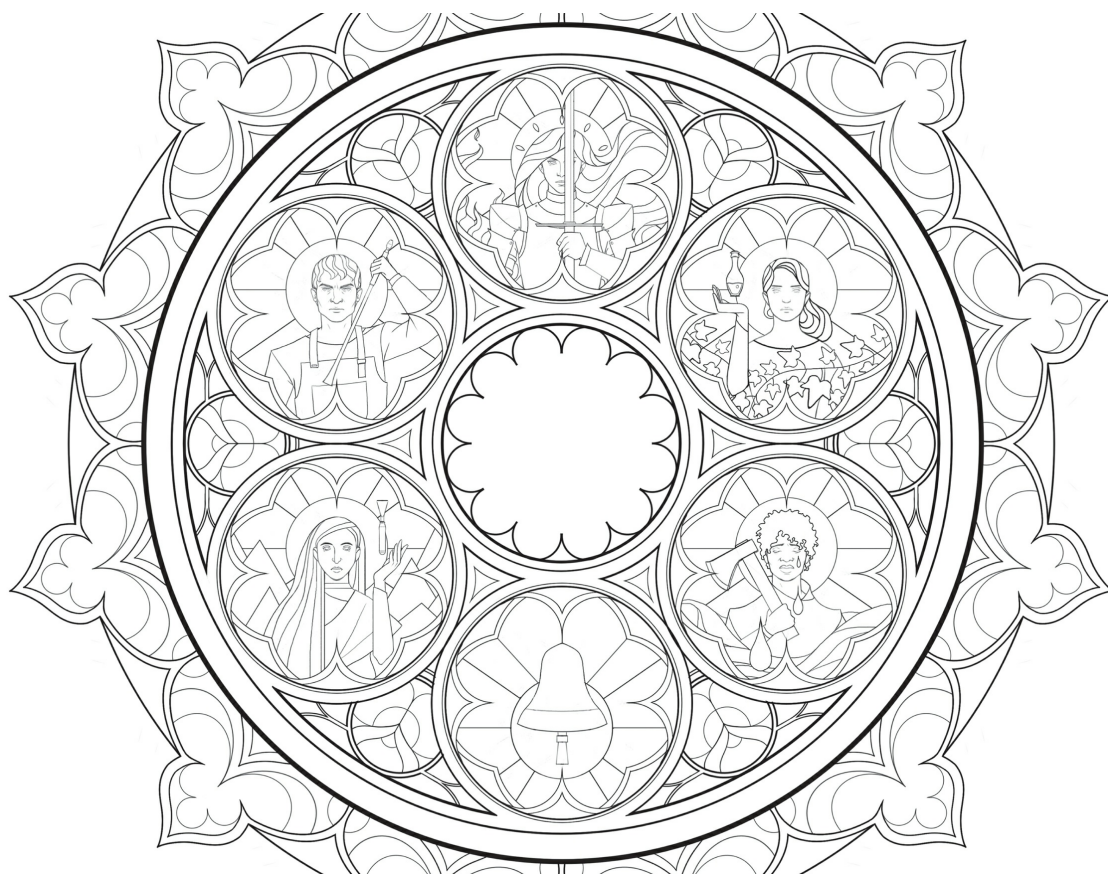




ELLE TESCH

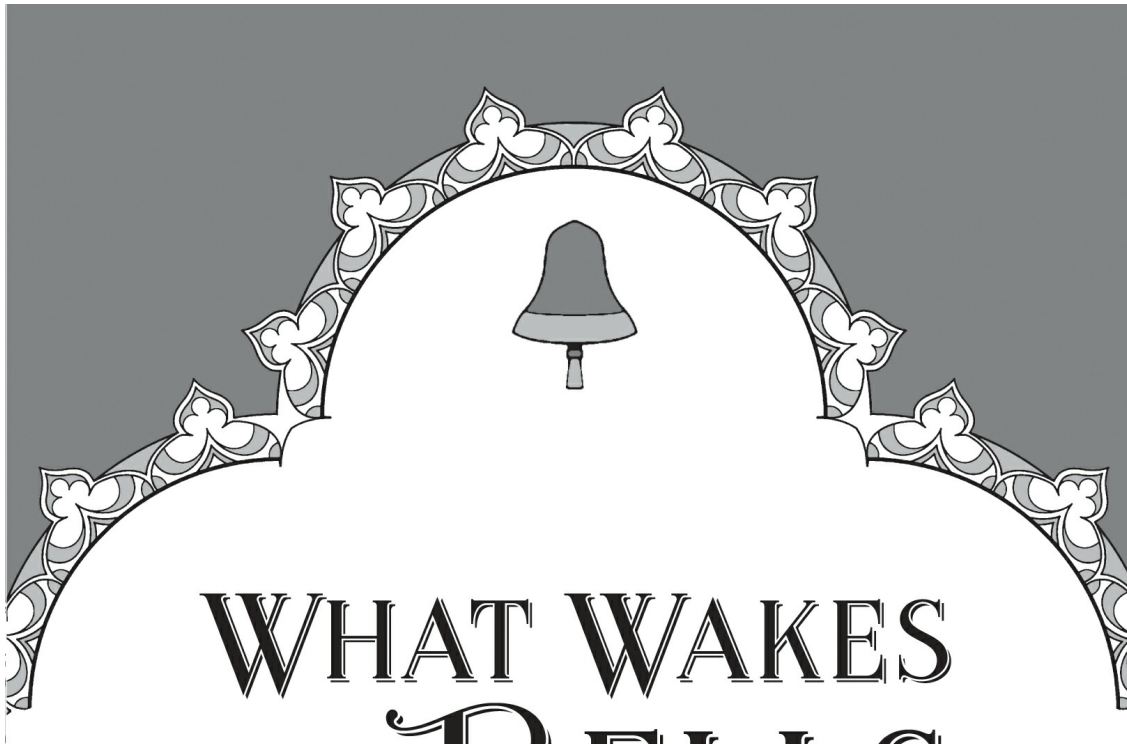
Her city lives and
breathes and bleeds.
And now . . . it *hunts*.

WHAT WAKES THE BELLS









WHAT WAKES THE BELLS

ELLE TESCH



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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FOR MOM
MINA WISHES SHE HAD ONE JUST LIKE YOU.

One

It's always in these final gasps of the hour that I sense the city's beating heart.

With my eyes closed, Vaiwyn's pulse feels as steady as my own. A gentle thrum beneath flesh of stone, metal, and wood. The city bleeds through veins that serve as cobbled streets, settles its growing bones in the creaks of the beams, and claims the airy hollows of its ancient buildings as lungs. Its living rhythm is a seamless match to the mighty clatter of the clock overhead; the softer tick of the watch cradled in my palm.

Together, all three count down to one o'clock.

Stained with grease, my pale fingers snap the silver watch shut and stow it in my pocket. Its fine chain slides against my leg as my grip tightens on the heavy shears. Their serrated, crystalline edges wink in the hazy light drifting through the clock's southern face. I snick the blades apart with an experimental cut, the gesture as familiar to me as the growing tension in my muscles.

Two minutes left.

With one hand, I tug the stepladder toward my enormous charge.

Despite half my childhood spent in its presence, I doubt I'll ever approach Arbutus without a healthy feeling of distrust. Dark and aged, a coarse patina of rust coats the bell like a second skin. Thin, spiky lettering in a language unknown to any scholar scars its hulking bronze exterior. The only bell in Lyndell Hall, and one of the most dangerous in the entire city.

A Vesper, crafted by the dying breath of a Saint.

Before I can slide the ladder into place beneath its heart, I'm stopped in my tracks by a nasty, falling splat of white that skids down the side of the bell. My nose wrinkles.

“Wretched birds,” I mutter, peering up between the beams. Dozens of ravens claim my tower as a roost. Mess is expected, but that doesn’t mean I enjoy the consequences of having such neighbors.

The mouth of Arbutus hovers level with my hips. I need to tilt the ladder to fit underneath and waste no time ducking in after it. Immediately, the tower’s constant grind of wheels and pinions rises to a thunderous pitch, every noise trapped within.

One minute.

I shiver. Cold shadows residing in the rusted throat of the Vesper hang heavy, pressing against the thick sleeves of my sweater as I clamber up beside the bell’s corroded clapper. It’s almost as if it knows what I intend to do. Knows, and yearns to stop me.

But I must steal its voice. Nothing matters more.

The open shears notch against the narrowest part of the iron appendage, below the hook that holds it in place. A deep breath, and the amputation begins.

Half a minute to go.

Sharp and decisive, the cutting motion strains my arms, but it’s a satisfying ache. Blades edged with tempered glass—made long ago by the Seething Glassmith—bite into the metal. Bit by bit, flake by flake, the clapper weakens.

Right on time, a new sound—faint but starkly different from the unending mechanical din—clacks to life at the top of the belfry. The clapper hangs by a thread now. Just another—

I double over with a cry as a piercing heat flares inside my heart.

“No, not *now*,” I spit through gritted teeth. The shears slip, clattering to the floor. I clutch at my chest. My fist pounds the chilled bronze, but the gesture only worsens the frustration bubbling alongside the ravaging warmth.

As if muddled by a dream, I hear the second group of gears release. Violent clanks set delicate workings into motion, and panic crushes my lungs.

One o’clock has arrived.

And I’m not ready.

Ropes creak throughout the tower. They draw through pulleys at the command of the hour, and the dark surrounding me shifts. Gripped by near poisonous terror, my tear-smudged gaze drops to the lip of the bell as it slowly tips to the side.

As sudden as it came, the pain vanishes. Only a barren ache remains in my pounding heart.

Some desperate instinct takes over before my scattered thoughts can realign. I jump off the ladder, recover the shears, then stumble back up to the top. Sparks fly from the point that scratches the clapper as I wrench apart the blades.

The last of the iron gives way.

The clapper falls, cracking against the floorboards.

My relief fades when Arbutus shoves against my knees. My balance breaks. I tumble to the ground with a yelped curse, the wind knocked out of me as I roll clumsily out from underneath the bell.

Flat on my back, all I can do is hold my breath as the Vesper reaches its peak. As all at once, the quartet of ropes relaxes, and the bell swings.

Startled raven wings knock the shadows loose. An onyx blur of feathers and beaks, careening out the open shutters on a cacophony of screams.

There is no deep clang, no rich knell. Only the voiceless impression of one. An empty note that shudders between my bones with a threat to cleave them apart. Like the flow of an avalanche, the silent vibration sinks low through the belfry, through every level of Lyndell Hall, and out over Vaiwyn's rooftops to the mountains that encircle the city.

A Vesper's Herald. It burrows fear into the souls of any who feel it. Reminds them of what it could do if allowed, the unholy fate it could bring down upon this city the Saints once built.

Suddenly, the bell in this tower stills. Stopped in its sway as if by an unseen fist. But in the city beyond, the danger may not yet have passed. My ringing ears strain to hear if any of the four other Vespers have tolled aloud. If one of them means to wake the Bane.

Silence.

I expel the icy disquiet from my body in a slow gust and seize the small medallion at my throat. Worn smooth by fervent fingers, the Lost Alchemist's golden features are a forgotten memory. Still, I grasp the metal and offer a prayer of gratitude to the Saints that nothing went wrong. And I should consider myself lucky for it.

This strange, sporadic pain has acted up for over a week now, and I *hate* it. I rub my chest with a sigh. Always a spark igniting from my heart, as if it has skipped a beat and struck like flint against bone. I suspect it's a symptom of

stress, of overworking myself, but the thought of taking a break from my tower only creates more anxiety. My hand curls into a fist. If I don't handle this, it's another weakness for Mother to wield against me.

For every day and night that Vaiwyn's five Vesper Bells have tried to ring their one o'clock Heralds, a Bell Keeper has stood guard. In the thousand years since the Saints themselves appointed the first of my ancestors to the positions, a Strauss and their shears have been all that separate Vaiwyn from the repeat of history. Of the days when this city fell to the rule of a terrible demon known only as the Bane and tore itself apart.

Forged by the Lost Alchemist in a sacrificial act, the Vesper Bells and their tolls were meant to exile the Bane from this world. But the demon's power was too great—not even the full force of the Saint could wholly contain it. Its infernal influence melded with her divine magic and twisted the Vespers to a different purpose.

Now the bells and their Heralds serve as both the warning song to Vaiwyn and the resurrection call to the Bane. Twelve peals to raise the alarm; a thirteenth to revive the evil from wherever it lies banished. And we Keepers ensure the Vespers can *never* sing.

No Bell Keeper has ever allowed a Vesper to reach that ruinous thirteenth toll, and whatever my mother thinks, that won't happen under my watch either.

An acrid scent lingers as I stumble to my feet. No longer attached to the bell, the clapper is warm against my fingers. Taller than me and weighing more than my entire family combined, I've no choice but to leave it where it fell, but already Vaiwyn's magic is pulling it beneath the floorboards. Wooden splinters absorb the iron into the city's bones with the faintest of cracks. When the next hour arrives, the clapper will have finished growing back and be ready to ring before I cut it again tonight.

I drop the shears on my worktable and rotate the shoulder I landed on with a wince. That'll be sore tomorrow, but I'll push through it. Springs and bolts, oil-grimed tools, rags and brushes dirty from constantly dusting clock parts, and a new textbook sent up earlier by Councillor Tamzin litter the rest of the table. The latter's enormous size serves as one more reminder of my mother and her belief in my ... *inadequacies*.

Resentment tears the sheet of parchment at my fingertips. I snatch up my pen, scribbling a message to Vanya about this heart pain. I refuse to give

Mother any more reason to challenge my abilities as Lyndell Hall's Bell Keeper. It's my duty. What I was born to be, and what I'll probably die doing, like every other Strauss before me. She can't take that from me—not if I can help it.

Two deft folds, and I smack the note against the wall. Beneath my palm, it melts into the stone, imbibed by the city's veins to travel ahead of me to the Dahlia Wilted.

As I turn to leave, candles snuff out in my wake. Shadows crawl forth from under the oak beams, chasing the pendulum and gnawing through what light remains. The belfry's door opens toward me on silent hinges as I approach, but I pause to touch the letters chiseled into its archway.

M-I-N-A.

My name, etched a decade ago by my late father. At seven years old, I'd never been so happy as I was witnessing him put *my* mark on this tower and my family's legacy. The memory of how hard he worked to get those letters to stay still makes me smile. I sat on a rickety stool at his side for hours, listening to the constant scratch of his penknife while Vaiwyn's magic traced over his efforts, erasing the gouges in the stone. Father had whispered to the wall in his patient tone, coaxed the bones within until he convinced the city to see the cuts not as a wound to heal, but a tattoo to immortalize.

In my small apartment below the belfry, I swap filthy trousers for clean woolen skirts, and fetch my tweed overcoat from its hook. As I transfer my father's silver watch from one pocket to the other, I find a sturdy peace in its ticking. At least *he* would be proud of me.

The spiraling descent to Lyndell Hall's top floor is treacherous, the steps worn smooth by time and countless feet. Twists of cold brush my cheeks as I use my reflection in a narrow window to reapply my favorite carmine-red stain to my lips. The overcast sky appears bleak; the diluted light soaks the tarnished copper and clay tiles of Vaiwyn's rooftops, their spires made sharper in the crisp air. It's a radiance that threatens snow.

I frown, tucking my short, dark-blond hair behind my ears as a lush, carpeted corridor replaces stone steps. Even hidden as we are in the mountains, the first snowfall hadn't been expected for several weeks still. Shoving aside thoughts of an early winter, I button up my coat and pass by government offices without stopping to visit anyone.

The Hall's main staircase drops in tight corners and long landings. An iron

chandelier unfurls in the center, ringed by weeping candles. The soft flames, coupled with the light tinted pink, lilac, and gold from the tall window, reveal the dust sparkling through all six floors. Nestled inside the wrinkles of sculptures, caked into the joints of armored suits, a second frame added to every portrait—the aged residue is such a part of Lyndell Hall that to clean it would be to remove the one brick that keeps the entire building together.

The last turn of the stairs rolls into a grand, bustling foyer. A Council meeting must have just concluded—city councillors and their aides stream across the floor.

I step onto the ebony marble as Councillor Tamzin crosses in front of me.

“Hello, Mina.” Never slowing her brisk pace, she nods in greeting, her crimson Council robes snapping in her wake. Her manner is certain and firm, equal to how she is in her mentorship of me outside of my belfry. The fire blazing in the wide hearth shines on the silver beads knotted in the ends of her long black braids and limns her dark-brown profile.

“Hello, Councillor.” To the pair of aides trailing behind her, I add, “Rhys. Maximillian.”

Rhys, his slight limp helped by a lacquered cane, offers a distracted wave, but Max gives no sign he heard me. His attention is devoted to the bundle of parchment he carries. If I wasn’t watching him, I’d miss the torn slip he drops.

Like Tamzin, my steps don’t falter as I pick up the paper. I can’t help looking over my shoulder, though, earning myself an eyeful of Max’s back. Despite being a few years younger, he towers over Rhys by several inches, those loose chestnut curls gleaming.

I cut through the other Council members and unfold the note, discovering a single inked heart. A smile tilts the corner of my mouth, and my rib cage burns with a different kind of warmth, one I never want to lose.

The Hall’s doors fling wide of their own accord, and the chilly embrace of the city swallows me whole.

★ ★ ★

It doesn’t matter that I took the long way down the hill, hoping to discard my lingering worries over my chest pain in peace. At this time of day, *every*

street in Vaiwyn teems with bodies, voices, and smells. Schaden Bridge in particular—one of a trio crossing this arm of the River Riga—is the busiest route between the main isle and the south bank.

So, when I stumble to a halt at its center with that Saints-*damned* heat surging in my chest again, I’m quickly lost in a horde eager to elbow me aside.

Jaw clenched, I shove through a fleeting opening to slump against the rail and the statue of the Weeping Carpenter perched there. Sculpted of stone and copper long since turned green from age, a dozen such regal figures stand guard on either side of Schaden Bridge. Their blank eyes brim with a judgment I don’t appreciate at the moment.

“Come *on*,” I almost growl. My fingers claw into my coat, as if I can remove the pain by force. “I do not need this.”

To distract myself, I lift my gaze to the frosted Alosse Mountains surrounding Vaiwyn. Snow still clings to the flanks of the tallest peaks, stubborn and thin after the passing of summer. A sudden clamor of bells strikes the second hour across the city. The mountains distort the sounds, but five distinct peals rise above the rest.

When not marking the first hours silenced by their Bell Keepers, Arbutus and the other Vespers sing the sweetest melodies with their newly restored clappers. From the Ingmund Courts and Buchari University to the south; Elke Cathedral and Farvald Bank to the north; and Lyndell Hall on the island that splits the river in two.

I couldn’t care less which bell clangs right now. Breathing through this spiked heat in my heart, I half expect steam to billow from my ears, too.

When it finally subsides, I dive back into the swell of people and reach the south bank.

Fine threads of pewter and gold, bronze and silver, carve between the cobbles. If I wished, I could follow each metal line to the buildings they once adorned. Sculptures and fortifications, reduced to melted rivulets. Frozen tears upon a city’s face. Today, I trail a string of iron up several winding side streets to my destination.

The wooden sign above the apothecary’s window sways with a creak. Upon it, a dying violet flower in peeling paint reveals the shop’s name: DAHLIA WILTED. The facade is wood, stucco, and drips of iron, and as I approach, the door opens inward.

“Hello?” I call over the merry chimes announcing my entrance.

The potent punch of herbs is all that greets me. One after the other, ribbons of basil, sage, and anise unravel before my nose, guiding me between the cluttered shelves. Sunlight never quite reaches inside, the buildings too close-knit to allow it, but I’m certain it would reveal the motes of magic that must nest here.

There’s always been something wondrous about the Dahlia Wilted. The shop’s very aura grips your wildest thoughts—no request is too lofty. Every time I visit, I discover some new and strange item on display. Pigeon feet in corked glass jars, labeled drawers containing beheaded irises and foxgloves, shallow baskets of nuts void of their meat—each so odd on its own, but altogether small brushstrokes on a beautiful canvas.

Caught up in the silence, I move to tap the small bell resting on the counter, and freeze.

The Dahlia isn’t as empty as I first assumed.

The woman waiting to be served doesn’t so much as turn her head to acknowledge my presence. Still, chin lifted and gaze forward, she knows it’s me.

“Wilhelmina,” she says, her silvery voice laced with eternal impatience.

Through gritted teeth, I reply, “Hello, Mother.”

Two

Imogen Strauss has never deigned to notice how hearing my full name makes my lip curl. And why would she start now?

“I trust you are well,” she says tightly. While grease from her work in Buchari University’s bell tower stains her clasped hands, her neatly pinned hair shines a resilient gold.

“Yes, thank you. How are—”

“And your studies?”

“Erm ... they’re all right.” When the fine lines around her mouth deepen, I rush to add, “Councillor Tamzin is pleased with my progress.”

The solid weight of the watch inside my pocket barely steadies me as a vile sense of incompetency floods my gut.

To be a Bell Keeper is to possess not one role, but two—and despite my best efforts, I’m woefully unprepared for the second. The textbook waiting in my belfry haunts me even from here. No good can come from a book that large, yet if I’m also to fill the position of Council Speaker in the next year, I need to commit its every line on administrative appeals to memory.

And I will. I’ll choke down every bit of legal jargon if it means proving myself to Mother.

A funny grunt sounds in her throat, but she says nothing more.

I suppress the shrill laugh balanced on my tongue. Our first conversation in almost a month, and it’s already over.

My foot taps as the silence builds, deafening with the possibilities of what we could both say. I should probably be grateful she didn’t push; I don’t need another reminder of how I fail to meet her expectations. No more than she wants to hear how I think she’s wrong and bitter. After our last talk resulted in a smashed vase, I have no wish to relive that argument.

An all-too-familiar wave of sadness washes over me that *this* is what we've withered to. Our once-loving relationship fatally wounded by my father's death and buried in her constant disapproval over how I became a Bell Keeper.

Like everything else in her eyes, I did it wrong.

Before I came squalling into this world, the Vesper Bell I would oversee was chosen for me. My elder sister was set on the Courts, shadowing my uncle; my brother would take over for my great-aunt at the Cathedral. Mother had claimed the University for over ten years as the matriarch Keeper, and after an apprenticeship nearly as long under my grandfather, Lyndell Hall became Father's. All that remained for me was Farvald Bank once Grandmother passed.

Every Strauss begins their training at age sixteen. Not only do we learn how to maintain our respective belfries and their clocks, but we prepare for the professions that wait below. Positions not meant to elevate, but that allow us to serve the public and our city as lawyer, deacon, librarian, Council Speaker, and accountant.

At first, I put every effort into my education. But, lacking any affection for numbers or Grandmother, I often found myself where I felt most at home. And Father was only too happy to have me as his shadow.

Plenty of time for Mina to learn about dusty money later, he always assured Mother when she seethed over me missing yet another lesson. *The bells are half her training anyway—it works just the same at Lyndell Hall as it does the Bank.*

Lyndell Hall was never meant to be mine, just like Grandmother and Father weren't meant to die. But eight months have waned since tragedy struck our family like lightning to the same spire. Once was unfortunate; the second, wholly unfair.

The matter of succession was settled before either body lay cold. The Heralds waited for no one, and neither did Mother. Emiko, a woman the same age as my sister who'd worked with Grandmother for years as I had not, was the natural choice to step in at the Bank. She's not family, but nor is she the first to fill an untimely void left by a Strauss either. On the other hand, Father hadn't taken on an apprentice yet, which left only one person anywhere near qualified to take his place. *Me.*

A loud bang erupts from behind the velvet curtain across the shop's back

wall, then a clatter of jars. Mother looks toward the commotion, offering me a view of her profile. It's an almost perfect match to the portrait hanging in the Strauss family home. Her painted cheeks hold a youthful warmth, her grey eyes glittering with light.

I consider that artist to be the greatest liar of their craft, for nothing akin to warmth or light pours from Imogen Strauss whenever her gaze now lands on me.

My vision blurs as I'm gripped by a terrible ache. It's a stubborn creature, this grief. A monster trapped deep inside that never seems to go away. I'd barely registered the news that my father was gone before Mother ordered me into that belfry to prepare for the afternoon Herald alone.

Little did I know I'd lost two parents that day.

Mother fed her usual maternal criticism a steady diet of misery until it matured into what I can only describe as true contempt. For every task she thinks I can't rise to, I spitefully double my efforts just to prove her wrong. Yet she refuses to recognize the work I put in, focusing instead on my mistakes. Never acknowledging the long hours I study under Councillor Tamzin's guidance, how I toil to absorb every damn bylaw, regulation, and policy—all so I can fully accept the roles thrust upon me.

None of us wanted what unfolded, and all I ask for is recognition. Just the smallest ounce of pride in me *trying* to be enough for her, for my family and our legacy.

And I don't understand why it's so impossible.

The curtain is batted aside, and the Dahlia's herbalist emerges. A large wooden crate weighs down her arms. In a rough and gritty voice, Vanya says without an ounce of surprise, "Mina. Good."

Brisk as ever, Vanya gives the impression that everything she does is on purpose. I wince as the corner of the rattling box crashes into the wall, taking a chunk out of the plaster, but the herbalist doesn't even blink; she's already set the crate down and moved on. Not that the damage lasts—within seconds, Vaiwyn has sealed the hole, floral wallpaper and all.

Vanya slams a round tin down on the scarred and scorched counter. To my mother, she says, "I grew a new strain of arnica, so this salve is stronger than what you're used to."

"But does it work?" she asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Don't insult me, Imogen."

After an exchange of coins and a few hushed words, Mother turns to leave, the salve for her joint pain tucked inside her satchel. I brace myself. She pauses to look down at me, even though we're the same height. "Will you join us for church service this Sunday?"

The question strikes dead any retort I have, a tiny blossom of hope unfurling in my chest. I haven't been to Elke Cathedral since our last fight, mainly to avoid her. Still, as much as I dislike her unending search for faults in me, I hate not being on civil terms with the only parent I have left more.

"I suppose I could—"

"Your sister was asking last night. She hasn't seen you all month."

"Oh." So, not a peace offering at all. Just her attempt to appear the forgiving one in the eyes of my siblings. "Yes, I'll ... I'll come."

With a nod and nothing else, Mother departs in a flurry of rose hip oil and the lightest trace of grease. I stare over my shoulder at the place she disappeared behind the shelves, not breathing properly until the chimes above the door ring out.

"What's this about your heart?"

I turn back. Between two fingers, Vanya holds the message I sent through the stones earlier. Gratitude that she waited until Mother left to bring up my reason for visiting unknots the tension along my spine.

As she begins grinding mustard seeds in a mortar, I lean both elbows on the counter.

"I'm hoping you have something to make this pain go away," I say.

Never one to dwell in sympathy for her customers' ailments, Vanya gestures with her chin to my chest. "What's it like?"

"It's ... hard to describe."

She snorts. "Well, if you want help, you have to try."

My thoughts return to the pain. All-consuming and ravenous, but without a target in mind. It's just ... there. Hungry, yet stagnant.

"It comes when I least expect it," I say, "and burns like a damn fire. For over a week now."

The pestle cracks against the bowl as Vanya stills. I run my gaze from her honey-toned, spidery fingers over rolled sleeves spotted with burns and powder stains. Dimples form in each cheek as she considers me. A linen bandana holds back black hair threaded with grey, but a few short curls have slipped free to frame her forehead.

“When did this last happen?” she asks.

“About thirty minutes ago. Then just before the last Herald. Sometimes it’s once a day, sometimes every few hours. There’s no pattern to it.” When her mouth thins, I lick my lips and add, “It might just be stress, though. Anxiety. Right?”

“It might.”

“But it’s starting to keep me from working, and I *have* to keep working.”

Vanya taps a finger smudged with yellow against her nose. For one awful moment I fear I’ve asked the one request she can’t grant, that my mysterious pain is too much to remedy.

But then she exhales deeply and resumes grinding. “I can put something together.”

My shoulders slump with relief. “Today?”

“Give me an hour. I need tea first.” Her elbow crooks high at her side as she puts more weight behind the pestle. “And some brandy. I don’t charge enough for this job sometimes.”



Every step upward echoes callously, reminding me I’m alone in Lyndell Hall’s east stairwell. And that suits me fine. After the tumult of the streets, fighting against the rush of workers leaving by the main staircase is more than I can handle right now.

The unexpected encounter with Mother tipped me off my axis in the worst way. My mind fixates on analyzing the gestures I made, every word I spoke. All to find just one that would further lower her opinion of me. It is ... Saints, it’s *exhausting*. Hollows my stomach to a gaping cavern. All I want is to curl up in my armchair with a cup of tea and hide from it all.

At half past five, the top-floor offices I pass are empty. Only darkness lurks within. Dusk arrives early to Vaiwyn, no matter the season—the mountains swallow any chance at evening light. Each lamp on the wall flares brighter as I near, gilding the dust. It swirls in ribbons around me even as I begin ascending my tower.

After the first landing, though, I stop mid-step. Lights are already on in my apartment above. Hand tight on the railing, I listen to the sounds filtering

down the stairs—muffled footsteps, the clang of a pot, a loud curse. My miserable spirits dissolve.

Only one person visits unannounced these days, and there's no one else I'd rather be alone with.

I drop my satchel the moment I enter my small quarters, pitch my coat through the door to my unmade bed. When I turn into the main living area, I can't stifle my affectionate grin. Max stands with his back to me at the stove, focused on whatever he's cooking.

Or—I sniff warily, eyes widening—*burning*.

"If you wanted to surprise me," I say, rushing behind him to the double window. He startles but doesn't look up. "There are easier ways than burning down my apartment."

"Ah, but they aren't as effective," he calls over his shoulder, and I glimpse the sheepish flush in his cheeks.

The window swings open once I lift the latch. Max tosses me a dish towel, and I flap it to help clear the smoke. Outside, the overcast sky is washed in a violet that deepens with every passing minute. Still, there's enough light to make out the stained-glass design that has sprouted in the last few days.

Near the sill, several diamond-shaped panes have shifted, lead growing between pieces changing color. First green leaves, then a taller stalk, and today the budding white petals of an edelweiss. Tomorrow it should be in full bloom, and it delights me. Vaiwyn manifests new patterns in its windows often, but I've never had one of my own before.

"Well, I guess that's that."

My attention flits back to Max. The cast iron scrapes as he removes it from the heat. Spatula still clutched in one hand while rubbing the back of his neck, he's the picture of chagrin as I join him to examine the blackened lumps in the pan.

I tip my head to the side. "What ... is it?"

"Believe it or not, those were once dumplings." He turns to face me, a playfulness glinting in his tired brown eyes that makes me breathless. His mouth softens into my favorite crooked smile as a gentle finger tilts my chin up. "Hi."

"Hi."

Suddenly feeling bold, I reach for him. I grip his nape, nails digging into soft hair just long enough to curl, and kiss him.

My heart, kindled with a new tantalizing heat, pounds as Max drops the spatula in the pan. Sparks fire from his fingertips as they spread under my jaw, press into the freckles that dot my skin. Firm and soft and familiar. His other hand snags my waist. Teeth graze my bottom lip ... *Not yet.*

I pull back. If Max finds my retreat after initiating the kiss confusing, he doesn't comment. Doesn't ask what's wrong with me. Nor would he—he understands me like no one else. As my palm slides down his unbuttoned waistcoat, his own covers it atop his steady and kind heart.

"Hi," he repeats. His deep voice rumbles through my hand. "For what it's worth, I really was trying to surprise you. But then I had an idea for my proposal that I had to write down and got distracted."

"I appreciate the sentiment—"

"Not that you deserve it." I frown, taken aback by the unexpected seriousness of Max's tone. He interrupts my bewildered question to grumble, "You called me Maximillian before."

I throw my head back with a loud laugh.

"You mock my pain?" he demands, but his false outrage fades to a smirk.

"I'm sorry. Would it make you feel better to call me Wilhelmina?"

"Absolutely not." And this time, his affront is genuine. He knows I don't like it, and it sets starlings alight inside my rib cage.

I withdraw from his grip, but not before wiping my lipstick from his upper lip with a thumb. The cast iron clatters as I move it to the sink. I snort when the dumplings don't even budge—they're charred right to the pan. The hot water turns on, the pipes groaning between the walls, but a touch to the faucet tells Vaiwyn I'm not cleaning right now.

"How do you feel about a sandwich?" I ask.

He opens the cupboard above my head to fetch two plates. "Like I've never wanted one more."

As we butter brown bread and slice hard cheese, cut onions and spear herrings from a fresh jar, our elbows constantly brushing, Max shares the latest drama surrounding a proposal he's working on with Councillor Tamzin. They want to convert an empty building into a new clinic, and the mayor is fighting it—if only because he lives two houses down.

"How Bergen was ever elected, I'll never understand." He stabs a little fish with more force than necessary.

I never disagree on that point, but as a still-venting Max carries our plates

to my tattered old couch, all I can think is how content I am. Here, alone with him in my apartment, every worry crumbles away. Whatever bothered me earlier, it doesn't matter when I'm with someone who won't judge my every action. If I had burned our dinner, Max would simply look for interesting patterns in the black crisp.

After a few minutes, he asks, "How was your day? Did you get...?" He points to my chest.

Max is the only person I felt comfortable telling about my heart pain when it first happened, so I'm almost grateful to acknowledge his question with a nod rather than pretending everything is fine.

"Vanya made me something I can mix into my tea." I raise the last half of my sandwich to my mouth, then lower it, biting my lip instead. "It flared up right at one today."

His brows lift, immediately grasping the significance. "Did she know what causes it?"

I shrug. "She agrees it's likely anxiety."

"You really do need to relax, Mina." He nudges my knee with his.

Not eager to start *this* conversation again, I pivot to the only thing I can think of—and the last thing I should. "Mother was there. At the Dahlia Wilted."

Max grimaces. Mouth full, he swallows quickly. "You're still in one piece, so I'm assuming it went all right?"

"No fragile items were broken." My nails pick at my bread. "Best-case scenario, really. She asked if I would join her at the Cathedral this week and I said yes."

I can almost taste my sour regret as I recall how I dared believe that she might have been offering to restore peace between us. Foolish—I want something from her that I'll never get.

"Would it help if I came with you?" Max asks slowly.

"No!" He flinches at my abrupt answer, and part of me collapses. Softer, I say, "No, she'll see you. See *us*. I can't risk it—not yet."

Under the unforgiving weight of her criticism, I lower my plate to my lap. I set it aside, no longer hungry. Max takes my hand in his. I don't mind the crumbs prickling between our palms because this touch is something to savor.

We can't be together out in the open. Behind locked doors, nothing matters

except us, but exposed to the world ... Max is an unraveling secret. *My* secret, held tight to my chest in terror that revealing it will turn it to ash beneath my mother's gaze.

None of my past relationships lasted long. Always too much, too fast for me to feel comfortable, so I never let them take flight. They flirted when I wanted to talk. Wanted intimacy when I needed familiarity first. For years, I thought something was wrong with me. That I was a riddle in desperate need of a hint to solve.

Then Max arrived in Vaiwyn to work as Councillor Tamzin's second aide, and I stopped believing such nonsense about myself. Here was a boy who granted me the space, the time that I craved. My friend when Father was still alive, then something more when *I* wanted it later. The first person who understood that I needed to ease into each step of our relationship. Even tonight, when I pulled away because we were moving toward what I was not yet comfortable with, he gave me what I needed. He lets me puzzle myself out when no other partner was willing to wait.

And now, this boy has become a dazzling light to me ... and I hide him in the shadows.

I bury my face against his chest. He smells of evergreen cologne and ink and dust and I want to bottle it. "I'm sorry," I mumble into his waistcoat.

My body jostles as Max places his empty plate on the coffee table, then wraps both arms around me. I burrow deeper into his warmth.

He presses a kiss to my head, his whisper soft against my hair. "She won't be like this forever, Mina."

I close my eyes, voice shaking. "I know. But at some point—*some* point—I have to stop caring what she thinks of me."

Silence, then: "Just not yet."

I want to cry. "Yeah."

The last two seasons spent with Max in secret kept my head above water. The stability he gave me after Father died is the only reason I've been able to work and learn the role of Bell Keeper on my own, but I *cannot* let my mother twist that. I won't allow her to use Max as ammunition, proving that I distract easy. That I'm too young and unworthy of my post, one slipup away from bringing devastation down upon us all.

I push upright and try to stealthily wipe away my ridiculous tears. My hand smooths the wrinkles left behind in his shirt without thinking about it. Which

amuses me a little, because six months ago I never liked anyone enough to consider holding their hand and now there's only one person in the world I *need* to let me cry on them.

"Anyway, yes, I did get something for my heart, and I should probably take it now."

By the time I fetch my satchel and bring it to the kitchen table, Max has stacked the dishes and is rolling up his sleeves to wash them. He notices my shiver and stretches to close the window.

The lamps in the courtyard are all on now, the city's magic acknowledging the night. As Max steps back, the fiery light glazes the sharply cut planes of his handsome face. It also reveals how much more tired he appears than usual. My brows lower. We both keep abnormal hours, but he looks as though he hasn't slept at all.

"Is that new neighbor still keeping you awake at night?"

"Hmm?" He scratches the side of his nose. "Oh, no. I think I'm just stressed about this clinic situation. The weirdest dreams have been waking me up the last few nights." He chuckles. "Maybe I need some of this, too."

He reaches for the pouch of fine powder Vanya prescribed me. "I'll put the kettle on for you, but it will come at a cost."

I freeze before I can deposit it in his hand. "Did you forget whose apartment this is? I'll make my own damn tea."

"Mina." He snags my sleeve and pulls me closer, that playful gleam returning to his eyes. "I haven't forgiven you for calling me Maximillian, but I know how you can make it up to me."

My eyes narrow. "Oh?"

"Let me win at cards?"

"Absolutely not," I say, echoing his previous words with a wicked smile.

Three

Whenever I hear a hymn sung in Elke Cathedral, I'm reminded of a choir of ghosts. A thousand phantom voices, all twining about the massive columns, crawling along vaulted ribs, and twisting between chandeliers dressed in wax. Even after the congregation lapses into silence, the last notes continue to haunt the ceiling.

We're directed to sit, and pews and bone joints creak in response. In my arms, my baby niece releases a shrill noise. Panicked, I place Hana in my eldest sister's lap, but the growing whimpers make it clear Aida is not the desired parent. Her wife, Nikole, reaches over, and Hana instantly quiets. My snort earns me an elbow to the ribs.

At the front, the high priest steps up to the pulpit. A once-powerful man now gone to seed, none would guess Patrik was near eighty from the way he speaks. There's no buckling in his words, no hesitation in his delivery. Candlelight flares over the uncut planes of the Analith—hung from his neck by an ornate silver chain, the rare translucent crystal marks him as head of the Church. Even seated this far back, I can make out the white line said to be a sliver of Vaiwyn's heart pierced through the core of the blue stone like the eye of a snake.

Today, his sermon discusses the virtues of humility, and I don't try to listen. Devout on my own but never able to stomach being preached at, I stifle a yawn with the back of my hand. Beneath my grey eyes, the dark smudges—a trait as permanent as my narrow nose and sharp cheekbones—startled even me this morning.

After attending to Arbutus's nightly Herald, I tossed and turned in a sweat, unable to sleep. Vanya's powdered remedy granted me two blissful days of a cooled heart before this *hellish* pain became immune to it. Now nothing

seems to help, and I can't just *relax*, as Max suggested.

My gaze wanders, entranced by the stark contours of radiance and shadow that fracture the Cathedral into a hundred pieces. Jeweled facets of light touch the frescoes, the gilded icons, and the sculptures that loom over us all.

With brazen indifference, the marbled likenesses of the Saints look down upon us feeble mortals. The Five who crafted our city inspire only adulation and fear. Carved from the towering columns, they trap their willing flock between empty gazes and open arms.

His long blowpipe held in both hands, the Seething Glassmith greets those who enter the nave from either side. He flaunts his divine relic and emblem of power—a tool of his trade blessed by Vaiwyn—as one would a spear. Devastated fury pulls at his harsh features, drags his broad shoulders up.

The Weeping Carpenter follows, their axe, honed to a wicked point, lifted to the heavens. Seams of lapis lazuli serve as tears, which pour down their melancholy face, cascade through the folds of their sculpted shirt and trousers, and pool at their bare feet.

Beside me, the Undone Sculptor is incomplete. Her legs are raw stone—she's not yet reached them. Held with care, her chisel outlines her waist and unveils the ends of her hair. It's said that she raised the Alosse Mountains to shield Vaiwyn from prying eyes.

The Withering Healer possesses the finest appearance, narrow and sharp and jutting between jaded veins of wilted ivy. She holds her relic aloft—a vial, symbolic of the poison fed to a tyrant who once fancied himself king of a fledgling Vaiwyn.

Another yawn claws up my throat. I close my eyes and breathe in deep, hoping the cloying scent of incense will wake me. Rose hip oil assails me instead.

“Wilhelmina.”

The hiss comes from my right, and my eyes snap open. My cheeks blaze, but I refuse to show Mother her reprimand has any effect. Rather, I slip my hand into my skirt pocket and let the steady tick of my watch soothe my simmering irritation.

Sermon concluded, Patrik tucks his hands into the voluminous sleeves of his white robes and retreats from the pulpit. A much younger man rises to take his place. One with brown eyes, a defined jaw that we both share, short, dark waves that match my sister's longer tresses, and olive skin that comes

from his and Aida's father.

Isaac may be ten years older, but he's *my* sibling. Aida was fourteen when I was born, and by the time I was old enough to be deemed interesting, she was invested in her law studies. Far too busy to play with dolls and dream up mystical fantasies. But not Isaac. *Never* Isaac. Now on the cusp of eighteen, I continue to rely on my half brother as a constant confidant, an ally against our mother, even if this is the first I've seen of him in weeks.

"Vaiwyn is a city built of the blood, sweat, and tears of the five Saints," Isaac reads from the Scriptures. The tone of his voice is rich, meant to be amplified by every crack in this building. "But it's also a city still standing from the great sacrifice of one."

Unable to help myself, I study the fifth statue, closest to the Cathedral's heart.

The Lost Alchemist.

Regal in simple armor, she is the only figure unafraid to look away from the lofty ceiling. Her wild expression dares any fool to come at her from below. She wields a sword, the blade aligned with the center of her nose, and a ghastly skull sits in the crook of her arm.

As Isaac tells the Saint's story to an audience already well fed on it, my attention sharpens. Her tale always enthralls me. A legend wrapped in violence and upheaval.

The Lost Alchemist shaped the metalwork that forms part of the city's skeleton. While one hand molded iron and copper, the other transformed them into gold and silver. But as her last act, she crafted the Vespers. Bells forged from her dying breath, their purpose to warn Vaiwyn should the evil she sacrificed her life to vanquish ever try to return.

I can't see it from here, but I know what her stone foot crushes. A faceless figure of spindly bones, cloaked in onyx. *The Bane*. The dark entity to blame for once corrupting our city and turning it on itself. No one ever speaks of the destruction the Bane wrought, only that it must never be allowed to reawaken.

Without the Alchemist, we won't survive another attack.

When she perished, Vaiwyn wept. Her metals melted. They dripped down the city's many faces in tears that remain today. The four surviving Saints, battle weary and grieving, ascended to the heavens. All that remains now are the Vespers, prayers, and a thousand-year legacy my family has upheld since

the Saints tasked us with it.

“And in her death, the Alchemist left us a way to hear the summoning of the Bane.” Isaac turns the page, the rustle thunderous in the silence. “Thirteen tolls, one for every molten tear wept in forging the Vespers. A warning our Bell Keepers silence so that Vaiwyn may *never* hear it, and her sacrifice will not be in vain.”

I sit up straighter. Hearing the story inscribed across my very bones—it fills me with a faith as steadfast as the Vespers themselves.

Thirteen tolls is all it would take to rouse the ungodly Bane from whatever hell it was exiled to. My family keeps it at bay, and no matter what Mother thinks, that legacy includes me. In overseeing Arbutus, I stand in my father’s footsteps. I stand *with* my mother and siblings, between Vaiwyn and the banished demon.

It’s a burden I gladly shoulder, and Mother best get used to it.



Those sweeping out of the Cathedral seem unaware of the sky finally acting upon its threat to snow. But alone on the bottom step, beneath the puckered, slate-grey veil that drapes atop Vaiwyn’s spires, my eyes latch on to each flake, following their lazy drift down.

A flash of movement draws my gaze to the center of the square.

Beside the ice-crusted fountain and its bronze quartet of stamping horses stands Max. He ceases waving once I spot him, a broad smile lighting his face. He moves to meet me, but I quickly shake my head. His crestfallen expression rends my rib cage, yet a glance over my shoulder is the only explanation I can offer.

My family gathers near the Cathedral doors. Aida and Nikole show off Hana to someone I recognize from the Ingmund Courts, while Mother chats with Emiko, the woman who became the Bank’s Bell Keeper instead of me. Her sleek black hair is braided back from her face, her scarf knotted tight beneath her jaw.

It doesn’t matter how badly I want to bring Max into that circle. None of them know about our relationship, and while it’s foolish to believe I can keep us shielded from Mother’s judgment forever, the idea it might stay protected

a bit longer appeals to me more.

I look back to the fountain, but Max is gone. Guilt as cold as the frost stitching the windowpanes slips inside my chest.

Saints, I *hate* this. Max understands I still need to consider Mother's opinion of me, but I meant what I said: Eventually I have to stop caring. I just worry I won't recognize that point until it's too late. Earning her approval is both a prize and a curse that may cost me everything in the end.

"Mina! Saints, where have *you* been?"

I startle at the question, not having heard Isaac's approach. His arms cross against the chill; his green deacon robes are no match for my thick coat. "You missed the last three dinners at Ma's."

"Glad someone noticed." I shrug, ignoring his skeptical expression. "We had an argument."

"Again?"

"Yes, *again*." Immediately, I regret snapping. It's not my brother's fault that Mother and I can't be alone with each other for long before another thread of our relationship unravels. "She hates me now, remember?"

He rolls his eyes and looks back at our family. "So, you've been avoiding *all* of us." Even flattened by the cold and open air, his voice still holds that wonderful richness that begs to be listened to. No longer confined to vaulted ceilings, all it does is make me scowl.

"I'm not—I haven't—" I sigh. "You can visit me, too, you know."

"Same argument, I assume?"

"You mean how I'm not pulling my weight?" Unable to stay mad at Isaac, I loop my arm through his and lead us to the fountain. "Or how I can't remember things that took everyone else five years to learn?"

A disgruntled noise rumbles in his throat. "I'm going to talk to her. You're the youngest Bell Keeper in centuries, how she expects you to—"

"No." When he looks askance at me, I add with a huff, "It won't help. No matter how hard I try, she wants me to be something I can't be for at least two more years."

"Mina..."

Warmth curls around me at his exasperation. It never matters who the bully is—Isaac always has my back. "It'll be fine. I just have to watch my step, that's all."

I know he doesn't believe me, but the chance to press the issue is shoved

aside by a loud, slurring voice behind him.

“Well, look who it is.”

Even from ten paces away, I smell the absinthe on Quinn’s breath. It emanates from every pore, clings to her battered clothes and white hair like perfume. Sure enough, when I spot her seated beside the fountain, Quinn raises a green bottle in greeting.

“Have you come to visit me?” she calls.

Isaac and I stop at her feet; the frayed hems of the blankets she lugs about touch our toes. Tolly, Quinn’s old, half-blind terrier, lifts his head to sniff.

I crouch to meet Quinn’s bloodshot eyes. “Of course. What’s the gossip today?”

“A lovers’ spat.” She gestures northward, a slight sway in her upper body. “Down there. He was furious, and *he* was right ashamed. Said the wrong thing, no doubt.”

Her hearty cackle lurches into a wrenching hack that makes me wince. The bottle must be near dry. She tips her head so far back her wool hat slips off.

Quinn has drowned her sorrow in absinthe for the last four years. Today seems to be a slightly more sober one, but there isn’t a day gone by where she hasn’t searched fruitlessly for relief at the bottom of a bottle. Then again, there are few who blame her for trying.

Only the cruelly unlucky lose two loved ones to the Talus Pox.

Long ago, the Saints built this city on the skeleton of a fallen god. They felt the beast’s heartbeat beneath the moss and loam and gave it new purpose by channeling its magic into their creations before that magic became theirs. Made of stone and wood, Vaiwyn is as alive as those who inhabit it. It lights its streets like eyes opening; mends cracks as blood clots; closes doors as any mouth can; passes messages through its walls like whispers to an ear.

As with all living things, blood runs, lungs congest, bones break, and thoughts are vulnerable to confusion. Mistaking warm flesh and hard bone for its own, Vaiwyn sometimes feeds its magic into its citizens, turning them to stone from the inside out.

A thousand years ago, the Talus Pox struck down half the city. There was no cure, and no way to protect against the disease. Medicines, tourniquets, strategic amputations—not even the Withering Healer’s power was enough to slow it. The city’s magic was too strong, and anyone afflicted by the Pox died within days. But Vaiwyn grew resilient. In time, it learned its own strength

and understood where to spread its influence. Eventually the Pox itself became a rare occurrence, with only a few cases each year. Not contagious, yet beyond anyone's control.

Quinn's husband and son perished from it four years ago. She lived next door to the Strauss home then, and I still remember the echoes of her cries through my bedroom wall. To lose them together, to watch them calcify while lying about how it'll be all right—who are any of us to tell her how to grieve?

And I understand her pain all too well.

Grandmother's natural sickness was slow. Staved off by many remedies, it took years for her to succumb to the cancer in her stomach. She might have lasted even longer if my father hadn't died first. The Pox stole him from us in little over a week. I helped him as much as I could until his every limb turned stiff and the infirmary became the only place for him, and his tower became mine. A disease without mercy—it doused the brightest flame in my life without caring who inhaled the smoke left behind.

That trapped, grieving creature within rears its head. My fingers find the Lost Alchemist at my throat, the medallion rubbed smooth by those days of constant prayer, hoping for a miracle that didn't exist.

Isaac squeezes my shoulder. His and Aida's father—Mother's first husband—died in a carriage accident when Isaac was still in the cradle. My father may have only been his stepfather, but he was Isaac's parent before I was born. And Isaac's touch now reminds me of what I have left, because unlike Quinn, I'm not alone.

In search of comfort, of distraction from my own grief, I scratch Tolly behind the ear. He flops over to expose his belly and doesn't flinch when Quinn hacks harder.

"Looks like we're getting snow early this year, Quinn," Isaac comments, changing a subject that was never spoken aloud. "Do you want an escort home?"

"I'm fine right here," she says, and it's the answer we both expect.

Quinn hasn't been home since her family died. The spare key still waits under her doormat, and Isaac, Aida, and I alternate visiting to water her plants, sort the mail, keep things tidy, but it's useless. We all know she won't return. The losses she suffered in that house—she would rather roam the streets than face her grief, and some days I wish I could join her.

“Are you sure?” Isaac tries again. “We can even get you something for that cough.”

“Bah! It’s nothing some”—a great swig—“can’t fix.” She drops the bottle, empty at last.

“I’m sure Tolly would like to get warm,” I say, noticing the holes in her gloves.

She doesn’t hear, consumed by scrounging through her carpetbag for a fresh drink. Several bottles clink together, but none seem full. With a sigh, I tap her knee, then point to the one behind her. The sound of the cork popping is all the thanks I get.



Even though I knew it would be cold, I didn’t expect the night to bite so bitterly in my tower. I pull the blanket tighter around my shoulders. For every hour I’ve perched behind the iron number five, frost has scratched farther across the southern dial with an insistence as unflagging as the ticking clock itself.

One more page, I encourage myself. In a few minutes, I must return below and prepare for the nightly Herald—I can read that much about administrative appeals before then.

At least, I think so.

My thumb and forefinger rub my burning eyes, but all that bursts behind my closed lids is the imprint of the paragraph I’ve tried to understand for the last quarter of an hour. I squint at the page once more for good measure.

If a public citizen disagrees with a decision made on a permit for a superfluous exterior building alteration (i.e., not constructed by Vaiwyn itself), they may file an appeal within forty-five days, contrary to the sixty-day period allowed for interior alteration appeals.

My head falls back with a groan. “Who even says superfluous anymore?”

As dreadful as it is, the cold is all that keeps me awake while studying this dull textbook. I lean against the opening in the glass and breathe in.

The snow that started earlier is heavier now, falling all day to leave a smooth layer of white across the city’s roofs. I always find it mesmerizing to watch. How the flakes flit about like wandering bees in the spring. Even as a

young child, I would get lost in the sight while trying to stay awake for Mother and Father to return from their towers, believing Isaac when he swore it was pollen thrown from the heavens by the Withering Healer—

Ice spills inside my veins when the clock shudders, and to all sides of the tower, a minute hand shifts to twelve. In the corner of the platform, levers and wheels crash to life.

“Shit.”

The book thumps to the floor; the pen I use to take notes slips between the cracks, pinging off beams on its way down. I swing my legs around. Too late I remember the blanket wrapped about myself. I barely free my arms before my body slams to the ground.

A quartet of ropes guided down the walls tugs upward.

The clapper. It still needs to be cut.

“*Shit!*” I shriek. My legs thrash wildly against the blanket as I scramble to my feet. I dash toward the stairs, my heels thudding against the floorboards. “No-no-no-no!” Saints, I’ll never make it in time.

On the third step, an empty quiet smothers the world, as though it just heaved in a deep breath. I clutch the railing with both hands as the Vesper Bell tolls.

Its knell is the roar of a feral cougar cornered. The deafening bellow of a starving bear before it charges. A voice that can only mean danger. Eyes squeezed shut, I might be screaming into the hollow noise, but I can’t tell. The Vesper’s single droning note *rattles* the belfry. It quakes between every brick and pane of glass and bursts into the unforgiving night.

Please stop, I beg. Saints, please, please.

I forget how to think of anything else until silence reigns.

Relief weakens my knees, and I collapse on the step. Elbows on knees, I dig my fingers into my scalp. It helps quell the shaking a little.

Once. Arbutus only rang once. I exhale so hard dizziness overcomes me. It’s all right. Everything is fine.

Under my breath, I mutter five separate prayers I can’t hear through the humming in my ears. On the fourth to the Undone Sculptor, the heat blazes within my still hammering heart, and this time I accept the pain as the punishment I deserve. A lesson to be learned.

Only when I trust the strength in my legs do I return to the curve of the clock dial. Ravens startled from their roosts in the other four Vesper towers

wing through the shutters above me. A migration pattern that's never once broken, no matter how negligent a Bell Keeper might be.

With deceptive calm, I pick up my fallen textbook and drape the blanket over my arm. As I stagger down the stairs with limbs stiff from shame, I don't know how to reconcile the fact that I heard a Vesper's Herald for the first time in my life.

And despite my best efforts, I have no one to blame but myself.

Four

Before this heart pain arose, I could engage in several different remedies to help settle my nerves whenever too much clattered about in my head. The past eight months offered plenty of practice. Deep breathing lets me multitask, reading a novel gives my thoughts a break, and screaming into a pillow is cathartic. But my most effective antidote is quite simple. I start in my tower and, at a brisk pace, march all the way down to the ground floor of the Hall and back.

And with the next Herald breathing down my neck, I can't bear to stand still anymore. Why I'm so bothered, I don't know. I already cut the clapper. It won't grow back before one o'clock, and my Vesper will *not* sing. Never again. If only my roiling stomach could grasp what my mind already does.

The stairs fly away beneath my feet. Head down, my huffs keep time with the watch in my pocket. Each beat compels me to think in fragments. In seconds, in exhalations, in the steps remaining. I focus on the warmth kindling under the heaviness of my sweater, the satisfying burn in my thighs as I ascend the steps.

I yelp as I crash into someone between the fifth and sixth floors. Max.

"*Whoa!*" He grabs hold of my arms to steady us both before I stagger into a hooded sculpture as tall as he. "Where's the fire?"

"Not in my apartment," I say with a breathless grin, and dodge around him.

"Hilarious," he drawls. Max darts ahead of me, walking backward up the stairs. The light in his eyes is earnest. "Do you have a second I can steal?"

"Several, that I'll give you for free."

A glance at his wristwatch makes him trip on the last step. "Wait, never mind. It's almost one. You should go—"

"I already dealt with the Vesper." I halt beside him, close enough that I

have to look up to meet his tired gaze. “My time is yours.”

Max doesn’t comment on the Herald I missed last night. The perfect opportunity to admonish me—or worse, feel sorry for me—hangs between the dust motes, and he ignores it. Instead, he turns the full, devastating force of that crooked smile on me. A fluttering rises in my chest, and my gratitude for him surges.

“Are you sure?” When I nod, he says, “Perfect,” and tugs me by the wrist into his office.

It’ll be fine, I remind myself as the familiar tension winds through my muscles. For once, I have time to spare.

Everything I know about being a Bell Keeper I learned at my father’s side. In all the years I watched him, he left himself no more than a few minutes to silence Arbutus, and I aspired to imitate him without giving it a second thought ... until I woke up this morning in a cold sweat of realization. Father claimed decades of experience—how naive I was to think my handful of months could compare. If the two recent mishaps with my heart and losing track of the time are any indication, *I* am setting myself up for the failure my mother believes me capable of.

Last night, I missed a Herald for the first time. Arbutus rang once when it shouldn’t have at all. My saving grace is that Mother only sent a written scolding through Vaiwyn’s walls in the aftermath. The rose hip oil scent lingering on the parchment was as strong as the disappointment encased in her elegant scrawl. If I miss another Herald, she’ll ensure there is nothing left of me to place in the catacombs.

But it won’t happen again.

Although the odds of the Bane awakening are stacked impossibly high, I’m leaving nothing up to chance. Six minutes remain until one o’clock and the Vesper’s clapper already lies on the floor. My presence there would merely be a formality now, and I’ve never been prouder of myself.

Yet, despite my newfound confidence from silencing Arbutus fifteen minutes early, I can’t shake the unease sitting like a rock in my gut.

Max releases me and rounds his desk. His shared office is empty, Rhys still away for lunch. Nevertheless, I give the door a light tap. It moves by itself and snicks shut, hiding us from prying eyes.

From the top drawer, Max withdraws a small, wrapped package. He pulls the flat box closer to his chest, hesitation sketching his features, then thrusts it

out. “I wasn’t sure if I’d see you today. So, happy birthday, Mina.”

His obvious uncertainty is endearing, but I can’t even find it in me to tease him. Instead, I stare at the gift, tied with twine, and swallow every thought that packs my mouth. None of them are enough. All I manage is: “You remembered.”

“Of course I did.” He sounds almost defensive. “I know you don’t care much about it this year, but I couldn’t ignore it.” He shakes the box. “Take it. Come on—*tick-tick*.”

I can’t help my wide smile as I accept the gift.

A gentle tug undoes the bow, and the paper splits to reveal a pine box. Its lacquered surface is a rare shine in this dusty place. Nestled inside is an odd mix of painted wood, copper, and string. My creased brow smooths when I lift it out by a hook, and a delicate symphony fills the room. Silver and gold stars dangle, enticing lively rings from the chimes they strike.

“You told me one of your favorite memories was watching the winter star showers with your father,” Max says sheepishly. “I thought you might like to have them all year round. Hang them—”

Whatever else he means to say, I don’t let him. The chimes crash against his back as I throw my arms around his neck. A squeezing touch expressing a fondness I doubt could ever fit inside pretty words.

“It’s perfect,” I breathe into his shoulder.

“Really?”

“Why are you so surprised?” I laugh, pulling away to return the chimes to the box. Already their sweet sound is one I adore. “This is the nicest gift I’ve received in a long time.”

His smile is back to devastating, but it slips as he seems to savor his next words. “Are you ... do you have family plans tonight?”

The warmth that blossomed in my chest dampens. A simple question that no longer has such an answer to match.

In the past, we would have all gathered at the Strauss family home and celebrated with a big dinner and lemon cake. A few presents, then several serious hands of cards before everyone returned to their belfries for the nightly Heralds. Maybe even Max could have joined us.

But that was *before*.

After, Isaac’s birthday came first, and the May date passed without fanfare. No invitation to dinner, no cake baked, my gift to him given three days later.

Then Aida's followed the same pattern in August, and now mine in October. I don't need to be on speaking terms with Mother to know she's planned nothing.

Nor do I *want* her to. I already know the result. Dinner salted with criticism, a cake iced with discontent, and a gift wrapped in obligation. There'd be no love in it, only guilt. A forced and unpleasant celebration before we devolve into yet another argument. And after what happened last night ...

No, I'm eighteen now. I can do without.

I shake my head, the easiest response I have but one Max understands better than most.

He steps closer, the toes of his shoes brushing mine. "Then maybe we can do something? I can make you a late dinner—that *will* be edible—"

I smile softly. "Promises, promises."

"—and we can play some cards?"

There and gone so fast, in the twitch of an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth. If I didn't know his face, I'd blame my imagination. *Pity*, and I want none of that, too.

My grip tightens on his gift to me. I've had enough today of feeling lesser, and that tiny glimpse from him urges me to push back. To exert my power and reclaim what I need for my birthday. It's not my family. Not dinner with Mother. Not even acknowledgment after an age of ignoring all but the mistakes.

My gaze shifts over Max's shoulder to the door, then back to him. His expression is expectant, almost hopeful as he waits for my answer. All I need is a night with someone who loves me exactly as I am. And with an overwhelming burst of conviction that makes my heart feel oddly full to the brim, I realize Max can be that person.

The box of stars slides onto Rhys's desk before I grasp Max's waistcoat and tug him down to meet my mouth.

An arm wraps around to pull me closer, as if in question. For the first time, I arch into him and leave no room for doubt between us. My hand slides behind his neck, trading embroidery for warm skin and soft hair. He tastes my lipstick, carelessly slow. As ever, Max is obeying the limits I set for us. I loose a frustrated growl.

It took time to believe that he would let me take the small steps I needed to

build a relationship with him. A crawl toward a cliff that everyone else wanted to dive off. But now ... Saints, I think I trust him enough to catch me, so I rise on my toes—and *fall*.

The backs of my thighs bump into the desk. The only scents in this world belong to Max, notes of ink and dust and that favorite evergreen cologne of his. Teeth scrape my bottom lip, and I don't pull away. I want a little more. And it's terrifying, to ask for more than I ever have, to push the boundaries of my experience, my comfort, but it feels *right*.

His fingers graze my throat, finding each freckle. His gentle touch is lightning across my skin. Surely he feels my raging pulse. Even the bells ring alongside it. One toll to meet five wild beats. Once, twice—

The bells!

"Saints!" I shove Max off me. He slams into the filing cabinet, knocking a potted fern to the floor. We stare at each other, frozen inside a muddled silence.

"Max." My gasp is almost beseeching. A plea to tell me that what we hear isn't true.

In the distance above us, the Vesper Bell rings a third time.

At one in the afternoon.

After I silenced it.

"No! Saints, no!" The door bursts open on its own and I dash across the hallway.

Four rings.

I take the tower steps three at a time. Confined to the stairwell, Arbutus's horrid song rattles my bones, reaches between my ribs, and threatens to tear out my beating heart.

Five.

I don't understand. I don't—I *cut it*. I cut *the clapper*. This shouldn't be happening. It doesn't grow back in fifteen minutes. Not even in thirty. It never does. This shouldn't—

Six.

A razor-edged scent, suggestive of a brewing storm, swills around me. It only worsens with each landing passed, deepening the pit in my stomach. Feathers of dust spill from cracks overhead, shaken free with every strike of the Vesper.

Seven.

My legs give out. I fling out my hands to catch myself, but my chin still smacks against trembling stone. My right knee skids down several steps before I regain my footing.

Eight.

I stagger into the belfry's doorway as the very air ripples with smudges of black. Shadows tumble over one another as the ravens fly about in a frenzy. Their shrieks are barely audible over the lingering *boom* of Arbutus. Trying to think fast, I snatch the glass-edged shears from my worktable and dart up the stairs ringing the tower.

Nine.

The blades crash together. No resistance sits between them; they slice like a knife in water through the first thick, heaving rope connected to the wheels tilting the Vesper. The second succumbs to the shears just the same.

Ten.

The severed ends of the last two ropes fall as I drop the shears. Whatever strength I have left sags against the railing. Every bone in my body gives up, sunken with relief.

It's done. I stopped it. I stopped the Bane.

Tears blur my sight, but they don't blind me to the impossible rebellion before me.

Eleven.

"No!" My scream is lost beneath the deafening knell. *This can't be possible.*

No longer assisted by the tugging ropes, the Vesper Bell is singing on its own ... and it means to reach the final waking note.

Desperation makes my cold-blooded joints move. I slide under the rail and land heavily below. The Bane. It can't—I *won't let it come back!*

Twelve.

Out of options, out of time, I rush to meet the dark bell's swing. Arms outstretched, stopping Arbutus through sheer force is all I can think to do.

The coarse bronze is frigid and sticky to the touch. My fingers scrabble to hook under the lip of the bell, to pull it back and keep catastrophe at bay. My heels dig into the floor as Arbutus tips above my head. Its rusted throat threatens to swallow me whole.

It's not enough. *I'm* not enough.

The clapper slams into the side a thirteenth time.

And the world ceases to spin.

A power, unholy and paralyzing, explodes from the Vesper. It spreads outward with greedy hands, claws that snare my heart and set it ablaze.

No raging wildfire could be worse than this inferno within me. My ribs turn brittle, bits of charcoal crumbling as flames push up my throat and flood my stomach. I'm knocked off my feet, thrown back across the floor—

My head meets the wall with a resounding crack, and I slip away to nothing.

Five

The moment I shake free of my awful nightmare, I very much wish I had not.

My eyes squeeze tight against the pain that stews in every facet of my sprawled body. A low groan wedges in my throat as I touch my throbbing head.

What the hell happened?

A charred metal scent sits heavy in my nose, and there's a strange ringing. Tinny and high-pitched, like a swarm of wasps inside my ears. Under my spine thrums a second pulse as erratic as mine.

The world is out of focus, muffled. Shifting silhouettes and metallic glimmers among too much light. And voices—*so many voices*.

One shadow looms over me. Arms slide beneath my knees, shoulders, lifting me from the floor. The pain wrapped around my bones doubles as I'm jostled into a chair.

"Easy, Mina," Max says, his sedate voice distorted as it feeds through the hive in my mind. Crouched before me, he places a gentle hand on my bruised knee, and a much firmer one at my shoulder to keep me upright. "You hit your head pretty hard."

I open my mouth to ... well, I don't know. A coppery taste coats my tongue. My shaking hand prods my bottom lip and comes away streaked red. It's too wet, too bright to be my lipstick. At the back of my skull, I find the same slick color.

It's blood, I realize. *My blood*. My fingertips rub together, smearing the red deeper into the whorls of my skin. I can't get my racing thoughts to connect, and that scares me.

Max lightly presses a handkerchief to my split lip. I brush it aside and fix him with an imploring look. His complexion is wan, as if whatever blood I

lost he's matched.

"How long was I out?" I croak.

"Twenty minutes."

He tries again to clean my face, moving to my right cheek, and I grip his wrist.

I stare at his ruffled hair, the lipstick smudged at the corner of his mouth. Brown eyes that have seen every inch of me, now unable to meet mine. Unable to hide the fear that dwells within.

"I ... I didn't dream it, did I?"

The blotted handkerchief disappears inside Max's clenched fist as his brow furrows. For one bated moment, I hope he'll tell me I'm wrong. That these crashing swells of memory are just echoes of some terrible nightmare.

But we both know it would be a lie.

I sit up straighter, steeling myself. My foot slips on something jagged. I tear my gaze away from Max, and horror swamps my gut.

My tower is ... it's *broken*.

High above, the gangway leading to the southern dial now hangs lopsided by the thread of its overhead supports. The clockface itself—shattered. Every ivory pane is missing from an iron skeleton of numbers and spokes. And beyond this, between splintered beams, casting flickering shadows, ravens fly through the collapse in the vaulted roof.

Down here, the bottom half of the southern wall is simply gone. A round mouth with masonry teeth and the cold outside for a maw.

Every noise comes back with a vengeance. The rush of the pendulum, the grind of gears, the clack of the clock, the ravens—all at once too much for my rattled head.

Several shadows detach from the icy light. Max moves to stand beside me. His hand stays on my shoulder, and as familiar faces come into view, I credit it as the sole reason I remain seated.

Councillor Tamzin reaches me first. "Mina, do you know what happened?" she demands. Her braids are gathered over one shoulder, unease plain in her dark-brown eyes.

"This is preposterous!" comes a blustering voice.

Mayor Bergen bumps Tamzin aside. Where she's soft concern, he is heaving anger. The buttons of his waistcoat threaten to pop with each breath. "I won't have this coddling. She was here, damn it—" He leans in, gripping

the arms of my chair. “Of *course* she *knows*.”

My spine flattens against the back of the chair. “I ... I don’t...” It’s all I can muster with him so close.

“*Hey*.” Max shoves Bergen in the chest, pushing him away. “Leave her alone.”

I can’t even process Max’s sheer gall before the mayor erupts. They step almost toe to toe, but Max has the advantage of half a foot in height.

Tamzin pushes between her aide and the mayor, her expression settling into quiet rage. “I realize we’re all shaken, but this is not helpful. From *either* of you.”

Rhys grabs Max’s arm and, after a few hissed words in his ear, restores him to my side. Bergen and Tamzin face off as they’ve done on countless occasions in session. A few more faces appear behind them, and Councillors Junia and Crain add to the rising racket.

I can’t think, can’t focus on what the *fuck* just happened, so instead I turn my mind to something I can comprehend.

My tower is in shambles, but ... it can be fixed. Dealt with. One broken piece at a time.

Glass sparkles across the floorboards, mingling with shards of stone and wood. If the city doesn’t eat them first, a broom can tidy that. The structural damage, the gaping gashes in the wall and ceiling—Vaiwyn just needs time to heal those wounds. The hole will brick itself up, glass panes will spread like fungi, the roof will patch like the work of a clever seamstress.

All of it is a mess that makes sense. It can be resolved.

Then I see my Vesper Bell, and it doesn’t seem so simple anymore.

The ropes I cut hang limp, swaying in the chill breeze. Dead things the same thickness as the crack lancing through the rusted bronze of Arbutus’s curved belly. From crown to lip, through spiky inscriptions now glowing with a dark-gold aura. A bell cleaved like an egg hatched. The clapper I removed earlier is almost absorbed by the wooden floor now—half an inch of iron still waits to be devoured.

Beside it lies an impossible second clapper I did *not* cut. Nor have I seen its like before. Its surface too smooth, too polished; its shape too foreign and different. Sharp-edged and violent, and ripped free from the Vesper in one piece.

It’s a sight that fills me with a need to cry. I feel so scraped out and hollow.

The unthinkable really did happen. In my belfry, on *my* watch.

I lean over and retch.

Bergen, despite not being near me, lurches back, crushing Crain's foot. Nothing comes up but bile and spittle, leaving an acidic ache in my throat. A dull pain to match the one in my heart.

On that thirteenth toll, the blaze in my chest exploded to what felt like lightning. But it hasn't faded, not completely. I touch my sternum, feel my simmering pulse. I'm reminded of coals, nudged for a gasp of life.

Councillor Junia waves a message she must have just received through the walls. Tamzin appears to have one as well, already unfolded from its neat square.

Over the outrage of the others, they share reports of damage done outside Lyndell Hall. The River Riga flooded its banks after an avalanche was triggered; windows in three churches on the north bank have all blown outward; several sinkholes opened in the Financial District.

"Damn it all to the Saints, what are we to do?" Bergen bellows. He whirls on me once more, his thick white mustache quivering. "I won't ask again, girl! What. *Happened.*"

I can't give an answer because I have none. Severing the clapper—amputating the tongue to wake the Bane—was supposed to be enough. The sole purpose of Vaiwyn's Bell Keepers for centuries. *Be the warden of your Vesper; keep it in check.* It was a lesson hammered into me from the first day I understood I would eventually have my own bell tower, and it should have been *enough*. That a second and entirely new clapper grew in its place within what could only be a few minutes—the evidence is right in front of me and I still don't believe it.

The shouted din feels like a firing squad, and I laugh. Short and sharp. It seems a small miracle that my mother isn't here to hold a rifle to my head herself.

"I think," comes a soft voice, rising above the noise and carving out a tenuous quiet, "we would all appreciate that answer, Bergen."

Seized by a suffocating dread, my gaze shifts to the belfry's doorway. To Imogen Strauss, frozen on the threshold and staring at the remains of Arbutus.

If I didn't know better, I'd say shock draws her eyes wide. The impossible has happened, after all. But this is my mother, and if she's startled, she

immediately veils it beneath a frigid, pale mask.

Max grips my shoulder as she enters. To arrive here from the University so quickly, she must have run the moment she heard the second toll, but the only sign of this lies in her flushed cheeks. Not a single hair is out of place from its tight knot. Mother stands before me with all the straight-spined grace available to an individual, and then some stolen.

"I certainly would like to hear what transpired, Wilhelmina." She clasps her grease-stained hands and waits. Somehow, her quiet expectancy is worse than any lecture, any argument. I want nothing more than for the floor to give way beneath me.

With strength leeching from Max's touch, I tell the tale as best I can beneath her terrible, critical gaze. Deliberate in omitting my time with Max, the events that led to the surrounding destruction spill forth. My removal of the clapper at quarter to, my dash up the stairs, the severing of the ropes, my last-ditch effort to stop that doomed thirteenth ring. How, despite everything, I did as I was taught.

When I finish, only the ominous crack of a beam and a fresh shower of dust responds. My hands clutch my knees. I glare at them, barely ignoring the ticking in my pocket and its reminder of whose footsteps I sought to follow. I try to sit in my silence, pray no one will delve for more, but I can't resist, if only to clear myself of this *guilt* that worms inside.

"I cut the clapper." I find Mother's face, hating that I need her to believe me. "Regardless of what happened, I did my job."

But she's not looking at me. Her lips purse, eyes narrowed at the hand on my shoulder. The glint behind the grey speaks to pieces clicking into place. Icy claws furrow between my ribs.

Max must become aware, too, for he releases me at the same time I try to shrug him off. I accidentally elbow him in the gut instead. He doubles over in a sudden fit of coughing. I look at him in alarm as he turns away, handkerchief emerging to cover his mouth.

"Perhaps," Mother says with a deadly calm, "you should wipe the lipstick off as well."

Bergen scoffs. "No, that's blood, Imogen." He offers a vague gesture toward me. "The boy was here when we arrived."

Her eyes flick to mine, and I'm trapped. "How fortunate."

To the untrained ear, these are little more than innocent observations, but

they spear through the core of my deception. I never shared why I wasn't here when the hour struck, but she's figured it out. Mindful of her family's image, even of those deemed a disgrace, Mother won't spread the cause for my failure aloud.

But she *knows*.

My precious secret, held tight and lovingly sheltered for months, now blown apart for anyone who cares to see, and the reveal could not be more disastrous. I feel sick, thinking of how this will fall when Mother and I are next alone.

Max soon recovers himself. He returns to the fray beside my chair, clearing his throat, but I don't dare look at him. For both our sakes, I pray he doesn't touch me again.

"I don't understand." Tamzin scuffs her shoe over what remains of the tarnished clapper I cut, interrupting the unspoken revelations passing between Mother and me. The councillor straightens, examining the other, more menacing clapper. "It *was* removed, just as Mina said. How could it have created a replacement so fast?"

"Does it even matter?" Junia demands.

"Exactly," Bergen agrees, nodding with his usual bombast. "It no longer matters *after* the fact. We have an unprecedented crisis on our hands!"

"But what happens now?" asks Crain. They tuck their hair behind one ear with nervous fingers. "What are we supposed to do?"

Another question without an answer. And that scares me most of all.

The only certainty we possess is that the Bane, exiled by the Lost Alchemist's sacrifice, is awake. My Vesper is undeniable proof of that.

But apart from orchestrating Vaiwyn's near ruin centuries ago, that is *all* we truly know about it. If I were less upset, I'd laugh. An evil so scorned by history we're only taught its slumber must never end. What it looks like, the details of how it first controlled the city, what it could do again, never mattered when it ...

When its return would always be stopped by the Bell Keepers. I swallow hard.

"What do we do next, Bergen?" Junia asks.

"What we do next"—Mother's voice cuts in clear as winter air—"is lock this city down. Every citizen must be accounted for. Instigate a strict curfew. Sunset to sunrise. Organize a citywide search. Keep information to a

minimum so people are alert but will still listen.”

“... Curfew?” The mayor stares at her for a moment before jumping to attention. “Yes, of course. You!” He turns to the three councillors present and repeats Mother’s words.

Mother moves toward me, and I refrain from flinching as she grips my elbow. She needs to apply no pressure for me to rise, and her arm wraps around my waist like that of a loving parent.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” she murmurs, and for a second, I remember her as the woman I ran to when I was young. One who kissed my scraped knees and brushed away my tears. Who served me hot chocolate in a grown-up mug because she knew it would make me feel better.

Max calls my name, but I fix my gaze ahead. Despite her soft words, there’s a strain in Mother’s body that warns of a spark about to ignite, and I won’t fan the flames.

“Your brother and sister will meet us at the University,” she says. “Emiko is on her way as well.”

“The University?” I stumble. “What for?”

I never expect an answer, but she snaps, “We have a long night before us.”

“Citywide search—wait.” Bergen shouts for Mother when we reach the threshold. “What aren’t you telling us, Imogen? What are we searching for?”

Her hold on my waist tightens, forcing me to keep walking as she ignores his questions. Under her breath, low enough I barely catch it, she says, “Something that doesn’t belong.”

Six

Restored to normal in short order.” I roll my eyes and pitch the flyer back onto the table. “As if anyone believes—Ow.” I flinch as Isaac applies cotton doused with alcohol to my cut cheek.

“If you would just sit still—it’s like trying to catch an alley cat.”

“Can an alley cat do this?” Before he can deny me, I take a swig from the vodka bottle at my elbow. If it’s good enough to clean the visible wounds, then it’s good enough to numb the ones on the inside, too.

Isaac wrenches the bottle away. “Don’t mix that with what I gave you for those headaches—probably end up smelling colors or something. And stop feeling sorry for yourself. You did what you were supposed to.”

“Easy for you to say. Your Vesper isn’t a broken mess.” I wince again, even though his prodding touch is gentle. “Did your purpose in life suddenly implode?”

The moment it leaves my mouth, I wish I could collect it back. Stuff it down my throat and choke on it. Because my life’s purpose *is* Isaac’s, our childhoods and lessons the same. And despite only my Vesper failing, we both lost that inherited sense of reason in the space of thirteen tolls. All five of us Keepers did. So, what do we do now?

“Like I said.” Isaac looks to the corner of the library, where I hear our mother hauling books from shelves and slamming them into her cart. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

Sheepish, my gaze flicks to the table, its surface marked carelessly with ink.

Steps from Schaden Bridge on the south bank, dominating the second and third floors, Buchari University’s library is a prized jewel in Vaiwyn’s crown. Where Lyndell Hall’s age is clear in perpetual dust, here it’s told in a smell

one never settles into. Sweet and musty, pouring from thousands of books almost as old as the city itself to invade every breath. It seeps into the mahogany shelves and stains the griffins carved along the banister. Perched in a line, the wooden creatures glare at troubled students dashing down the stairs, all their classes now canceled for the foreseeable future.

I drag an idle finger over the green leatherbound book before me. *An Intricate and Unabridged History of the Saints: Volume Two.*

After shooing students out of her library, Mother dropped this, along with several other books, on the table before disappearing between the stacks. Since then, she's returned every ten minutes with a different pile—all detailing either the five Saints, bells, or Vaiwyn's history and theology—and a stony silence I don't dare try to sand down.

Emiko and Isaac, too, must have sensed the growing storm when they arrived earlier. Emiko retreated to the archives a floor below. My brother merely sat beside me after procuring medical supplies, that frustrating flyer tucked in his pocket. Several copies of it, all marked with the Council's seal, were delivered through the school's walls and scattered across the hallways.

When I move to snatch this one again, already crumpled and smudged, Isaac slaps my hand away.

"Mina! Sit. *Still*. Saints." He dabs the cotton to my split lip, and my protest comes as a sharp hiss. "Pretty sure you've memorized that damn thing by now."

I *have* memorized it. But somehow, I've also convinced myself that if I trace over the black script one more time, I'll glean something new. Something useful.

Effective immediately, all citizens of Vaiwyn are to remain indoors from dusk to dawn. This is for their safety, and for the Constabulary to conduct the necessary searches. The situation will be rectified, and business restored to normal in short order.

"How can so many words say so little?" It's a question that has cycled through my mind since I first read the flyer, but seems strange to voice aloud.

Isaac smears a foul-smelling paste across my cheek and lip, then turns to pack up the supplies. Vodka in hand, he hesitates with the cork before offering me the bottle anyway. After I take a deep swig, he imitates me.

He dries his mouth with his sleeve—not his deacon robes, but the sturdy linen tunic he wears when working in the catacombs, redolent of chemicals

and dankness—and says with a shrug, “The Council is trying to keep people calm.”

“Isaac, the Bane isn’t some rabid wolf the Constabulary can just capture and put down.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But until we figure this out, someone has to keep things together.”

I scoff, almost wistful, watching as the vodka disappears inside his satchel. There’s a pleasant warmth in my extremities, a softness to my sharp-edged emotions that makes me wonder if Quinn has the right idea. To blur reality, if only for a little while.

Every person in this city heard—and if unable to hear, *felt*—those thirteen tolls. They know what it means. The Council wants calm, yet this is the quiet before a tempest, and it’s already falling apart. No matter how much they try to disguise it, I saw fear in the darting eyes of the people Mother and I passed after leaving Lyndell Hall; hear it now in the raised voices of the students leaving the University. The reminder of the Lost Alchemist and her sacrifice is an unavoidable constant throughout Vaiwyn. In sculpted likenesses, sermons, the Vespers and their Heralds—in her metals, melted as tears on every damn building and street.

Lyndell Hall’s Vesper has called to the Bane, and nobody knows what to expect.

No sketch portrays the Bane’s true appearance—the horrid, cloaked figure underfoot at the Cathedral is one artist’s interpretation. No book describes how it first attacked the city, no scholar understands if it’s one shadow or many—or something worse. It could be in this very room, and we’d never know. Vaiwyn’s most terrible foe, and because the Alchemist gave us the means to forget, none endeavored to remember.

How could this city have been so naive? So trusting and *hopeful*. The Saints don’t even walk among us anymore to protect Vaiwyn as they once did. They ascended. They *left*.

That unwelcome guilt slithers inside again, and I force myself to recall the slice of shears through iron. The memory of a Bell Keeper’s job done.

“Do we just ... start reading?” Isaac asks.

“That’s what Mother said,” I reply. “But looking for what, I’ve no clue.”

“Didn’t she say?” The lamp on the long table’s surface flares brighter the moment he pulls a thin volume on metallurgy toward him and flips to the first

page.

Mother's muttered words in the belfry tip through my mind, as unbidden as a shiver. *Something that doesn't belong.*

Does she know something about the Bane? As the matriarch Bell Keeper, maybe she's privy to more. Councillor Junia mentioned an avalanche—perhaps a lair of unspeakable evil was unveiled with it. What if unseen monsters born of nightmare and brimstone now roam the streets? I stare at the windows, half expecting claws to caress the glass.

“No,” I answer slowly. And from the banging still floating between the stacks, Mother is pulling dozens more books. Even if we knew what to look for, it would take days to read through them all. “See, this is what I don't get. Why don't we know more about the Bane?”

“The religious texts burned eight centuries ago.”

Aida's curt voice precedes her arrival. The tip of her nose glows, her olive cheeks flushed from the cold. She removes her coat, wet with snow, to reveal a fussy blouse. A narrow box slides across the table into my elbow.

I point at it, frowning. “What's this?”

“Your birthday gift.” She settles in the chair opposite. “It's an engraved fountain pen.”

“A pen. Thank you.” I force a smile, but it turns into a grimace as my cuts twinge. Some birthday this turned out to be. Shattering thousand-year-old legacies and all that.

From my heart, there's a lurch of heat before it reverts to the dull burn that's lingered since I regained consciousness in the belfry. No longer painful, but still foreign, uncomfortable. My anxiety has a new source, so why shouldn't the way it presents itself change, too?

“You didn't need to do this, what with...” I give a weak, all-encompassing wave.

Aida runs both hands through her long black hair to clear it of melting flakes. “You were getting it today, no matter what.” To a stranger, her brusque tone would seem uncaring, but she rarely wastes a word.

“Where are Nikole and Hana?” Isaac asks, and I lean over, as if my sister-in-law will round the corner with my squirming niece.

“At home. Nikole can't go to her parents, since they've already closed the mountain passes, what with—” Her hand twirls in a more aggressive version of my gesture. “So, until we figure out what's next, locked doors will have to

do.”

“What were you saying about church records?” I ask.

Ever studious, Aida is already on the second page of a book. “In answer to your question, about why we don’t know.”

When she offers no more, I turn to my brother.

He tosses his book down, already giving up. “About eight hundred years ago, a fire at Elke Cathedral destroyed almost all the religious texts pertaining to the Bane. It wasn’t arson, but when Vaiwyn didn’t extinguish the fire itself, they saw it as a heavenly sign that we don’t need to know the specifics of the Bane or that first attack. The fools,” he adds darkly.

“No, I get that,” I say, then point between the three of us. “But we’re the Bell Keepers. Our ancestors were appointed by the Saints themselves. Why don’t we know more?”

“Because, Wilhelmina.” Mother comes into view, pushing a cart stacked high, its wheels creaking. “The threat of utter ruin was meant to keep this from ever coming to pass.”

Like clockwork, I bristle at my given name. *Mina* began as my father’s nickname for me when I couldn’t pronounce the full thing. Too many unwieldy syllables and letters for a young child to wrap her tongue around. And it stuck. Wilhelmina may be the unfortunate name Mother selected for me, but Mina is who I am without her. And she tramples it every chance she can. To grind me back to the shape she believes me to fit.

With forced calm, I reply, “We guard the Vespers, though. How can we not know what the Bane will do once freed?” *And why couldn’t I stop it?*

A furious glint enters Mother’s eye as she walks down Aida’s side of the table. A look that once sent me retreating to my bedroom now makes me dig my feet in, marking my territory. Isaac rises from his chair, as if he smells the danger leaking into the musty air.

“Yes, Wilhelmina, over twenty generations of Strausses have guarded those Vespers.” A low, dangerous tilt to her voice threatens to undo my resolve. “Every day and night without fail, our ancestors’ lives revolved around those bells and what they mean to this city. One. Thousand. Years. And that legacy dies with you, all because you couldn’t keep your hands off a boy!”

The books in her arms slam to the tabletop, and the warning flashes of lightning from earlier crash down at last.

I stiffen. “Don’t bring him into this.”

Even if he were here, Max does not belong in this conversation. Whatever she’s figured out, it wasn’t his fault. I willingly went into his office. *I’m* the one who kissed him. Her anger rests with me alone—I can protect him from that much.

Aida lays a hand on Mother’s arm. “Let’s not do this now. We’re all—”

She jerks free and draws up to her full height. “You and that boy. I *knew it!*”

Heat rises in my cheeks, curls my fingers to fists. Perhaps it’s the vodka, or maybe it’s a frustration that’s built up for months. Might even be grief—my solace is no longer my secret. Whichever it is, it encases my bones in steel and boils my blood. “Knew *what*, Mother?”

“That something was going on between the pair of you.”

“So? It does happen,” I shoot back. “The three of us got here somehow.”

She takes a quick step forward, and for one fleeting moment, I fear she’ll strike me across the table. She didn’t even do that when I was young. But her hands don’t lift, and I breathe out.

“I didn’t expect much from you, starting in this position after your—” Her fingers flare before gripping the back of a chair. “But that you would *sink* to such depths and let a *useless* distraction keep you from your duty.” Her disbelieving laugh is more air than sound. More vicious than amused. “You weren’t there to cut the clapper. The Herald rang, and you were not there because you were busy flirting. Unlike the rest of us, you had only one job. *One*. And you couldn’t even bother with it.”

“That’s not true! I...” *Saints*.

Wrapped up in her stark displeasure, Mother unveiled one glaring truth to my siblings: I wasn’t there. She may as well hold up my heart for the others to inspect for rot. It would hurt less. I don’t look at Aida or Isaac. Mother holds all my contrite attention.

“I don’t know what comes next,” she continues, pinning me with icy challenge, “because it was never meant to happen. Not if we Bell Keepers do our job as we’re *trained* to do.”

Each word is a knife between the ribs. I coax my voice forth, indignation seeping through the holes she’s made. “Why won’t you listen—I removed the clapper at quarter to, the same as Aida always says she does. I *did* my job. Just as Father taught me.”

“And last night, was that also you *doing* your job?”

“I was studying,” I retort. “I lost track of the time.”

I know it’s the wrong thing to say a split second before a single brow lifts, smooth and sharp as her measured words. “You lost track. Of the time. In a *clock tower*.”

“Ma.” Isaac’s tone is soothing in the way one would speak to a cornered, snarling dog. “From what I heard, that Vesper couldn’t be stopped...” His support fades beneath her glare. Little more than a flick of her eyes, but more effective than a gag.

“Your father coddled you,” she spits at me. “I *told* him you shouldn’t have shirked the Bank as you did, spending all your time with him. He never saw what I did: a *child* who thought herself above it all. Who seems to think when she’s told not to, she should out of spite. I told him that, but just like you, he refused to listen. Refused to push you toward the responsibility that was yours alone.” Her grip on the chair turns white-knuckled. “And now look. I was right.”

I draw in a sharp breath. There it is. The killing blow, spearing through my every last defense. After months of sparring, searching for weaknesses in the other, she’s finally won.

And she knows it.

As she storms downstairs to join Emiko, I sit in my defeat. But I don’t shake it off or let it drag me down. Don’t let myself cry. Instead, I let it anchor me. Allow it to fill me with a strength that will bloom into fury. A wrath I’ll let fester beneath the skin for as long as it takes.

Because all that’s left is to try to prove her wrong once more. Show her I’ve always given a damn. My Vesper is gone, my calling vanished—but my city remains. And whatever threat hovers over Vaiwyn, answers need to be found. Any shred of detail that survived fire, time, and ignorance but speaks to how I can protect my home again—I must find it. I have to.

That’s all I have left.

★ ★ ★

I should have known the first book Mother gave me to read would also be the first my exhaustion says no to.

As bells across Vaiwyn greet an hour that straddles darkness and the coming dawn, my bleary eyes make little sense of *An Intricate and Unabridged History of the Saints: Volume Two*. The leather spine creaks like a body stiff from disuse as I reach for my coffee.

The rendering of the Lost Alchemist on page 478 is exquisite. I touch the parchment, finding tiny imperfections where paint was brushed on too thick. Her expression is beautiful in its ferocity. Pale skin glitters with warmth as auburn hair whips in an unseen breeze. Her armor gleams, kissed by the fire that encases her fabled sword and crowns her head. But the Saint's eyes—they brim with divinity, yet reveal a woman who saw the end of the world coming and gave everything to stop it.

Cracked porcelain meets my lips, only for me to remember I drained it minutes ago. I stare into the empty cup for longer than I want to admit before setting it down.

At the cost of an unfortunate humming in my veins and several trips to the toilet, five cups of coffee have kept me awake through the night. The frequency at which my body is now tuned leaves me skittish, reacting to the smallest sounds. I swear something is scratching at the stone outside.

"More coffee?"

I startle as Emiko appears on the other side of the table, a fresh pot in hand. With shadows beneath her eyes, hair piled atop her head, the Farvald Bank's Bell Keeper looks as haggard as I feel, but that hasn't stopped her from continually brewing the bitter drink. I suspect it might be a coping mechanism for her—it didn't manifest until after the four remaining Vespers tolled the nightly Heralds without Keeper intervention. It was ... the worst sound in the world.

"No." I stretch out my arms as she sits. "I think I'm at the point where it'll put me to sleep instead."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." She fills her cup and cradles it greedily. "I think it'd be more effective to just inject it."

The lamp between us flickers out, and I poke the shade, forcing the flame back. I frown. I've never known a light in Vaiwyn to be faulty, but this one has winked on and off for the last hour. From the suspicious glance Emiko gives it, it must strike her as strange, too.

"Anything good in the archives?" I ask.

"Just mice and mold. Imogen is still searching, though." Her voice fades

once she says my mother's name, a rueful twist to her mouth that makes me smirk.

It's as I expected. Emiko avoids our familial spats, wrongly considering herself to be an outsider to our group, but she's not above eavesdropping. Bell Keepers who aren't Strausses—either by blood or by marrying into the matriarchal name—aren't unusual, but I always wonder how Emiko feels, witnessing how dysfunctional this family is behind closed doors.

I look at my siblings. For a family accustomed to staying up late every night, we're useless past one o'clock.

Across the table, Aida pillows her head on some labeled diagrams. She tried leaving for the Courts at midnight before remembering we all agreed there was no point to it—the damage was already done with my bell. My stomach twists observing her now-peaceful expression. Aida hid in the stacks for a while just after one, but I saw her somber front splinter through the gaps between the books anyway.

Her light snores match Isaac's; he collapsed in the armchair beneath the windows he opened, hoping the cold air would help keep us alert. Aside from a small "oh," that rumbling in his chest is all the noise he's made since the Vespers rang.

I return to my book, if only to pretend I can still function. But as I examine the faded lines on the page beside the Alchemist's portrayal, a thrill jolts through me instead. Inked strokes, thin and spiky—and identical to the foreign script etched across Arbutus's belly.

Except *this* is in a language I can read. Or ... can I?

This talks about a bell, souls, and *six* Saints. I lean in closer. That must be a mistake. All my life—all *Vaiwyn's* life—I've only ever heard of or seen five Saints. Not six.

Before I can share this strange discovery with Emiko, a piercing scream shatters the stillness of the city.

Seven

The sound is a knife wound to the dying night, filled with such pointed fear.

Isaac wakes with a choked yelp; the books in his lap smack to the floor. I shove up from the table, my chair toppling. Another scream—deeper, more masculine—echoes from farther away.

The moment I reach the window ledge, I lurch back with my own strangled noise. Isaac catches me, steadying me against his tall frame. From behind come Emiko's concerns, Aida's groggy questions—all go unanswered.

As stone rasps on stone, I don't know how to believe what unfolds before me.

Like most of Vaiwyn's older structures, the University's facade is a flurry of detail. Vast swaths of ivy cover entire walls like a verdant illness, their hungry roots infecting limestone. Intricate tracery fills the spaces between ribs, columns, and knobs; ribbons of melted silver lend the building personality. And perched on every corner, nestled between stained glass and guarding the roof, are sinister statues of nightmare and lore.

Sculptures made even more terrible now that they're *alive*.

Isaac still presses close as I approach the ledge once more. Slow, careful.

The grinding is louder, more insistent, as the gargoyle to the left of the window stretches its taloned fingers, uncurls hooked feet. Snow spills from broad shoulders with an abrupt twist of its reptilian head. A shout lodges in my throat as leering, blank eyes find mine.

"Mina, get back!" Isaac yanks me to the ground as stone claws swipe.

Wings of limestone beat against the windows, slamming them shut. Isaac covers my body with his as the glass rattles under every strike. The gargoyle lets loose an unholy screech. A sound so loud I want to clamp my hands over my ears and never hear again.

Instead, I clutch Isaac's arm, turn my face away from the window, and pray. Feverish, broken pleas exhaled into a dusty rug. I don't even know to which Saint I'm begging, and it doesn't matter. Any of them will do if it means the impossible demon outside goes away, stops pressing against straining, cracking glass.

Before the earsplitting echoes fade, Emiko's hands rake at me and Isaac, helping us up. Aida is there, too, drawing us both into a suffocating hug. I can't tell who between us trembles worse. My heated heart races at a frantic clip, each breath tipped with razors.

No monsters squeezed inside, no windows smashed beneath the weight of living stone, but a moment of safety has never felt so tenuous.

As one, we turn to the outside. The snow stopped falling at some point overnight. Aida reopens the window to better watch that dark shape cut across the fractured, bleeding sky, then dive into the mist that rolls off the River Riga.

"What devilry is this?" At my side, Isaac's expression is hard, but the creak in his voice betrays his distress.

I shake my head, still unwilling to understand. This can't be happening. This can't be *real*, and yet, somehow, it is.

No snarling wyverns or elegant seraphs move—only those most ugly and mean. Limbs twitch into motion, stiffness kicked out of their joints. Explosions of snow are the gargoyles' only warning of flight. A second tears free from the southern wing, and a third of blackened sandstone separates from the buildings opposite the University's gates, not fifty feet away.

"This is the city's doing." The note of horror in Aida's tone forces me to look at her.

"How is it Vaiwyn's fault?" Isaac demands.

Eyes still tracking across the sky, she wraps a hand around her throat, as if to prevent her thoughts from emerging. "Think about it. Vaiwyn heals stone, mends its cracks." She meets my tired gaze, and the clarity in hers alarms me. "What keeps it from breathing *life* into all of it?"

"I..." My jaw clenches as my mind veers off the track Aida just laid. To an answer that waits like a landslide, certain and destructive. "I don't think this is entirely the city's fault."

Renewed screams bring us back to the scene outside. The wintry mist, thick on the ground, shields everything from view but the floating specters

resembling streetlamps.

“But a curfew is in place,” Emiko insists. “It’s not yet sunrise.”

“Doesn’t matter when they’re still out there, but we should help them.” I push away from the window and hurry toward the library door. “Let them know to come inside where it’s safe.”

“Wait!” Isaac reaches my side as I round the shelves. “You’re not going alone—”

We both stop in our tracks at the sight of Mother obstructing the wide, arching doorway. Even when drawn with fatigue, her expression aims to shrivel.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hands planted on her hips, she looks deliberately between us, eyes glinting with a threat I won’t heed.

More strident screams puncture the library’s dense quiet, impossible to brush off. They’re probably vendors, shop owners, ignoring the curfew if only because their business begins before the sun rises.

“Mina’s right: We can help.” Isaac moves to step past, but she blocks him. “Ma, have you not seen what’s happening?” He tries the other side of the doorway and finds her already there.

“Of course I saw,” she hisses. “And it’s precisely why I will *not* have my children running about like mice hunted by a falcon in an open field.”

“You cannot be serious,” I scoff. The memory of our last exchange is still fresh, and listening to her inflict her will upon my choices is salt rubbed in a bloody wound. “Mother, whatever is going on, *this* is the Bane!”

The moment I say it, I know the declaration is right. However incomplete it still appears, this is the answer we were supposed to find in all these books. What my Vesper awoke. In the past, a city turned on *itself*.

What keeps it from breathing life into all of it?

I can’t help the thought that follows: that this is also my fault. I expect her to ram that into my gut, but to my surprise she only flinches and holds firm. “You will both. Stay. Here.”

My harsh bark of laughter is my sole warning before I lunge for the space she’s left unguarded.

A manacle of fingers ensnares my wrist, but there’s no chance for Mother to turn the key. I tug free as Isaac slips by, and we hurry to the stairs, chased by her waning shouts.

Hung like a spray of withered branches, the iron chandelier above the

entryway flickers. The few candles that spark are a feeble audience to our dash across the worn slate tiles. I angle my body to slide through the opening doors ... and crash into them instead.

Rubbing my shoulder, I stare aghast at the thick cedar, still shut before me. “What—why didn’t they open?”

Isaac’s bewilderment mirrors mine as he tugs both handles. “It’s locked. Listen.”

Now that we’ve paused beside them, I hear it: a staccato rattle, as if a strong gale is knocking. My gaze shifts between the heavy bolts plunged into both the lintel and floor, the doors nudging against them. A building at odds with itself. My stomach folds into knots.

“Isaac, Vaiwyn never locks these doors if someone is inside.”

“I know.” He grabs my shoulder, his thumb finding a tender bruise. “But this is good. Not that way,” he adds at my furious expression. “It gives us a second to think, though. Do we even have a plan here?”

“We get people inside.” I wrench the left bolt from the floor. The deafening squeal of the rod lifting worsens the frenetic energy bubbling within me. “Simple enough to wing it.”

He cringes at my unintentional choice of words, then backs away.

Ice fills my veins. “Where are you going?” I demand.

“You work on unlocking the doors. I’ll be right back.”

“Right back—” My arms fly out to the side. “Now?”

He tears down the south hall, yelling over his shoulder, “I just remembered something.” Lacquered wooden signs point the way to different departments, and I’m at a loss as to what my ridiculous brother could want from the biology wing.

If only to keep from pacing, I follow his advice. The bottom bolts are no trouble, but those above are well out of reach. I cast around and spot a curved handle protruding from under a bench. It’s flimsy and trimmed with black lace, but the forgotten umbrella will do the trick.

As I press onto my toes with it in hand, my mind turns to the inevitable.

This is the Bane.

I don’t want to be right, but what will deny what I so confidently said before? These locks, the flickering light fixtures—gargoyles coming to *life*. Vaiwyn is malfunctioning, which means I *am* right. If this is what it does, corrupts the city at such a base level, then maybe it’s not a monster we can

see. But it is the Bane, and my Vesper called to it.

A sour taste fills my mouth. I swallow it down. Guilt, true or not, isn't helpful right now.

Once the last bolt pulls down, the doors explode open, throwing me back.

My sudden fear that something shoved the doors vanishes when nothing swoops inside. No stone beasts lurk on the threshold, only frigid, pearled air. The fog plays with the shadows, twists them into restless, dark spirits.

But the courtyard beyond is calm, the lawn and wild hedges cloaked in glittering white. A slick ribbon of cobbles curves to either side, each brick and metal thread gleaming beneath the streetlamps. Vaiwyn can still clear its own streets of snow, and my knees nearly give out from the flood of relief that accompanies the realization.

I spin upon hearing Isaac return. First my head, then the rest as I notice what he clutches.

"I'm sorry, are you a constable now?" I gesture to the rifle, long enough to reach his hip if stood on the ground. "Where the hell did you get *that*?"

The metal is black and oiled, the wood finish glossed to a high shine even in this weak light. It's clearly a well-cared-for piece that has no business being in my brother's hands.

"It's Hagen's." He raises it higher, toying with the lever that will load the first shot. And from the bulge in his pocket, it won't be the last either. "You remember him from my year in school? He works here now. Keeps it in his office."

"Do you even know how to use it?" From the awkward way he shifts it to sit across his back, as if it's his fussy niece, I suspect whatever he's about to say is a lie.

"Sure," he definitely lies. "I went hunting with Hagen last summer. I observed."

"What are you going to do, Isaac? Chip their noses off?"

"As opposed to beating them with an umbrella?" he retorts.

I forgot I was still holding it, but now I clasp it tighter, almost in defiance.

A man's scream, coming from deep within the mist, cuts short my derisive response. We sober instantly.

"Just ... don't point it at me," I say.

We share a curt nod, filled with unassailable trust, and run into the courtyard.

Eight

Every slap of our feet is a muffled gunshot. Ice melted from the city's warmth flowing beneath the silver-threaded cobbles curls steam around us. When we reach the bricked pillars that anchor the wrought iron gates, Isaac and I crouch behind the rightmost one.

Out here, the mist plays no games. The shadows streaking through the dawn are very real.

Across the street, pressed against closed shutters, is one—no, two—huddled figures. A woman, with a young boy hitched to her hip. His panicked cries mingle with the gargoyles' rough screeches. Piles of snow rest at her feet, the striped awning above shredded.

I rap my umbrella against the thick pillar. The sharp taps may as well be the flutter of moths; the woman's eyes remain fixed on the sky.

It's difficult to tell where the winged monsters are. Or even how many. A pair appear to fly down the length of the block, and another roosts beside a cloaked sculpture on the opposite building's roof, a flaw in the pattern of snow-covered embellishments.

I hit the pillar again—no reaction. She leaves me no choice.

"Cover me," I say to Isaac. "I'm going to get them."

"What do you—*Mina!*" he hisses as I dart into the street.

The fog ripples, and I'm suddenly aware of how exposed I am. I hunch over, careful not to kick the turnips strewn across the cobbles, spilled from a cart lying on its side. The woman's face comes into focus, but I don't recognize her.

"Hey," I call in a low voice, waving my closed umbrella to catch her attention. "*Hey.*"

The *crack* from Isaac's rifle is far more effective.

A window two floors up shatters as his shot misses the gargoyle leaving its perch. I barely hear the monster's shriek of displeasure over the frantic throb of my pulse. It careens toward Schaden Bridge before its wings tip, and it wheels in a wide arc to return.

The woman's stunned gaze finds mine.

"We need to get inside! All of us," I say, no longer worried about keeping my voice down. From behind me comes the click of the rifle, the clatter of the used shell to the ground, as Isaac readies another shot.

The terror freezing the woman seems to thaw. She lifts her son higher and hurries toward me.

A shadow peels away from the street to the left, and for one harrowing moment, I forget how to breathe. My bones fuse in horror, certain another gargoyle has joined the hunt. Only it's not the rush of air beneath wings I hear, but the smack of boots.

A man appears, sprinting from some hiding spot. From the dark green and brass of his outfit, he is revealed as an officer of the Constabulary.

The greencoat draws level with the woman and her son and shoves them out of the way. His service-issued rifle is missing, but that makes him no less dangerous. The taut lines of his weathered face speak to reckless desperation as he runs straight for me, the last obstacle to his safety.

I raise my umbrella, ready to strike.

Isaac fires.

Thrashing wings slice through the mist as hooked feet snatch the greencoat, sinking deep into his shoulders. Blood soaks his coat and visceral screams pour from his mouth.

I pitch back, tangling up my feet and falling. The impact of my tailbone against the ground stuffs my yelp back down my throat. The umbrella rolls away, a weapon now truly as useless as a twig.

Isaac shoots again, and a chunk breaks off the gargoyle's bat-like ear. A growl rumbles in its belly. The constable's coat tears as one foot slips, but the other holds firm.

Wings work hard, blowing the hair from my face as the greencoat lifts up, up, up. While unbothered by the man's wild efforts to save himself, the gargoyle doesn't take him far.

Once level with the third floor, the gargoyle flings him aside.

I clap a hand over my mouth, bracing for the crack of bone, the slap of

flesh. The man slams against the building ... and is eaten by stone.

The bricks act as a web, and its black widow awakes. Tendrils of stone snake around the greencoat's body. They lash his feet to the ledge, fetter his flailing arms against the wall. Pull him in tight and absorb his bones one by one. Faster and faster, then slow, drawing it out. Gritty fingers creep up his throat, over his chin, and into his screaming mouth.

Within seconds, the man becomes a frozen piece of Vaiwyn. A sculpture of terror on a snowy sill above a butcher shop. The same emotion churns in my gut, threatening to emerge as I stare, unable to look away from his unyielding expression.

Then Isaac is before me, shaking my shoulders and dislodging the shock that cages me. I meet his wide gaze, swallowing the rising bile; alarm makes my tongue heavy and thick.

"We need to move," he says, the rifle slung across his back again. He flinches and crouches lower as another gargoyle flies directly overhead. "Saints, Mina, this was a bad idea."

I offer no argument when he yanks me to my feet. My mind can't stop replaying what I just witnessed.

Vaiwyn has always been alive, stitching itself together and growing to accommodate its burgeoning population, but not like this. Never like *this*. Not in a way meant to harm. To kill.

We hurry to the gates, reaching them as the woman and her son disappear inside the darkened building. Its spires scratch a sky now leaching to a watery gold above the mountaintops.

"Wait." I wrest my arms free. Isaac lunges for me but pauses when he hears it, too.

Barking, frantic and high-pitched.

At the end of the street, little more than charred ghosts, a small dog snarls at a gargoyle battering down its new quarry. An older woman with wiry hair stumbles to the ground. A bottle smashes, and my heated heart falls along with it.

"Quinn!" I yell. "Hang on, we're coming!"

Disembodied screeches erupt, and I keep close to the fence encircling the school grounds as I run. The crack of Isaac's rifle undercuts his frightened call at my back. I feel the air shift as the shot whistles past, but I can't tell if it hits anything, stone or otherwise.

“Wretch! Ruffian!”

As I near, Quinn’s words to the sandstone gargoyle teem with fury. She kicks and twists, and the monster, smaller than its limestone counterparts, can’t seem to claim an advantage. Wherever its claws dig in, the material tears; her clothes are too threadbare and patched to hold. But Quinn’s movements are a count too slow, soaked in alcohol.

When stone talons finally land a blow, her wrath hitches to a howl. I run faster. Dark red drips from her fingertips as she clutches the slash across her forearm, doubling over.

The gargoyle fists both paws into her thick coat and pulls.

But Quinn does not—will *not*—give in that easy. Her writhing limbs throw the monster off-balance. A wing tip scrapes the iron fence, spraying sparks over the damp street. Both scream at the other, one out of stony frustration and the other in drunken indignation. Tolly jumps in circles, snapping at Quinn’s feet as they leave the ground.

I leap, reaching for her with arms, fingers, and foolhardiness.

Her shouts falter as I latch on to her waist—and return even louder as she turns on *me*. I nearly lose my scant hold as her knee rams into my side, followed by a bony smack to the arm.

“Quinn—Ow! Stop,” I yell. “I’m trying to help!” I dodge a blow to the ear, imploring her to look at me, to know me. Eyes overbright with absinthe find my face.

“Let me help,” I repeat, breathless.

She doesn’t indicate that she understands, or even believes me. But after two bleary blinks, her fists return to the gargoyle. It’s all I need; my arms wrap more securely around her waist, and I dangle my legs.

The gargoyle’s screeches pebble with anger. It gives a great wrench skyward, wings beating with obvious strain. My toes graze the glass-strewn cobbles. I try using my added weight to bring us lower, let my feet dig in.

As if sensing my intent, the gargoyle flaps faster, harder, angling toward Schaden Bridge.

Inch by inch, beat by beat, the ground falls away.

My vision hazes. Although the sky brightens rapidly, streetlamps still blaze through the mist. Halos of warmth ring the bridge’s cold statues. Where before they towered over me, now their heads are level with mine.

Quinn’s next kick upsets the monster’s tenuous balance. It swerves wide,

narrowly avoiding a statue of the Undone Sculptor. I scream and shield my face in the crook of my arm. The Sculptor's rusted chisel scrapes my shoulder.

A sharp pain. Liquid heat trickles down my back.

Suddenly, the gargoyle jerks. We fall a few inches before returning to our previous height. Dread sinks into my bones that it might release us into the icy river's swift and unforgiving depths. I cling tighter to Quinn's waist, wrap a hand inside the folds of her coat.

The monster lurches again, and my pounding heart leaps into my throat.

Bitter certainty floods through me: It's trying to shake me off.

A third dip, and even though I'm ready for it, my stomach plummets. There's a slither of weight at my hip, a gentle clink of metal.

Several things happen all at once.

One arm releases Quinn, and I catch my father's watch as it tumbles from my pocket.

The idling flame in my chest roars to a firestorm barely contained within the hearth of my ribs. But it's not painful. No agony accompanies this fever boiling every drop of blood.

Wings turn frantic. Panic threads the gargoyle's screeches. Claws unfasten from Quinn's coat, and we fall six feet to land in an ungraceful heap on the bridge. I clamber off Quinn, only to misjudge my own balance and topple into a statue of the Seething Glassmith.

Crack!

Isaac's bullet wedges between wing and torso, a glint of silver among filthy sandstone. The monster rises, struggling despite no longer carrying a burden.

Frigid rays of sunlight spear the eastern Alosse peaks, and sunrise is upon us. The gargoyle spirals upward, then angles back to the University. A wing tip slips into the light and it shrieks, floundering down to the river's surface before righting itself.

As it shoots past, I notice one wing is uneven—the tip exposed to the dawn has crumbled away.

"Mina!"

Isaac's voice heralds his arrival, and the scratch of claws does Tolly's. The terrier reaches us first, launching at Quinn with furious yaps.

My brother gathers me to him, crushing my shaking limbs. I realize, as the adrenaline drains and my pulse slows inside veins now cooled, that I never

put on a coat. Isaac continually readjusts. His hands move from my lower spine to clutch the back of my neck, to a death grip around my shoulders. It's as if he can't quite figure out how best to keep me safe.

"You *idiot*," he says into my hair.

"Can't ... breathe..."

Without letting go, he shoves me out to arm's length. His cheeks flush bright. A sheen of sweat glistens at his brow and upper lip, but no anger stews in his gaze. Only unbridled relief. "You could have become a damn figurine."

I squeeze my watch before forcing myself to pocket it. "So could've Quinn."

We look at her, still on the ground. Her hands tremble as they stroke the dog licking her chin. Over and over, she mumbles the same incoherent words to him. Little color remains in her face, but her returned stare is steady, defiant.

My jaw clenches. Awful scenarios of what might have happened if that gargoyle didn't let go surge forth. The image of her pressed into a wall like that constable ... I've never wished harder for her to be willing to go home. I doubt she cares about the curfew, but even if the memories waiting still hurt, that townhouse is one of the safest places in the city for her.

Overhead, the rest of the gargoyles seem to return to their roosts. They fly low, careful to avoid the light that tilts into the mist and gilds the world in fragile spun gold.

Sculpted monsters watch over every street in this city—how many severed themselves from buildings? How many more people were scooped up like rag dolls in the streets? The unwelcome remorse that fills my throat once more means to throttle me, and this time it's harder to swallow.

"You're hurt!" Isaac exclaims. He twists me around to observe my bloodied shoulder. "Or—oh. Whose blood is this?"

"Mine?" I frown, recalling the earlier pain. I crane my neck to look, running a hand over my shoulder blade. "The statue cut—what the hell?"

Nothing is there. My blouse is torn halfway down my back, the ragged edges stained a deep crimson, but the flesh is whole. I grope from a different angle, my eyes widening.

Under a tattoo of rust, all that remains of the injury I received is *nothing*. If it weren't for the blood, I'd think I hallucinated it.

Before I share this with Isaac, he moves on to Quinn. Crouched before her, Isaac speaks softly. Once she nods, he looks her over.

And finds nothing amiss ... aside from the slash made by those talons on her arm.

A line clotted not with blood, but with blackened stone.

Smooth scales of Talus that will crack across every inch of her flesh. Replace muscle and tissue and bone in a handful of days. My vision blurs as I press a hand to my mouth.

Weeks are too far out of hope's reach once in the grip of the Talus Pox.

Nine

The first eight years of my childhood were accompanied by a silver wolfhound. A dog tall enough for me—to my mother's dismay—to ride; I clung to his collar as we raced all over the house. He often lay in the kitchen, gnawing on whatever bone was left over from dinner. His teeth would grind in a steady rhythm until the bone slipped from his jaw.

Rooted in place at the belfry's threshold, I now find the clock overhead sounds just the same. Chewing through time, second by second, until it ... slips.

I clutch my father's watch as tight as I once did that dog's collar, and step inside.

Earlier, as a debilitating mix of shock and exhaustion settled in me on Schaden Bridge, it was clear I didn't have long before I collapsed under the weight of the last day and a half that began with missing the nightly Herald. And I knew that when it happened, I needed to be *alone*. No longer on the defensive. Away from Mother.

Isaac was the one person I trusted to understand why I couldn't return to the University. The only ally who would encourage me to run the opposite way.

Without a coat, my shirt torn and bloodied, I did what I deemed necessary to keep the overwhelming emotions at bay for a little longer: I fled, while I still had the strength to do so. Through snow-edged streets awash in lines of shadow and rising sunlight, between the homes and shops brave enough to crack open their doors, unclasp the shutters.

Questions poured over the cobbles; screams as residents spotted the new rooftop additions. People quickly recognized me, as they would any other Bell Keeper. Calls of my name accompanied hands reaching out for me to

stop; bodies moved to block my way and make me feel small. But worse was the silence that fell as I barged past them all. The whispers that followed in my wake.

I thought myself unable to bear facing my mother, but as I ran, I wondered if enduring her presence instead was the easier option. And amid the bitter ruin of my tower, I realize it was.

Saints, I shouldn't have come here.

I navigate through rifts in the glittering, splintered debris, swept clear by the feet of those who'd trespassed in this hallowed space of mine. Mounds of snow valiantly try to hide the rest of the devastation. Heard between the clock's hesitant ticks, the croaking ravens strike me as sinister. Their numbers are fewer, but their company seems an omen rather than a comfort.

At the southern wall, I lay a hand on the stone.

In the past, I drew resilience from the gesture. A moment to block everything out and realign myself with Vaiwyn's reliable pulse. Numb as I am, I don't have to close my eyes to feel the erratic feathering against my palm now. A wren trembling beneath a broken wing. It fills me with unease, but there's no need to physically touch it—I can see something is wrong.

Failing lights and locks are nothing compared to the hole still in the wall.

I swallow my sickening dread, force even breaths through my nose. A hole taller than I, and barely healing. What should've taken half a day to reseal has shrunk by only a single row of bricks. One glance upward shows the same gaping wounds in the clock dial, the ceiling.

Reluctant, my gaze drops to what held the knife.

Observed in a proper light of consequences, the broken Vesper Bell smothers my very being. Shards of glass reflect the newborn sun against the corroded metal, which seems to absorb every drop. Devours it cold and packs it into the mighty crack down its side. Inside that jagged line, the light bleeds, giving off a heady scent of rot.

This was my fault.

The moment it enters my mind, I crush the thought. Mother's voice has no right to echo here. Not when it's obvious this couldn't be prevented. I shiver. The clapper I severed has vanished beneath the floorboards, but the sharp, glossy replica that grew in its place still waits where it fell, vicious and mocking.

If I'd stayed here instead of easing my anxiety, if I had waited a little

longer before cutting the clapper, if I'd ignored Max ...

If, if, if. I shake them all away. It doesn't matter. None of it does. All of this—nothing could have stopped it. Arbutus rang as if pushed by the hand of an ineffable god.

But then I recall the silence that cloaked my shoulders as I hurried away from the University.

Whatever matters to me ... it doesn't to the rest of Vaiwyn.

And I think—I tug my collar away from my throat. I think I just made it all worse.

The hands that grabbed to stop me in the streets? I tore free of them. The bodies stepping into my path, I shoved them back in a haze, unable to breathe as they crowded me. And the questions, asking—*begging*—me to tell them what happened, I screamed for them to *leave me the fuck alone*.

The spitting image of indisputable guilt.

Despite being chained to our towers twice a day for the Heralds, the Strauss family is well-known. Every citizen learns of the Saints-appointed Bell Keepers who guard their city against the Bane. Memorizes their names, their towers and positions. We're recognized not as figures of legend, but of duty and service to Vaiwyn.

And for those below Lyndell Hall, they know exactly who to blame for the Bane's return.

Because it was my tower. *My* tower.

I built my entire life upon the foundation of becoming a Bell Keeper. Brick by brick, my purpose was to follow in my father's footsteps and claim my place in history to keep this city safe. And now it's just ... gone. With no way to fix it in sight.

The overwhelming sense of loss is a kick to the stomach. Alone for the first time since yesterday afternoon, it finally happens. The last brick crumbles from around my bones, and I fall to my knees in a sobbing heap.



Dragged over the worn rugs, my slippered feet tell Lyndell Hall to hush. The elegant portraits I pass in the flickering corridors seem to weep, their subjects blurred beneath a varnish of dust. Every oiled stare riddles me with holes,

exposing the cobwebs and faulty heart within.

My reflection wanders alongside me in a long, cracked mirror, but I can't bear to meet my own gaze. I already know I've never looked less myself.

Without my usual red lip, I'm washed out. A pathetic imitation. The dark smudges beneath my eyes resemble fresh bruises; my freckles, drops of ink against ashen skin. But if I were to examine this drained Mina more closely, those details would stay in the peripheral. Besides, my fingers can't ignore what bothers me the most.

The stinging memory of vodka raises them to my cheek, my bottom lip. Places where bloody cuts existed yesterday, now smooth. Healed like my shoulder without a trace. I can't help but wonder if this is some twisted version of the Talus Pox. Some new way for my misbehaving city to lash out under the Bane's restored influence—or something entirely different.

A yawn shudders through my whole body. Instead of a bath, I should have tried to sleep, but despite my exhaustion, finding unkind dreams felt like a promise I didn't want to keep.

So now, clad in clean trousers and a wool sweater, without a bell to my name, all that's left is to roam Lyndell Hall as its ghost. A spirit dwelling on its regrets with no purpose, no direction—

I round a corner and slam into a solid chest.

Arms reach to steady me, then drop when their owner steps away. I lift my head to meet Max's tentative gaze. He swallows hard. I can almost see the words, the fearful questions filling his mouth, but I don't want to face them. Not yet.

I lunge, trapping him in an embrace. Even when he staggers back, I don't let go. I can't. I won't ever again. Not after I've found him on the other side of us being discovered. There's no one to hide from anymore, and for once, I don't care who sees us. Not a single opinion matters anymore except for his and mine, just as it should have been from the start. And I'm furious I let this precious thing be any other way.

My eyes slip shut as I nestle into his chest, inhaling his ink-and- evergreen scent. It takes him a moment to return the gesture. To lay his cheek atop my head and clutch me just as fiercely.

Something within me ties tight. A knot tugged apart by my mother, and now I've recovered the other half of the string and stitched myself whole. I feel calmed, wanted. I belong *here*, in these arms.

Max and I were together when hell broke loose, but nothing between us has changed. If that's one of his questions, I pour the answer into my grip.

This is a direction for me. A purpose. Max is what little I have left, and I'll fight tooth and nail to keep him.

When I let go, it's only enough to look at him properly.

Even in the muted light streaming through the stained window, I'm startled by how haggard Max appears. I'm not much better, but the shadows beneath his glassy eyes look alive.

"How are you?" I ask, uncertain. I cradle his cheek. Although still light, this is the most stubble I've ever seen cover his jaw. He prefers to stay clean-shaven.

His hands slide to my waist, the gesture as smooth as a habit. Palms fit to curves as though they've always rested there. Max gives a funny shrug with one shoulder. "Fine."

I feel the slight jump in his pulse beneath my fingertips. "Liar."

The corner of his mouth twitches into a weak smirk. "Mina, between the two of us, I don't think I have a right to complain."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, you silly goose." His hand grazes the underside of my jaw, tipping my chin higher. "I'm just tired. Same as always. A lot happened yesterday, and I was worried about you."

"Me—Max, *I'm* fine." But my voice falters. I guess I'm lying, too. Still, his concern touches me, and with a tender scoff, I quickly press my lips to his.

When I drop back down to my heels, I realize with a start that I didn't even think twice about it. About kissing him, about doing so in a public hallway. And it feels empowering. Especially when his smile widens, and he ducks to gently reciprocate. I finally trusted him enough to leap off that cliff I needed time and connection with him to reach, and this is proof he means to always catch me.

I push a strand of hair off his forehead. "Did you see any of the ... those *things* this morning?"

He shakes his head, then says in a voice edged with gravel, "I heard them, though. It—it sounded bad."

The screams of that constable as stone engulfed him ring in my memory. "Saints, Max, it's worse than that. Mother had us at the library to—"

The loud bang of a door slamming, followed by voices growing louder and

closer, stops me from speaking further.

I snatch Max's arm and tug him back the way I came. I may not care who sees us, but the desire to face anyone other than Max right now is tiny. Nor do I want anyone to overhear what Isaac and I witnessed outside the University. More stares of misplaced blame might send me into a spiral.

With no destination in mind, I turn us down the first branching corridor. The rugs muffle our hurried footfalls. My hand slides into his, braiding our fingers together, and it's just another thing that feels *right*.

Another turn, and I recognize this hallway. The marble bust of a mustachioed man opposite a striking, androgynous statue is hint enough, but the set of intricately carved doors on the left confirm it. I wrench open one. Vaiwyn is too slow to move, and we slip inside.

Despite the chandelier at eye level and the tepid jewel light of the windows facing us, shadows suffocate this balcony. In such a low-ceilinged space, the dusted air compacts into something I must wade through. One of a stacked trio, this uppermost gallery is an auditing eye for the Council Chambers. But it isn't the height that makes me retreat from the railing and nearly stumble over a neglected chair.

"Mina, what's the matter—"

I release Max's hand and cover his mouth. My palm stifles his startled protest, but he quiets, eyes widening when he hears it.

A voice. Several, coming from below in a room that should be empty.

Ten

Max's eyebrows lower as he recognizes the disgruntled speaker. He pulls my hand away from his face, and we tilt our heads to better hear inside the gathered shadows.

"That woman with the dog. She's not the only one." Mayor Bergen's brash voice carries well but holds a weak echo this close to the rafters.

Bergen's presence in such a revered place isn't surprising. The Council Chambers is where he and the twelve elected councillors discuss the city's governance. Each decision concerning Vaiwyn and its citizens is agreed to in this very hall. Council meets every seven days—with these galleries open to the public—and the next is scheduled for tomorrow.

So, yes, while his presence is warranted, he shouldn't be here.

Neither should Councillor Tamzin, who speaks now, her tone dry. "We've received reports of at least five other people with the Talus Pox since the gargoyle attacks."

My blood chills, recalling Quinn and her stony cut. *Five others?* Surely I misheard.

A thick skein of cobweb stretches from a chandelier to the sharp nose of the column hiding Max and me. Sculpted to resemble a giant, it bears the weight of all three galleries. As I peer over the railing, its tortured expression is a mimic of mine.

The rift between public and government space is as stark as the galleries splitting the wall. One half of the room is bare. Sconces spill light across green-and-white marble tiles without encountering a shadow. In the other half, elevated benches border an aisle that Tamzin and Bergen stand in the center of, speaking to four more familiar faces.

Isaac. Aida. Emiko. Mother.

As I recognize each one, hurt plunges into my heart. Betrayal, deceit, rejection, regret—each slides between my ribs to split *me* apart. My knuckles whiten around the railing.

Every Bell Keeper but one is down there.

As if he can read my thoughts, Max murmurs, “Why aren’t you with them?”

I shake my head, silenced by abrasive disbelief. I didn’t return to the University because I wasn’t ready to face my mother, so they took that as an excuse to shut me out?

“*Five?*” Isaac stiffens in the bench seat he’s claimed, staring at Tamzin as though she’s sprouted horns. “*Five* cases of the Pox.”

Leaning against the mahogany paneling beneath him, her hair tied in a low knot, Emiko frowns. “That’s not possible. There’s never more than two a year!”

“Stone shouldn’t fly either, but that theory no longer holds water, does it?” She could whisper and I would still flinch at the acid touch of Mother’s impatience.

“But what’s the cause?” Isaac snaps. “The Talus Pox doesn’t just double overnight.”

The strain in his voice is measurable. We all saw the toll it took on Father, but none have witnessed the Pox’s devastating effects more than my brother. He’s seen every victim to enter the catacombs since his training began with the Cathedral over ten years ago.

“Well, I refuse to believe it’s because of the Bane—”

“Oh, don’t be *naïve*, Bergen.” Aida, seated on the shallow steps at the front of the room, lifts her head from her hands. The column blocks the rest of the dais from my view, and knowing what chair hides there, I’m glad. One emotional maelstrom is already enough to cope with.

Bergen turns to the doors. “I need to summon the Constabulary.”

“Excuse me?” Mother’s tone, low and bolstered with warning, halts him in his tracks.

“With the Bane back, I must be careful.” His cheeks flush, but Bergen retains his usual bravado. Both hands grasp his lapels. “The man in charge is always the first target, you know.”

Tamzin’s eye roll is unmistakable. Mother’s scorn, however—loud enough to touch the rafters.

“Saints, Bergen. Be serious. He can’t—” She stops. Every inch of her, frozen.

I press closer to the back of the column’s scalp, gawking at her.

In every room she enters, Imogen Strauss is the imposing figure everyone turns to. When she has such attention, she does not fumble it. And as someone who spars with her often, what she just did—I recognize its significance ... and it burns my vision crimson.

A secret nearly slipped free. Two words, revealing she knows more than us. *He can’t*.

Mother clears her throat, disguising the pause inside an excess of phlegm and recovering quickly. “No greencoat can help you,” she assures Bergen coldly.

“Well, I don’t see *them* answering my summons,” he splutters. “This is a hoax, Imogen!”

“Ma, what are you two *talking* about?” Aida groans into her knees.

Isaac nods in agreement. “And why are we just waiting? Who did he summon?”

A furious pleasure cuts through my anger. It doesn’t last long, though. They may not know what’s going on either, but at least they didn’t stumble upon this meeting by accident.

“Just—be patient,” Mother huffs, and starts to pace.

Bergen angles away, but grumbled snatches about poll ratings still reach me. For the first time, I realize that he’s alone. A man diminished without his usual shadow of three aides. Suddenly, the hush of the Chambers registers differently.

Piles of blank parchment wait on tables before every seat, but no pens move. Whatever they’re waiting for, this meeting is to remain clandestine. A secret of the utmost importance. My outrage, already crackling seeds, blossoms into something that makes it difficult to breathe.

Six people are down there, and it should be seven.

While they’re in the Council Chambers, I’m left skulking up here like an unwelcome, petulant child. Just because I ran this morning doesn’t mean I don’t want to help. I was in my apartment for hours—they didn’t even try to find me.

As if sensing the storm shifting within, Max finds my hand, his own cool and sure. I squeeze, hoping to imbibe the calm that seems to roll off his frame

at my back.

“Of all the people who should be down there,” I whisper, “and they leave me out of it.” Shame rises in my throat as the last words cleave apart. Saying it out loud—that they deliberately excluded me from discussing the Bane *my* Vesper called—cuts the deepest. “How could they?”

“Come on.” A light tug on my hand, then a harder one when I don’t move. “Mina, maybe we can hear better—”

A chair, forgotten in the middle of the balcony unlike its fellows stacked against the back wall, topples to the floor as Max bumps into it. A wooden eruption through the restless quiet.

I yank Max to his knees as faces lift. My pulse hammers through my ears. I press my palm to his chest to steady myself and am taken aback by how much slower his heart pounds in comparison.

Below, Isaac says something I can’t make out. I close my eyes. For as loud as the sound was, I stupidly hope they mistake it for a bird lost inside the Chambers again.

As much as I want to reveal my presence—if only for the satisfaction of seeing everyone’s expressions—the sensible part of me needs us to stay out of sight. They don’t want me there—fine. But Saints damn it all if I won’t be privy to their uncensored conversations anyway.

“Can we just stay here—” My whispered question dies beneath a sudden commotion. Thuds of feet against wood and slaps of hands against stone; the squeak of shoes quickly turned.

I stand to look over the railing and gasp.

No shadows lie across the open tiles, yet figures seem to step from whatever wisps of darkness lurk in the marble’s flaws. Four individuals, cloaked and hooded, appear as sunbeams would when the clouds part. As if they were always there, concealed in plain sight.

The chain of Bergen’s pocket watch jangles as he sidles around my mother, whose stoicism is deceptive. The lift of her chin, the rigidity of her spine—it’s calculating. These strangers haven’t surprised her like they did the others. What is she hiding?

Bergen claps his hands once, then wrings them together. Under the chandelier’s uneven light, the sweat beaded on his bald spot and forehead glistens. “W-welcome.” A peculiar stammer douses his bombast. “I trust you’re here about this B-Bane business?”

My eyes narrow. What could these people know that we don't? I glance at my siblings, and they remain as shocked as I am by these newcomers.

Faces hidden by burgundy and viridian wool, indigo velvet and heavy mink, the strangers stand unearthly still. Not even their hems flutter. I have the distressing feeling that they're using their disguises to stare straight through everyone else.

The heat in my heart sputters brighter as my muscles coil with curiosity.

Bergen seems to have forgotten all eloquence. Listening to his continued stumbling speech, we may as well have caught him in a scandalous position with an aide. My mother must agree. Her hand on his shoulder is gentle in appearance, but easily forces him aside.

She makes a dismissive gesture. "I would prefer to discuss this without the costumes."

"Very well." The gritty, feminine tone that comes from under the green wool is familiar. Before I can place it, all four draw back their hoods in an eerie, simultaneous movement.

Bergen's nerves make even less sense now, because the most *ordinary* people stand there in a row. The glassmaker who works a furnace near Elke Cathedral; an artist my grandmother once commissioned; a woodworker from whom I buy clever toys for Hana; and Vanya, the herbalist of the Dahlia Wilted. The last people I would ever expect to find in a secret meeting between the Bell Keepers, the mayor, and his deputy.

"I admit," Mother says, looking Vanya up and down, "I didn't expect it to be you."

A hand grazes my lower back, startling me from pondering that strange statement. Max leans closer over my shoulder, his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"It's our right to know what to expect now. We've seen the devastation Vaiwyn can unleash." She cocks her head as she observes each of them. After they return her stare in silence, she steps up to the burly glassmith. "He will not stop until we *know* how to stop him."

The glassmith towers over her. Even from here I see the twitch at his temple, the tightness of his bearded jaw and the clench of his fists. It's as though he's using every ounce of his restraint to not touch her. A wrath that matches my own reviving anger. I dig for my watch, turning it over and over in my pocket to help ground me.

Who is this *he* she keeps referring to? The Bane?

“Imogen,” Bergen says, and I’m stunned to hear the feeble crack in his voice as he tries to pull her back. “In their own time.”

She scoffs, scrutinizing the glassmith’s dark eyes. “You think we have time to waste? Mark my words, there will be another attack. Tonight.”

Bergen blanches. “No. No, that cannot be true.”

Isaac, still in the position he leaped to when the four first appeared, one foot on the bench and ready to bolt, calls, “Is someone going to explain —*Who are these people?*”

“Are they supposed to be useful?” Aida asks. She slowly descends the steps, as if approaching a wild animal.

Vanya is the first of them to move, the first to draw a deep, exasperated breath. “There is nothing to say until every Keeper is present.”

“I *told* you.” Isaac directs this sharp retort to Mother. “Let me go find her —”

“Enough.” Mother prowls down the line to Vanya. “We’re all accounted for.”

Fury flattens whatever strength my brother’s defense of me offered.

“You think patience is a flaw, don’t you, Imogen?” There’s a poisonous edge to Vanya’s tone. She’s always been terse, but this is downright combative. “But you will find it a virtue we are well-versed in.”

To her right, the sculptor crosses her arms and nods. On Vanya’s other side, the glassmith gnaws the inside of his cheek, expression thunderous. But the carpenter—my eyes dart to the shadowed corners and tight spaces of the Chambers—is nowhere to be seen.

When a gentle, new voice speaks beside me, my shriek rings like shattered glass.

“Some might consider eavesdropping an impertinence.”

Any chance to remain hidden evaporates. Every face finds mine, but the carpenter’s is now the only one that matters to me and my stuttering heart.

There’s something indescribably ... *sad* about them. They seem to droop, as though being in shadow makes them wilt. It’s a melancholy that worries at my own mood, cools my blood. I never noticed it before when I visited their shop. Sawdust salts their burgundy cloak and settles in the creases of their dark-brown skin. With an elegant gesture, they motion for Max and me to follow them to the stairs concealed behind a tapestry.

As we descend, I wonder how we never heard the carpenter coming. Every step beneath my slippered feet clatters violently, the spiraling iron treads and handrail rattling.

My progress is quieter once I reach the marble floor, but I step into the view of an already rapt audience. I don't shirk the attention. I hold my head high, square my shoulders, and stride down the aisle, all while evading Mother's gaze.

And falter. The stubborn grief-creature in my chest lifts its snout.

After eight months of avoiding it, I really hoped the first glimpse would be softer. In the galleries, I used the columns as shields, but down here I can no longer ignore the most obvious objectification of Mother's disappointment.

Atop the dais at the head of the Council Chambers waits the Speaker's chair.

A Strauss inheritance for centuries, the Speaker upholds order in the Chambers and ensures proceedings remain legitimate. Once it belonged to Father, and now a stranger fills that position. It should be *mine*, and I can't claim it. Not without at least two more years of Tamzin's tutoring, of absorbing books on municipal bylaws and administrative appeals. Training I never received earlier because Lyndell Hall wasn't meant for me, and Father shouldn't have died.

To see that chair empty when people stand before it is unnerving. It speaks to how wrong this gathering feels, but loudest is my father's absence.

I swallow to clear the lump in my throat and carry myself forward. Max keeps pace with me. His fingers curl around mine, bold as brass before my family, and I take comfort from his nearness.

"I don't want her here."

Everyone turns to my mother, except me. There are countless possibilities of what could lie in her stern gaze, but despite my own simmering feelings toward the way she regards me in this mess, I'm not steady enough to meet it.

"I don't want her here," Mother repeats. "She's too emotional to be of any help."

"Can you blame her?" Isaac retorts. He catches my eye and points to the seat beside him. I angle for the steps built into the mahogany paneling, dragging Max with me.

A whiff of chemicals hits my nose as I sit, and I realize he's returned to the catacombs since I left him on the bridge. Before, I never understood why he

spent all his time down there, surrounded by bones and impenetrable silence. Now I suppose being among the dead is its own sort of solace when everything else is falling apart.

“Mina has every right to be upset, just as she’s allowed to be part of the solution.”

Blindly, my other hand finds his and squeezes. Sparks strike in my mother’s eyes as they flick between the pair of us, but the explosion I would expect if we were in private never comes.

“Always her voice when she hides,” she hisses, then to Vanya, barks, “Satisfied?”

Vanya steps forward, and the other three follow with the same fluid mimicry. They stop at the edge of the benches, filling the aisle and fencing us inside this smaller space.

“You’ve summoned us because you don’t know how to act now that the true Vesper has rung.” Extra teeth bite from Vanya’s words, as though daring us to contradict her.

Naturally, the man in charge does. “This tower’s Vesper, yes,” Bergen says.

“No,” she snaps. “There is but one true Vesper. All others are forgeries.”

A pause, then voices stuff the Chambers with an awful dissonance of denial. Isaac stands once more, but I stay seated, stunned by what just reached my ears. She’s lying. That’s ... that has to be a joke. Of course the other Vespers are real. Why else would we guard them?

“Are you mad?” Isaac echoes my thoughts. “Five Keepers, five bells.”

“Five Keepers, five bells,” Vanya replies coolly. “One Vesper. The rest don’t matter.”

“No.” Flat and firm, Aida says, “I don’t care who any of you are—you’re *wrong*.” She splays her fingers as if she can grasp comprehension from the very air. “For years our lives revolved around those bells, and you’re telling us it was all for nothing?”

The outrage leveled at Vanya has layers. It holds names, faces. As Strausses, none of us was given a choice in being Bell Keepers. The late hours, the rigid schedules, the stagnant careers—now all a waste of time, if we’re to believe her. That the only bell Vaiwyn relied upon to keep it safe from the Bane was ... mine. My stomach curdles.

The glassmith scoffs and folds thick arms across his chest. “How little you

all understand.” He chuckles, but his guttural tone makes even his amusement sound vexed.

“Then help us,” Aida spits through gritted teeth.

Vanya raises a hand, calling for quiet. “Forgeries were made to ensure that this city was never left unguarded. The risk of annihilation from five bells rather than one seemed more effective. It was a mistake on our part to assume the Vesper could be silenced.” She closes her eyes for a moment. “But this peace was never meant to last.”

“But what now?” Bergen wails. The pinch of his brow makes it clear he wishes the question didn’t need to be uttered aloud.

“Why are you asking them?” Emiko blushes when everyone turns to her, uncharacteristic accusation in her voice. “I mean no disrespect, but what could any of you possibly tell *us*?”

The sculptor speaks for the first time, sweet and clear. “Because we were...”

Her sentence trails off before she can complete it, but Vanya must know what she meant to say. “Because we were there when the Vesper Bell was made.”

My hand is too slow to stop the laugh that bursts out. I’m aware it’s rude, but *Saints* does it feel good to find delight in something. It feels like a memory from years ago, not yesterday. Because Vanya *is* joking. Look at her. She’s younger than my mother. There’s no way—

The click of every door locking on its own is a period inked at the end of a book; the creak of window latches, the cover slamming shut. Vanya’s smile is the fire come to devour.

A bitter smell akin to sickly roses, salt, and myrrh stirs through the Chambers. Flames cower on their wicks. Static smothers the world, heavy and ruthless against my ears. Each of the cloaked figures begin to ... shift.

To snap apart and fold back into something profound. Impossible to watch with the naked eye, yet still I try. Apprehension dries out my mouth, pulls the warmth from my blood.

Their skin and hair change color, texture; limbs elongate, and bodies lengthen. Bones crack and groan and eyes cloud white. Ash drifts to the ground, turning black upon the marble.

Where before stood normal beings now reigns divinity. Holy but arcane figures, descended from the heavens.

The Saints.

Eleven

From every rooftop, street, and room, the likenesses of the Saints have watched the city they built grow. In inks and oils, stone and wood—they're as much a part of Vaiwyn as its own thrumming pulse. Before ascending to divinity, these four surviving Saints were mortal once, but I don't understand how the depictions spread throughout Vaiwyn could be so *wrong*.

Faced now with their true forms, I know of no canvas able to capture such feral, horrible beauty.

They tower over us, soaked in a faint radiance. Their bones have absorbed the stars themselves, bleeding an unfathomable aura. A softness that allows for only fleeting glimpses, never the whole of them.

But it's enough.

The Seething Glassmith stands tallest and broadest, more bear than man. Poorly blended and barely held together. A thick, oily black pelt, terrible claws, and too many mouths. Gnashing translucent teeth that clack and grind but don't speak. Across his chest, emerging along his arms and legs, they flash sharp and bright before receding into fur.

He lays one giant hand atop his head and pulls until his neck cracks. The splintered sound makes me wonder if his bones are also made of glass. "*Oh, it feels good to be free.*"

A violent shiver rakes my spine. Deep and threaded with narrowly tamed wrath, his voice pours not from his mouths, but inside my head. A multilayered entity, as if a dozen of him slipped into my most intimate thoughts. From the way Isaac's knees force him to sit, the invasion is not just of my mind.

"*I can kill a man with my bare hands again.*"

"*Piotr, you mustn't say...*"

Instinct tells me the sweet, clear voice joining the Glassmith's in my head belongs to the Undone Sculptor.

Chiseled of smooth marble, pale grey and veined with gold, she is a work of art. A crown of stone irises pins in place a veil. Folded tight to her frame, it clasps at her throat and cinches her waist. There's only the hint of a nose, a chin. Sweeping wings lie tucked behind her, every feather an eye. Blinking. Watching.

"An awful thing to..." As a figure, she is complete. It's her words that are left undone, the next syllables dangling out of reach.

"Yes, but that's never stopped him before, Amalie," the Weeping Carpenter adds.

Silver tears spill from eyes of flat blue, down dark cheeks stretched gaunt. Thick, slow, and restless, they roll along their jaw, pool in the hollow at their throat. Drop by drop, tears curl over their shoulders as a cloak; run in rivulets through skin patched with walnut wood. Every splash against the tiles is a hiss of sorrow.

They are altogether terrible and beautiful. Their professions raised and twisted to fit an ethereal mold. The creators of our city laid bare in their immortality.

"Now do you understand?"

I startle as Vanya's echoing voice steals inside. The Withering Healer, in all her glory, surveys me with luminous eyes of green venom.

Crystalline cobwebs drape her body in fine, tangling threads. Dull flickers of white through torn, desiccated flesh reveal her bones, and the flowers packed within. Nightshade, foxglove, and sprigs of hemlock. As her gaze slides away, moths flutter as shadows in her aura. They encircle her too-slender figure before crawling into her webbing.

My burning heart snaps me from my stupor. I didn't notice its bloom before, but now it scorches around my rib cage, drawn toward the Saints. Hand pressed to my chest, wincing, I look to those in the Chambers whose appearance my brain can reconcile with.

Bergen looks as if he's seen a ghost, revealed after haunting his steps for months. Aida and Tamzin hold on to each other, my sister clutching the councillor's hand as Max does mine.

And Mother—she hides it well, but I see the flaws in her indifference. Beneath it lies no awe or surprise, not even fear. Only close-held relief.

A derisive sound rises in my throat. *More secrets.*

Emiko's hands slowly uncover her mouth, as if ensuring first that nothing unsavory will flee. "Y-you're real. You came back down to Vaiwyn."

"*We never left.*" An admonishment and a reassurance, wrapped in a quartet of replicated voices inside my head.

Bergen fumbles with the buttons of his jacket and retrieves an envelope from an inner pocket. "Then my predecessors—all of them—they weren't joking?"

"What is that?" Tamzin comes to life, striding forward to snatch it from him. The piece of parchment she withdraws is as yellowed with age as the envelope.

"I hardly know. It's dated eight hundred years ago. Kept in the mayor's office safe with explicit instructions to open if a Vesper awakens the Bane. Don't give me that look!" he adds, nailed under her skepticism. "I did steam it open, of course, but I didn't *believe* it—"

Tamzin's dark eyes widen as she reads. "They knew." To the Saints, she says, "All this time, they knew you were still here." Her expression teeters between excited and dismayed.

Mother cuts in, tone dripping acid. "We're wasting time."

"*There's time while the day remains,*" the Carpenter says, but they sound already in mourning for its inevitable death.

"The Bane is awake, Imogen." Tamzin whirls on my mother. "We have the time to at least know what the hell it is."

"Not awake." It spills from my mouth before I think better of it. I stare at the floor, but all I see is an illustration of the Lost Alchemist, the faded words on the page beside it. "Unleashed."

When I look up, too many curious gazes brand my skin. It's unsettling.

Vanya's fingers fold together; the cobwebs in between tear. "*What do you know?*"

I swallow, clearing the way for my strengthened voice. "Not much. I—I read it in a textbook this morning. *A History of Saints* or something. It was old."

How could I have forgotten about that book? My anger revives, only to turn inward. All that time spent grieving my tower and pitying myself when I could have done something *useful*. I could have returned to the library with Isaac, but I was so focused on getting out of there that I never spared it a

thought. And now I'm stumbling through half-shaped memories of ink, brought on by the appearance of the Saints before me and blurred by exhaustion.

"I didn't read much before the attack this morning, but it mentioned the Vesper." I close my eyes and haltingly recite what I recall. "Something about the Lost Alchemist dying to craft a bell—to cage a soul. Thirteen rings would be his escape ... or rebirth, I think it said—wait." I gasp, loud enough to startle Max and Isaac both.

He. *He*. Saints, it's right there. Straight from Mother's mouth, and just as it was written in that spiked ink.

I don't flinch as I meet Vanya's venomous gaze. "There were *six* Saints."

Denials peel apart the shocked silence, but none flow inside my head. The Saints watch me closely. I can almost feel invisible fingers scraping about my skull. And it's that quiet I take as reason to push.

"I'm right, aren't I? The Bane is a sixth Saint, trapped *in* the bell all this time. And the *fire*—" My heart flares, as if nudging me toward the answer already half given.

Eager, I turn to Isaac. He looks as I felt up in the gallery, unable to stomach being excluded. "Yesterday, you said all the religious texts related to the Saints and the Bane burned. How it was seen as an omen to bury the history. It erased *him* from the record, didn't it?" All the pieces are there, each truth a grain of sugar on my tongue, delicately sweet.

With a twist of her withered lips, Vanya betrays a hint of being impressed. "*His memory was lost to the flames, but we remember his true name.*"

So many lies dug up in so short a time, and I intend to unearth them all.

"And you." I round on Mother, only to find her waiting, her spine rigid. *He*. "You knew."

Mother sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, and I'm speechless. She's *nervous*. There's no other word for her body language. Her laced fingers tap the back of the other hand. I've never seen her this way, and I would relish making her squirm for once if her answer wasn't so important.

When I wonder if I should repeat my accusation, a familiar imperiousness lifts her chin. "I knew of the sixth Saint, that he was in the Vespers. I just didn't know which bell."

The sugary truth spreads to the others but sours in their mouths.

"You *knew*?" Isaac wheezes.

“And you *kept* it from us?” Aida reels back a step.

My siblings’ outrage is a beast provoked, its tether fraying. I startle at their barks; usually I’m the one raising my voice at Mother. I yank Isaac back down by his sleeve, my pleas for him to calm swatted away. Aida storms to Emiko’s side.

“Were you going to tell us at some point, Ma?”

“What if you’d died with this?” Isaac demands.

“I am the matriarch Bell Keeper; of course I knew,” Mother bites out. “Your grandmother passed the knowledge down to me and I’d have shared it with Aida, eventually.”

He scoffs and crosses his arms.

“Would it have made a difference?” she snaps. “Look how you reacted to learning it wasn’t *your* bell. If you knew you might be guarding a forgery, would you have stayed devoted, or grown complacent? Neglected your Vesper because it was a risk you could live with?” She waves to the Saints. “They were right. Fear kept us diligent in protecting this city until—”

Her eyes flick over me, and I need both hands to keep Isaac seated. Even Max leans over me to help restrain him. “For the love of—She cut the clapper, Mother,” my brother shouts, shaking me off. “And even *they* said it wouldn’t have helped, so stop. Trying. To control. *Everything!*”

Her mouth closes as he adds the last bit, and satisfaction gleams inside me.

The Glassmith’s menacing voice rolls through my head. “*He’s not something you can control. I doubt we ever did.*”

“Yes,” the Sculptor says, “*but we had to try...*”

Aida and Tamzin are mirrors of each other, both ready to pace the length of the aisle. Having grown up with one and been tutored by the other, I’ve seen the steely determination now casting their features many times. A desire to know every detail, no matter the cost.

“But who is *he*?” Tamzin demands. “You’re telling us the Bane is a person.”

“*Bastian is a much younger Saint,*” the Carpenter says as the Glassmith cracks his hairy knuckles. “*He holds no title, as he’s unworthy of one.*”

Bastian.

I roll the name across my tongue, tuck it against my teeth, and taste nothing.

When cradled in my mouth beside majestic titles such as the Withering

Healer and the Seething Glassmith, the simplicity of it makes the mysterious Saint seem mundane. Insignificant.

But from the crackling shifts that stretch the auras of each Saint before me, Bastian is far from ordinary to them. And if he is the Bane, we've all seen what he's capable of.

Vanya raises a hand, hushing everyone with a whisper of moths. *"He did not build this city as we did, but he kept it from falling into ruin. Until he became ruin itself."*

Her voice booms in my head. Although there are four of them, it's clear she is in charge. The Saint who laid the bedrock for our government with her poisons—a leader in her own right.

"We chose this valley as Vaiwyn's foundation because of its heart," she continues. *"Buried deep and grown over by an age of wilderness, we found the pulse of a fallen, godly beast, and we alone knew how to soothe it. We poured our souls into drawing forth its skeleton, its flesh, shaping it with our skills. And in exchange for its renewed purpose, it changed us over time into divine images of itself."*

She beckons, coaxing her moths back beneath the webbing. *"But when this city was young, it was also temperamental. Its magic needed time, practice, to find the right veins. Perhaps we were impatient, pushed the limits too far too soon. Vaiwyn lost control."*

Isaac's shoulders slump. He drags a hand down his face. "The Talus Pox."

"It was contagious then, and deadlier." The Carpenter's voice is heavy, trapped in a grim memory. *"There was no resiliency left in a body once the stone took root."*

"The city was a quarter of what it is now, but so many perished under my watch, my hands," Vanya says. The rocky line in Quinn's arm swims to the forefront of my mind, floating atop my last images of Father, and a pit forms in my stomach.

The Sculptor's wings blink shut. *"Only we five were immune until Bastian..."*

"He was mortal then," the Glassmith adds. *"An undertaker's apprentice."*

"Bastian handled the dead," Vanya says. *"He carved out the catacombs beneath the city to house the bones. Kept the disease from spreading further as Vaiwyn learned self-restraint."*

"He, too, poured his soul into Vaiwyn..." Stone eyes open as one, staring at

each human.

“But he did not ascend. He fell.”

I shudder, realizing the bleak turn this story intends to take.

Max lays an anchoring hand on my arm. When he speaks, his voice is cracked and raw. “What happened to him?”

“He dug too deep in the dark,” the Carpenter explains, swiping at their steady tears.

“It’s a living thing, Vaiwyn. Vulnerable.” Vanya’s radiance brightens, as if attuned to a heightened emotion. *“Even if harder to wound, it bleeds just as you do. It can be corrupted, manipulated. All that’s needed is the right person to worm their way into its heart. Its mind. Its soul. And none spent more time inside its ribs than Bastian, learning the song of its heartstrings, reading the vibrations of its thoughts.”*

“He warped it...”

“Like a parasite.” I half expect her aura to turn scarlet, or green, from the venom in her words. I’ve known Vanya the herbalist for many years as someone I trust, but this holy version—she plants tendrils of fear in my chest.

“They fed upon each other,” the Carpenter says. *“Twisted every traded secret and touch into something vile. Vaiwyn no longer of its own mind, but Bastian’s. Theirs.”*

“We tried to protect them...”

“We did,” Vanya admits. *“When the Lost Alchemist realized what was happening to Bastian, we tried to keep him away from Vaiwyn’s heart, but it was already too late. Once Vaiwyn gave to him as it did to us, he understood the power we wielded.”*

Suddenly, the floor of the Chambers *explodes*.

Shards of marble fly every which way. Max lunges to cover me with his body, but tile fragments pelt my arms, the top of my head. They wedge into the paneling below with thuds reminiscent of a falling axe. I think people shout, scream, but I can’t hear over the thunderous noise. Peering under Max’s arm, I see no one.

Only the mountain ash that shoots upward from the center of the aisle.

The tree groans as its trunk elongates. Branches crackle as they stretch, blocking first the dim light of the chandeliers, then the windows. Glass shatters, one pane after another, as several limbs punch through. All droop beneath a crown of scarlet berries.

As sudden as it appeared, the ash stops growing.

Slowly, Max pulls back, chips of debris falling to his lap and the bench. He brushes them away with twitching hands. I straighten, my heart still beating too fast. This can't be real. Hesitant, I reach up, but the berries—bloodred pearls—tumbling into my palm are solid. I pinch one, and the juice that leaks out smells bitter.

“What the hell was that?” Isaac exclaims, breaking the quiet.

“*True, unfettered power.*” Vanya’s voice lacks surprise. A dizziness spirals through me when I realize this was her doing. *This* was the Withering Healer, the woman who birthed Vaiwyn’s gardens and parks, whose influence on the city blooms entire flower beds overnight. A tree grown from a mere thought—it must be child’s play to her.

I jump when the mountain ash renews its shakes, only this time, it dies. Berries shrivel and blacken. Boughs wither like arthritic fingers, curled toward a trunk turned brittle as a crone. The entire tree sinks through the floor, leaving only a jagged rift in the tiles.

A single belladonna flower falls from between Vanya’s ribs as she clasps her hands. None of the Saints seem perturbed, although it’s difficult to tell—their restless radiance blurs their features. Most of the Glassmith’s mouths open in what I suspect are yawns.

The Sculptor steps forward. Her chiseled hem scrapes loudly as she raises a hand over the breach. Marble pours from her fingertips. It lands as solid stone yet ripples outward like a burgeoning puddle, mesmerizing to watch. White and green fingers tug jutting edges into place; smother peaks formed by tunneling roots. Seconds pass, and the floor is smooth.

Her tender expression furrows as she examines her hand. “*It’s resisting even more...*”

“*Aye. But this city still knows us.*” The Glassmith glares at the broken windows. The panes rattle in their lead casings, and I nearly throw my hands above my head again, braced for the whole thing to fracture. Individual pieces of colored glass turn molten. Steaming droplets slough free, rolling down to fill the voids. They harden and cool instantly. “*It still listens. Damien?*”

The Carpenter only waves a dripping hand ahead of them. The shards in the paneling clatter to the ground as one, leaving behind unblemished mahogany.

“Bastian understood the sheer power we were gifted,” Vanya spits. “And he thought it wasted on us. He believed this power—ours, his—couldn’t be shared with the people of Vaiwyn. It was meant for control. And Vaiwyn listened to him. A city once gentle and kind, manipulated to bite.”

At the back of my mind, I hear the rough screech of the gargoyles from earlier, the grind of their wings. Impossible then, and even more so now, through a haze of traumatic memory. To pick up a man and devour him whole in stone—that’s no city I recognize.

“It wasn’t enough for Bastian to turn Vaiwyn against us all either,” she continues, tone cold. “The Talus Pox became his tool, one he directed and fed into as many as he could, taking from their bones to strengthen himself.”

The Glassmith snorts. *“The fool thought we should rule as gods.”* I swallow as those claws of his glint as scythes. *“What I wouldn’t give to go back in time and tear his—”*

“He believed himself”—Vanya interrupts his grisly imaginings—“a king. Vaiwyn was to be his kingdom. Bastian knew he couldn’t persuade us four to join him, so he turned to the Lost Alchemist. To her alone, he offered a place as his queen.”

“But she saw it, too...,” the Sculptor murmurs with a wretchedness to match the Carpenter’s countenance, who adds, *“She understood what he’d become.”*

Several sets of teeth clack as the Glassmith snarls, *“A demon beyond all hope of grace.”*

“The Alchemist,” Vanya says, *“gave her life to kill him, to cage his soul.”*

The Carpenter points to Bergen, and never have I seen a man curl so far into himself. *“You heeded instructions to open your letter when the Vesper Bell awoke the Bane. But that is incorrect.”*

“Other way around...”

They dip their head to the Sculptor in gracious acknowledgment. *“Bastian’s spirit has dwelled inside the Vesper since the Alchemist forged it, drawing power to himself and calling to the city to awaken the bell and release him. After centuries of trying, he has succeeded.”*

Vanya’s aura dims. *“Why he’s free now, we don’t know, but he will be unchanged. Perhaps worse, after being trapped with nothing but his own madness. Hungry for revenge. Intent on bending Vaiwyn to his will.”*

She gestures between the four of them. *“When it comes time, we are*

remade into new mortal shells, our spirits and memories intact. But the Alchemist's sword ran Bastian's body through. His soul was separated, and so it has no home. He will have taken a host to continue pulling the strings of this city."

"And he'll only grow stronger with each life he takes," the Carpenter says.

"These new cases of the Pox you're seeing"—Vanya directs this to Isaac—"they're his doing. All of them have been, since he was first caged."

"What?" I shake off the morbid curiosity that's veiled me while listening to the Saints' tale. Suddenly, the watch in my pocket weighs a ton, its ticking a countdown to something awful. "What do you mean, all the Pox cases since?"

Her gaze shifts to my face, but I fixate on a stain on my knee and bite my quivering bottom lip. Max's warm fingers thread through mine. I don't want to look at him—the flash of pity I saw yesterday was hard enough. There's a sharp intake of breath as Mother reaches the same conclusion I have, but I won't see her expression either. I think I'll lose it if I do.

The rest of my family needs it spelled out by Vanya.

"Bastian's corruption was never fully removed from Vaiwyn's heart. He's been gathering his strength over the last thousand years by controlling the Talus Pox. Stuck within the bell, his soul was limited in what it could do, but his reach was greedy enough."

Didn't reach far for Father, did he? Sharp heat cuts through my heart like a falling star. My father, collateral damage in a battle he didn't even see.

"Fuck," Isaac breathes beside me. He finds my other hand and the three of us cling to one another.

Brilliant anger stews within. At least, I hope it does. I can't feel much at the moment. Grief has slashed through me all over again.

But it's the Carpenter's warning that gives me somewhere else to turn my attention. *"He was trapped in that bell for so long, biding his time, searching for a foothold in the city's pulse. We fear he won't rest until he turns Vaiwyn upon every citizen and claims it as his kingdom."*

"But..." Bergen strokes his mustache, nervous as ever. "Perhaps he doesn't have a body yet?"

Tamzin scoffs. "Bergen, the attack before sunrise proves otherwise. As do all these new Pox cases."

"We Saints cannot influence this city without a physical form to anchor..."

“Bastian has claimed a host,” Vanya says firmly. “A body to return him to Vaiwyn’s heart, below the streets.”

An image enters my mind. Of a faceless shadow, piling skulls and crooning to the city’s bones, coaxing its wickedest secrets forth with his own as bait. Finding solace in that darkness.

I don’t mean to look at Isaac. The chemicals he uses down in the catacombs waft from his shirt as he shifts, leaning away from not only my gaze, but Aida’s and Mother’s as well.

“I was in the library the whole time last night!” he splutters. “Sleeping!”

“Of course, dear,” Mother assures.

“I’m not the damn host!”

“We didn’t think you were,” Aida offers.

“Honestly,” he mutters, but his shoulders relax. And while mine do, too, inside I’m wound tight as wire.

“None of this explains why no one ever knew of him, though. Of Bastian,” I say. “All these years, we were told of ‘the Bane’ and never questioned it. Surely a sixth Saint that dangerous would be remembered.” It’s a repeat of my question asked in the library, but this time I’m hopeful for an answer.

“The fire was our doing,” the Carpenter replies.

“Mine, actually,” the Glassmith admits. There’s a hint of pride in his deep voice.

Emiko clears her throat and asks, “But why?”

Vanya’s sigh sounds strange in my mind. Weariness magnified a dozen times. *“Bastian’s legacy didn’t die with his body. He gathered many acolytes when he first revealed himself as a Saint, and their so-called fraternity continued after his confinement.”*

“They were harmless...,” the Sculptor says with a grinding shrug.

“Harmless, but fervent. They were of the same mind as Bastian, that gods, not their peers, should rule them. If the city had to fall, then so be it. But when they swarmed this Hall and attempted to break the Vesper Bell on purpose, Vaiwyn protected itself.”

The Carpenter smacks their tongue in disgust. *“Tasted blood in the wood for weeks afterward.”*

“And after their third bid to free Bastian, it was time to act.”

“I burned the records and crafted the four false Vespers,” the Glassmith says.

“The Strausses—still Keepers since a young Ava had encountered the Lost Alchemist forging her bell—were divided across the city.”

“She grew something to eradicate those foolish rebels,” adds the Carpenter, gesturing to Vanya. “And something to make everyone forget.”

“Not completely,” she reminds them. “But enough to forget all except those hazy details needed to protect this city and its bells.”

I suppose those in the past were right. Eight hundred years ago, they’d seen the religious texts burning as a heavenly omen when it was really a ruse for Vaiwyn’s defense.

“You’ve summoned us because there is little you can do.” Vanya raises a hand to silence Bergen’s protests. “Bastian must feel the city beneath his feet, touch its pulse. His magic is of the dark, and the night is his domain. Your days are safe. Keep your curfew in place. Continue your search if you wish, but know that if you find him, he is not for mortals to kill. His host will be vulnerable to your bullets and knives, but none are a match for the demon within.”

I purse my mouth, hearing what hangs above us like smoke. Someone innocent will die for this. Whichever stranger Bastian’s spirit invaded, whether they consented or not, won’t survive what’s coming. To me, they are faceless, nameless. I pity them, but if it means the monster who took my father from me dies, too—I can live with it.

“And what will you do?” Bergen demands, the buttons of his vest straining as they do when he’s annoyed.

“He’s infernal, not divine.” Vanya’s moths take flight, the flutter of wings masked by the faster hiss of silver tears on marble. “Vaiwyn starting to resist our influence beneath Bastian’s thumb will prevent us from stopping future attacks, but we can still hunt. And Piotr won’t be the only one killing with bare hands this time. I’ll tear his soul in two myself.”

Twelve

Empty once more, the patient silence restored to the Council Chambers feels tainted. False. Max and I may be the only ones still here, but the phantoms of those who left minutes ago linger, too. And the echoes of their spilled secrets are deafening.

Only one Vesper Bell ever mattered.

The Saints are among us, terrible and powerful.

A sixth, caged no longer to tear apart Vaiwyn again.

Each discovery clangs in my head like my broken bell. Over and over, as I drop Max's hand and climb to the top of the dais.

But once my fingers graze the intricate scrollwork of the Speaker's chair, it all stops. I find a welcome distraction in tracing the ivy leaves whittled into birch worn smooth. It replaces the danger facing Vaiwyn with an issue more bite-size. More personal.

I don't even know why I'm up here. No matter how bad my knees tremble, how many times I did it before while fooling around with Father, I can't bring myself to sit. A chair rightfully mine, yet unearned. And now with everything balancing on a knife point, the face of Vaiwyn, the role my family plays in it—I have no idea what this city, this life I've grown into, will look like on the other side. If there'll even be another side. It feels almost selfish to consider this chair mine, and so my slippered feet stay rooted beside it.

The distraction doesn't last long, though. After everything I just learned, it's impossible to dissociate from it all. My hand follows the carved vines, and each polished leaf signifies a question.

What would Father have done?

Is it wishful thinking to believe he could have stopped Bastian from escaping?

Did Mother keep the same secrets from him, or did he always know what might lurk inside his Vesper?

My nails dig into wood. Silly, fruitless questions I'll never find the answers to because of one last revelation.

My father, dead because of a vengeful Saint.

The carvings blur, and I lift my gaze, as if that will prevent my tears from sliding. Soft footsteps, then Max snares my waist. Tugs me gently against his side as if reading my mind and knowing what kind of comfort I need. I lean my head onto his shoulder.

Saints, I'm too exhausted for this.

My eyes *burn*. A gurgle rises from my stomach, and I frown, trying to remember when I last ate. It may have been those stale cookies Emiko uncovered at two this morning. The ever-present heat in my chest is mild but keeps me far warmer than Max—and drowsy.

In an effort to stay alert, I focus on the objects hung along the back wall.

Like the Speaker's chair, the sweeping display behind it is something I've seen countless times, although examined at length only once in my life then never acknowledged again. Dull-edged sabers hang beside tarnished shields boasting obsolete crests. Medals bestowed upon notable mortals sit between state sashes diluted by dust and sun. So many trinkets of varying historical significance, suspended by rope or trapped under glass—a sea of ceremonial detritus.

Easy for the eye to get lost in, yet I can't seem to look away from one shining object perched to the left. The sharp island in the middle of the ocean.

A sword, untouched by time and whetted by rays of light.

"Max?" cuts in a voice.

We both straighten and glance over our shoulders. Tamzin has returned, standing at the threshold of the Chambers. She seems so far away, so small in the sweeping doorway, but her tone as she beckons for Max rings clear. "A moment, please."

His shoulders sink, and a loud sigh deflates his chest. "I'll be right back," he whispers.

Reluctant, I let him go. Cold nips at my vacated side as his footsteps recede to the opposite end of the Chambers. My attention tries to return to the wall at large, but it's hopeless; I can't ignore the sword.

Suddenly, as though flayed from its shadow, a silent figure emerges from

behind the Speaker's chair.

"Oh, fuck," I exclaim before I can mind my manners. My hand covers my startled heart. "Don't ... don't do that."

"Mina," Vanya greets aloud, returned to the form I recognize best.

It's odd. An hour ago, I couldn't marry the curt herbalist I know with the ethereal creature who literally shed her skin before me, and now this plain body doesn't suit Vanya at all. Meeting her dark gaze, it feels as though *this* is what she's trying to hide, not what lies beneath.

She nods toward the sword I was admiring. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

Beautiful hardly describes a blade of such craftsmanship. Thin filaments of copper, gold, and silver wrap the hilt tight. Bright lines that spill from a pommel of raw quartz to the cross-guard, then onto the steel blade itself. Never kissing the sharpened edges but twisting down its considerable length in elaborate designs that evoke strength and elegance.

I don't get it. Like the rest of the junk on this wall, I've never seen it removed or used. It doesn't even have a plaque to declare it of importance. Clearly another object of little value to the present day, so for what reason am I compelled to notice it now?

"Do you know anything about it?" I ask, my voice cracking.

"It belonged to Elora." Vanya, noting my confusion, adds, "The Lost Alchemist."

My eyes widen, tearing away from the sword to stare at her. A stern expression, familiar from every visit to the Dahlia Wilted, awaits. "That's the sword she used to stop Bastian? *The* sword?"

"Her relic, yes. Mierlin."

Her relic.

My mind flashes to Elke Cathedral, to the sculptures looming over the congregation. Their appearances may be false, but their marble hands hold weapons of truth. A blowpipe, an axe, a chisel, a bottle of poison, and a sword. Tools imbued with divinity from Vaiwyn itself and the symbols of each Saint's power. Items of myth and legend, never to be found.

It was once believed the Saints needed to carry their relics to access their power. However, an account detailing how Vaiwyn expanded beyond the River Riga's northern shores proved that theory wrong. Without his axe, the Carpenter felled half the forest on the bank with naught but a look. Now it's understood that relics amplify a Saint's power, serving as a conduit.

“I was there when she ran Bastian through.” A peculiar note of sadness deepens Vanya’s words. “It was her most tragic act.”

“Why tragic?”

“Because she loved him.” She notices the instant curl of my lip and arches an eyebrow.

“He was a tyrant,” I say, quick to defend my reaction. “You said it yourself: He spiraled into some lust for power that nearly destroyed Vaiwyn. The city *you* all built. How could anyone love someone that corrupt?”

“I don’t expect you to understand.”

I bristle. “Try me.”

“To be a Saint is to be alone. Abandoned by everyone you love, again and again. They wrinkle and wither while you live a hundred lifetimes.” She presses a hand to her chest. “So, when we open our hearts, it’s to scorch the memory of loneliness. In the years before he became like us, and in the time before he fell, Elora and Bastian were all the other had. And ultimately, she was the only one who could defeat him.”

“But why her?” I ask, remembering the power that made a tree erupt from marble. “Surely all five of you Saints could have vanquished him together, yet *she* gave up her life.”

“It was her choice,” Vanya insists, “to fight him alone, and we respected her wishes. I doubt anyone else could have done it. It was the hand fate dealt them both. They were destined for ruin, no matter how much love existed between them. His depravity was more than they could overcome.

“He offered her a place at his side because she was all he trusted. And she used that to get closer to him.”

My arms cross over my ribs. “Doesn’t sound like a very healthy relationship.”

“In the end, it was poisonous.” Her hand curls into a fist over her heart. “Elora killed him with a blade she and Bastian named together. Not even a god could have healed from a heart as broken as hers was.”

I turn back to the sword, its accomplishments painted by Vanya’s story. The red strokes of a daring, fatal battle, daubed with the white of victory and the gold of a city saved from devastation—bleeding a blue of tragedy. Of star-crossed lovers and agonizing heartbreak.

Faint taps against the floor, growing louder and nearer, indicate Max’s return.

“Vanya,” I say, struck by an abrupt thought, “if he’s here, is she—”

“No.” Her response is so quick, so adamant, I step back from it. Softer, she says, “Elora left long ago.”

“How are you so certain?”

She casts me a look that says I asked something offensive. I wince, arms tightening against my body. I’m grateful when she answers anyway.

“Immortality means that when our bodies grow too old, *death* renews them as younger variations. Our appearances alter completely, but some things remain the same. Piotr will always be a man, Amalie a woman; Damien doesn’t bother with such labels, and I don’t care either way. But like calls to like. We recognize divinity no matter what form our souls inhabit.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, comprehension dawning. “And you haven’t sensed her.”

“No. Bastian’s soul was trapped here. Now that he’s claimed a body, I believe we’ll find him the same way.” A moth darts out from her sleeve, fluttering up to the ceiling. “But Elora was free. There was nothing to keep her tethered to this world. All that remains of her now is her relic.”

“I thought all the relics were lost.” Max moves into view from behind me, his voice level as he creeps toward the sword. I wonder how much he heard, if our voices traveled to the doorway. He points to the blade. “Historians have searched for centuries, and the whole time one was here.”

“Knowledge that does little good.” Vanya gestures with her chin, watching Max reach for Mierlin.

His hand passes through the hilt like smoke. I gasp.

She nods, satisfied. “Only a divine Saint can wield a relic.”

I observe her figure with renewed interest, but she’s still dressed in the wool cloak she first arrived in. “Where’s yours?”

“Never you mind.”

Max tries twice more to grip the sword, only for it to slip through his grasp. When he turns away, sheepish, I’m struck anew by how exhausted he looks. His work was already wreaking havoc on his nights, and the events since yesterday clearly haven’t helped.

Vanya notices, too. “Are you all right?”

“I haven’t slept well for a week.” An exasperated statement condoned by a slight stumble. “That’s all. I’m just ... Saints, I’m so tired.”

“As one of those, I can be of assistance.” Vanya pulls a corked vial from

her pocket. Empty when held against the light, it fills with a thin, dark liquid as her eyes narrow. Once full, she motions for my hand. “A few drops will put you both to sleep.”

I hiss at the icy touch of the glass. The faintest whiff of salt lingers.

Max sways on his feet. In this state, there’s no way he can navigate through the streets to his small flat, never mind before curfew starts. Already the candlelight gleams more confidently as evening approaches, and what might wait beyond nightfall is not something I wish him to find like this.

My lungs give a nervous squeeze. I take his hand with both of mine, closing his long, ink-stained fingers around the small vial. “Go up to my apartment,” I murmur. “I’ll meet you there.”

He stares, as if he can’t quite string my words together, then nods. It’s bold of me to ask him to stay the night—I never have before. Nor has he tried to stay, always aware of my comfort and boundaries. But I need him sharp, and I won’t forgive myself if I don’t know that he’s somewhere safe.

As he walks across the Chambers, Vanya’s head turns, watching him over her shoulder. “Is there something else, Mina?”

I swallow. The first time I came to her about this issue, it was easier to explain. Now, I don’t even know where to begin. “My heart.”

“The pain.” She looks down at me, appraising. “Still comes and goes?”

“It *never* goes. Not since yesterday.”

“Curious.” She strokes her jaw, grips her chin as she continues to inspect me. I struggle to keep from fidgeting. Her gaze is unnerving in a different way now, as though she sees every scratch on my bones.

I gesture to the pocket she pulled the vial from. “Do you have anything...?”

“Give me a few days to think on it. I agreed with your assumption of it stemming from stress, but changing like that—this is evidently something else.”

“Do we even have a few days?” It feels like such a bleak thing to say. My eyes flick to the sword again, drawn to it as if caught by a tide. “Isn’t there —”

But she’s gone. Melted into shadows that loom larger, darker, as night creeps in.

The scuffed kitchen table wobbles as I shiver and clutch my shawl tighter. I should close the window, but fresh air is too precious to banish. A few hours past midnight, its bite wars with the heat from the stove in the corner, sharpens my racing thoughts.

While Vanya's tonic granted me over eight hours of sleep, I doubt any potion could force my mind to idle.

I feared my dreams would be unkind, but what transpired in the Council Chambers seeped cruelly through. Walls of clacking teeth and portraits with eyes of stone. Moths descending upon streets flooded with tears and bones. Bells rusted with blood and split apart from the inside by a ravenous dark.

And that *sword*. I trace the rim of my teacup with a trembling finger before taking a sip. There was no avoiding Mierlin, a fabled blade wielded by faceless villains who declared their love by impaling me.

In the courtyard below my window, the jangle of Constabulary horses rises with their riders' calls, reporting the results of their searches.

Despite the Saints' warning that they would be of little use, Bergen and Tamzin organized a dozen search parties after leaving the Chambers. From the pockets of bobbing lantern light I saw earlier, the greencoats are the only living souls roaming the streets, hunting for what they still call the Bane. I can't decide if they're brave or foolish—another attack could happen any second. Perhaps they intend to catch Bastian in the act.

Whichever it is, there's no need for me to be at the window to understand what their hollow shouts mean: They found nothing.

Hardly shocking. Bastian's soul could have taken root inside anyone. Even one of them.

For a moment, I imagine a greencoat peering down a darkened alley, a ruthless grin on his lips as his touch raises the cobbles. My mirthless laugh sounds flat in my small, dim kitchen.

And if they find his host, what then? Vanya said we mere mortals are no match for him. Do we clap him in irons and hand him over to the Saints, or trap him in another bell and repeat the cycle? Maybe we're not as helpless to face Bastian's return as the Scriptures taught us, since the Saints are here. But it was the Alchemist who killed him the first time.

That wasn't enough then, and she's not here now.

Again, I curse myself for not returning to the library for that history book. I barely dug into its pages, but I know if anything was to give me an answer on

how to destroy a Saint or *whatever* he is, it would be in there.

Decision made to leave for the University at first light, I lift my cup and freeze.

Beyond the reach of the lantern at my elbow, Mother stands outside the doorway of the bedroom where Max still sleeps. She makes a disdainful sound, lip curled. He collapsed into my bed moments after swallowing Vanya's concoction, forcing me to remove his half-unlaced shoes and cover him with the quilt she made Father.

"Oh, fuck me," I mumble to the porcelain. When she moves toward me, I point with a spoon to the chair opposite. "Tea?"

"No." Then she surprises me by picking up the offered chair and striding with it to the stove. She sets it down with a thunk, climbs up, and feels around atop the shelves.

I thought myself clearheaded, but the sight of my irreproachable mother standing on a chair to scrounge above my cupboards defies logic. "What. On earth. Are you doing?"

"There's a boy in your bed," she says, almost offhand.

"Uh—yes?" I splutter. And since I never seem able to let my words stand without defending them to her, I add, "Not that it's any of your business, but it's the first time I've had one in my bed. A boy. To sleep. Only."

A soft noise of triumph. She steps clumsily down, a dusty bottle held aloft. "Why him?" She drags the chair back and bangs the half-full whiskey bottle down. Vanya's tonic really is quite potent—what little I see of Max doesn't even flinch, but I certainly do. Curiosity lights Mother's steady gaze. "You've never looked twice at anyone before like you do him."

"I—I—there's—no one else *has* interested me." My cheeks flush hot. Explaining to my estranged mother how my romantic attraction works cannot be how this night ends. My confusion only grows as she collects two squat glasses. "How did you know that was up there? Even I didn't—"

"Your father may not have lived in this tower like you, but he ensured it had its comforts." She wrenches out the cork, pours, and pushes one glass across the table. She doesn't have to ask me twice.

Smooth on my tongue, the whiskey burns my throat. My eyes water as Mother refills both glasses. I don't drink mine, though it warms my blood. I need clarity.

The first of my questions to spill is small, but each syllable has teeth,

slicing into the space between us. “Why are you here?”

I assumed she went home before curfew, but she must have stayed. Keeping a finger in every pie, I suppose. Stamps of grey sit under her eyes, and dread gnaws my gut—I hope she doesn’t expect to sleep here. There’s the shabby sofa in the corner, but I don’t want her in this place I’ve claimed for myself. Her revealing the whiskey’s hiding spot is unnerving enough, like she knows the secrets of this tower better than I do.

“If you’re here to argue, or blame me for something uncontrollable, I call a truce.” I wave the end of my shawl, signifying a white flag. “I’m not in the mood.”

She sighs. “Believe me, Wilhelmina, neither am I.”

Civility is ... unexpected. I look more closely at her as she unravels her scarf, unbuttons her coat. A woman with a posture suited to sitting for a portrait, now slumped in a chair.

Before I can dwell on that, she rummages inside her satchel. I jump when she slams down a book covered in soft green leather. Embossed gold leaf gleams, spelling *An Intricate and Unabridged History of the Saints: Volume Two*. The very book I wished was here minutes ago.

A hundred reactions spark, but none arrange themselves into something coherent and polite fast enough, so I remain silent.

“I couldn’t find volume one,” she says. “This might be one of the few books that escaped the Saints’ fire.”

“How ... how did you get it?” I pull it toward me, nearly knocking over my cup of tea. “The curfew—”

“The Constabulary is not light on its feet.” She sips her second whiskey. Faint lines crease around her mouth as she grimaces. “I’m quite forewarned of when to stay in the shadows.”

My fingertips drum the table. “But why bring it to me now, in the middle of the night?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” Her expression is tight; I can tell she’s straining to keep it passive. Her jaw works a few times before she speaks. “I was rather intrigued by how you pulled any information from it. It’s complete gibberish.”

I rear back in my seat, sure I misheard. My hand digs into the book and opens it to a random page. A new chapter begins here, and similar to what I saw earlier, the detailed illustration above the heading is painted, the script

itself stark and spiked.

Mother turns the book to the side so we can both see, an elbow propped on the table. “Utter nonsense.”

“*Nonsense? Do you need spectacles?*” I point to a sentence halfway down and read aloud: “*While most titles were easily decided upon, the Glassmith changed his one dozen times before settling on Seething.*”

When I meet Mother’s gaze, I expect chagrin, maybe even embarrassment. After all, her malingering daughter just proved her a fool. Instead, her eyes are wide, mouth agape.

She wets her lips. “Saints, you *can* read it.”

“Ma, how strong is that whiskey—Careful!”

I steady the lantern as she shoves away from the table. The doors of my standing cabinet creak open, unveiling all manner of curios. Spare candles, decks of cards, knitting yarn ... and parchment. Mother snatches a blank sheet and a pathetic lump of charcoal I forgot was in there.

“Stop knowing where all my stuff is,” I hiss as she leaves. The sound of her feet changes from the thud of wood to the smack of stone, then hollow steps overhead in the belfry. “What is she doing?” I whisper to the ceiling.

Oddly, I’m at a loss for what to do in her absence. The stove emits a loud crackle as the burning wood collapses, and I’m glad for it. It forces me to peel out of this chair and add another log. The precious, delicate star chimes Max gifted me hang from a hook on the wall, and they gently jingle as I move past.

I drain my second whiskey while waiting, this time coughing on the taste. Clarity be damned.

When Mother returns minutes later, I’ve poured a third glass.

“Can you read this?” She lays the parchment before me, now covered in black marks, and grips the back of her chair.

I set aside my drink, willing to humor her. She appears to have pressed the paper against a surface and captured its texture by rubbing the charcoal over it. Words, but not all of them. They’re cut off mid-sentence at the paper’s edge, like thoughts reconsidered. I notice the text matches the jagged script in the book.

“*‘Beneath this bronze shell ... To remain caged until...’* I can’t make out the rest. You only got the top half of the letters.” I squint and lift the parchment closer to the light. “Where’s this from?”

“Arbutus.”

I laugh but stop once I realize she’s serious. “No, it’s not.”

Her knuckles are white on the chair. “That inscription is, yes.”

“No. What’s on that Vesper can’t be translated. It’s...”

I drop the parchment as though it’s caught fire. My hands suddenly feel dirty, and I rub them on my nightgown. The spiked lettering—it can’t be. It *can’t* be. And yet ... what the hell changed that I can now read it?

A more asinine question has never entered my mind. It’s quite obvious what *changed*. My Vesper broke. The bell in my tower split apart inches from me and now the unfathomable is legible. The vanished wounds, my heated heart—I think I might throw up.

I can’t be Bastian’s host. My fingers fist in my nightgown beneath the table. It’s *not* possible. Those three words fast become a mantra, repeated over and over to myself as my stomach churns. My heart pain—that started before Bastian escaped. And I didn’t make those statues move yesterday. I would have been aware if I had, wouldn’t have sent them after people I love. And Vanya stood in front of me as she explained how they would find Bastian.

He’s not me.

But that’s the problem with doubt. Like grief, once the seed is planted, it’s hard to remove every sprouted weed.

My voice creaks in the quiet. “No one has ever been able to read that.”

Mother watches me with a wary expression. “I won’t pretend to understand.”

A strident scream rises from the courtyard below. Rife with terror, it’s a sound I prayed to never hear again in the night. Frightened voices shout over the cllop of hooves and panicked whinnies.

After waiting a beat, we both lunge for the window. I reach it first, leaning outside.

Snow-topped lamps cast a hearty glow across the cobbles and set the fragile ice in the large fountain sparkling. A light that doesn’t stretch higher than the third floor but is enough for me to decide to close the window.

All manner of stone—gargoyles, dragons, and vicious eagles—tear away from the side of Lyndell Hall. I’ve no need to count the shadows that darken the courtyard to know it’s more than what abandoned Buchari University yesterday.

I'm not the one doing this.

My gaze catches not on the monster that soars past, but on the bottom corner of my window. Since I first discovered the growing stained glass, a trio of white edelweiss flowers bloomed to start a pattern ... and now they've all withered.

"I told Bergen it would happen again," Mother says.

I examine her sharp profile as she peers through the rippled glass. Where my face burns, hers has drained of color. But there's a staunchness to the line of her jaw that matches her frigid core, and it makes me somewhat proud.

"There has to be a way to stop this," she continues. "All of this. And not just waiting for the Saints to find the Bane. Bastian."

"There is." I retrieve another blank parchment from the cabinet and wait for her to sit, shaken but resolved. Two fingers tap the book's open page. "We research."

Thirteen

Like sunlight creeping across the floor, the croak of ravens in the belfry above draws me slowly and gently into consciousness. I roll over with a groan, feeling scraped thin.

Mother and I worked long after the night's screams stopped. Although Lyndell Hall's stone monsters didn't wait for the sunrise to force a return to their perches, they still terrorized Vaiwyn for hours more compared to the first attack. I hate to consider what that difference might mean. That Bastian is reacquainting himself with the city, working out the kinks and playing its pulse more easily.

I claw the covers off my face and reach out, only to find the space beside me empty. The quilt is pushed down; the pillow dented but cold to the touch. My heart sinks until I glance at the small clock on the nightstand. Almost two in the afternoon.

"Saints." My arm drapes over my eyes. I finished the rest of Vanya's tonic before I went back to bed, but I didn't expect to sleep so late. No wonder Max is already gone.

Max slept deep as the dead. Aside from a single rustle at the start of it, he never stirred throughout the second attack, not even to turn over.

The sudden need to tell him what Mother and I learned, to enlist his help, makes me throw the warm covers aside.

I instantly regret it—the floor is frigid to my bare feet. Beyond windows laced with frost, snow falls in an enchanting waltz. Shivering, I wrap my shawl around me to huddle near the stove in the kitchen. All the dishes Mother and I used are stacked in the sink, the spare blanket I lent her neatly folded on the couch.

No Max. No Mother. Only an empty bottle of whiskey, a stack of

parchment full of her notes, and an ancient book.

That green cover crackles to life a hundred thoughts that still don't quite fit, but I think I know how to knock a few into place.

I hurry to dress, grabbing whatever wrinkled thing lies on the floor, and comb fingers through my hair. A blouse tucked inside a skirt, a sweater thrown over and belted, and a scarf knotted about my neck. None of it matches, none of it's clean, and none of it matters.

Not when I have a Withering Healer to speak to.

A piece of bread passes between each hand as I shrug on my coat. I catch myself on the doorframe and retreat to fold Mother's tracing of the Vesper inscription into my pocket.

The strike of my boots on the stairs is rapid, but for the first time in days, hope buoys me. All because page 632 may have disclosed something that *I* can do to help this mess.

Vanya wasn't entirely forthcoming when she revealed the Lost Alchemist's relic. If her sword was used to defeat Bastian once, then a relic can stop him again. Only a divine hand can wield the sword, but Bastian is not of the heavens.

And he has a relic of his own.

Emerging onto the sixth floor, I peer inside Max's office. No sign of him. Not even a forgotten cup of coffee or a jacket hung over a chair.

I walk farther up the hall. All the offices appear abandoned, and only one event could cause such an anomaly: petition day. Every councillor and aide will be in the Council Chambers as of—I check my pocket watch—five minutes ago.

“Shit.”

The last bit of bread disappears inside my mouth as I bolt down the main staircase. Vanya can wait an hour; today's meeting is too important to miss. Not only will Council discuss next steps, but this is the day of the month for citizens to air their grievances. Given recent events, there's bound to be several of those. And Max will be there. I'll grab him and bring him with me as a second opinion and much-needed emotional support. I honestly don't know how Vanya will react to the questions I have in mind about Bastian—and me.

Halfway between the fourth and fifth floor, someone darts past in the opposite direction, their attention fixated on their feet.

I skid to a stop. “Isaac!”

My brother startles, recognition sparking. “Mina. Mother with you?” A weary question to match a weary countenance. His hair is in disarray, fingers carded through it too many times, and the bags beneath his eyes hold noticeable weight.

“Not anymore. She left before I woke up.” I move to the same step. “Were you in the catacombs again?” It comes out sharper than I intend, but his clothes are more crumpled than mine, that cloying, acerbic scent stronger than ever.

Isaac runs a hand over his face. I’ve never known him to go a day without shaving, and the shadow of a beard makes him seem older. More burdened. “I had no choice. Three of yesterday’s Talus Pox cases died.”

“D-died? *Already?*” I grip the railing for support. Usually, the disease needs a week to work through a body. For it to have calcified them from the inside out so soon ... the *pain* those poor people must have felt.

My heart squeezes as those last moments with Father drift through my mind. This is all Bastian’s doing, grasping for strength. For power.

“And there’s been twelve new cases since.”

“Quinn?”

“No word,” he says. “I’m told she left the infirmary yesterday afternoon, but I say escaped, more like. You know how restless she is.” When he realizes that isn’t a comfort, Isaac nudges my shoulder. “I’m sure Quinn’s fine. She’s tough. Will probably discover that absinthe is the cure.”

An unbidden laugh breaks through my throat. I only hope he’s right.

“So, when you say not anymore, does that mean Mother spent the night with you?” The curiosity in his voice is a living thing, nosing aside his exhaustion.

“Don’t sound so shocked.” I roll my eyes. “She showed up after midnight with that book. We might even have found—”

“You worked.” He points two fingers at me. “Together.”

I sigh. “We called a truce. How long that lasts, I don’t know.”

Working alongside Mother as an ally, exchanging thoughts without first dipping them in venom—it felt *good*. Like how it was before Father died, when she’d come home from the University for a late lunch to help me figure out schoolwork or share with me a newspaper article she thought I would find interesting. A touch of familial aggravation always existed between us, but it

wasn't until Father passed that her presence began gnawing my nerves and cutting my temper loose.

Last night, I felt none of that. It may even account for some of today's newfound hope.

"Did you check the Council Chambers for her?" I ask. "I'm heading there now."

Isaac snorts. "Good luck getting in." He gestures to the window as I frown. "Haven't you seen?"

At first, I think the fluttering snow plays tricks on me—I've never seen so many people in the courtyard below. Observed through panes of pink, lavender, and gold, there must be a hundred people milling about, all pressing forward. The glass muffles their voices, but the fearful anger twining them together is palpable. Large, rounded spaces are avoided by the surging crowd, and my late breakfast threatens to reappear when I realize why.

Where before the gargoyles snatched people off the street and sculpted them against buildings, the Constabulary horses received no such grace. Three carcasses lie on the heated cobbles, their flanks torn open and bones jutting out. Dark puddles stain the ground.

I stumble over a hasty goodbye to Isaac and race to the nearest gallery.

The doors are flung wide, the balcony packed tight with bodies. Protests erupt as I ram between shoulders, reciprocating every shove until I reach a spot close to where Max and I hid yesterday. Daggered glares turn as people recognize who I am, but their supposed disdain no longer upsets me. They don't know what we're up against.

Instead of unearthly Saints and a family of Bell Keepers, the straining giant columns now watch over barely contained chaos.

A barrier of greencoats with linked arms stretches across where the four Saints stood before, fighting to keep petitioners at bay. Rifles strapped over their backs glint with warning. Fists wave, voices fly, and though the greencoats jostle and stagger, the line holds.

"Quiet. Quiet! Order, I say!"

The booming voice draws my attention to the Speaker's chair, and the sight of someone other than Father seated there is a familiar pang. Councillor Genoa gave up his elected seat to hold the position, having the most experience after two decades in office.

Keeping it warm until you're ready—that's what he told me when Council

first announced the news. He meant well, I'm sure, but all I heard was a duet to Mother's disapproval.

Genoa bangs the gavel set on the small desk before him, but the cracked sound is no match for the upset crowd. Standing in the left-hand benches, mopping sweat from the back of his neck, Mayor Bergen looks ill. Even from here, I see the restless dart of his eyes as he takes in the horde.

The lone woman in the center of the aisle, surveyed by uneasy councillors and scribbling aides, doesn't wait for order or quiet.

"Two days since that Vesper called to hell and woke that damned Bane, and all we hear is 'Stay inside and lock your doors.'" Her sharp voice can't drown out the din, but intensity ripples off her bundled frame. "Do none of you realize the shortages that will occur if these Constabulary blockades continue in the mountain passes? Already my bakery suffers without deliveries of flour and sugar! How can you all justify it and still tell us nothing?"

Councillor Harmon rises. Young and untested, his crimson robes seem to swallow him whole. Whatever platitude he attempts to offer dies when the woman shouts that she didn't vote for him and pins him with a stare that makes him sit.

Tamzin stands next, her fierce expression a mirror of the petitioner's. "When we have information relevant to public safety, we will release it. The situation is in hand—"

"*In hand?*" another woman screeches. The noise of dissent swells as she ducks beneath the linked arms of the constables. "Were you hiding under a rock last night? My son was *taken* from me!" Tears stream down her flushed cheeks. "He's now perched on Kafkan Tower like a—a—a demon!"

The greencoats' feet dig in as petitioners rush forward, and Genoa beats the gavel again. Control is fraying, a single thread away from disaster. These people demand the truth, but to ears desperate for something substantial, I fear it would fall like a patchwork of lies. To share that the Saints still walk among us—that a sixth, unknown and free, is corrupting the city as the Bane ... even a day later, it sounds absurd to me.

Bergen raises his hands. "Everyone should remain indoors for the time being! These attacks follow a clear pattern, and if everyone stays off the streets after dusk, nothing will happen to you or your loved ones."

My gaze roams over the back rows of aides, and a flash of white distracts

me. I gasp, smothering the heat in my chest.

Max sits slouched in his seat, motionless. His blank stare focuses on the wall opposite. I frown. It looks as though he's left his body, entirely unaware of what's unfolding.

"We are working to rectify this situation—"

"What about that Strauss girl?" an elderly man at the front of the straining line shouts. I jolt. "Why isn't she here to answer to this?"

Frosted alarm obliterates the indifference I felt beneath their attention before. *Shit*. I turn, prepared to elbow clear a path to the door.

"Here!" It comes from the young woman at my side. She raises a finger, jabbing it in my direction. "She's here!"

Bodies crowd closer, pushing me back. Too many voices, too many accusations accost me. I stumble. These aren't the same people I shook off in the streets. My muscles tense, but there's nowhere for me to go. I shake my head profusely as I bump against the balcony rail.

"My wife has the Pox because of you!" cries the man to my right.

But it's not directed at me. A shoe flies from his hand, a second at the ready.

Bergen is too slow to duck, and it collides with the side of his head.

It's the final thread, tugged from its weave.

The weakest link in the greencoats loses his footing, and the line unravels. People swarm the benches, bellowing up at councillors who are uncertain if they should flee or lean over to listen.

There's a flurry of movement as aides scramble to collect their things. Some move to join their councillors, others hover at the back, arms full of parchment like it will double as armor. Only one aide remains in their seat.

With no one to block my view of him, I notice the pen in Max's hand. It idly draws some messy doodle in the corner of the parchment, his attention still captured by nothing. It isn't until the window above his head shatters from a thrown inkpot that he breaks from his stupor. As glass rains down around him, he lurches to his feet and races to join Rhys at the back.

I don't understand—is Max still that tired? How can he be so out of it in this uproar?

As if he heard my thoughts, his gaze flicks upward, quickly finding me as the lone still figure in the galleries. My breath strangles in my throat. What stares back is a confusion that swallows mine entirely.



“Rhys!”

Porcelain shatters. Tea runs between the flagstones, seeps into the rug, and splatters the shoes of the aide standing alone in his office. Rhys whirls, cane raised to beat back an intruder, only to find me, out of breath.

“*Mina.*” His body sags. “Don’t yell.” Although illuminated by the flickering lamp on his desk, a darkness shudders behind his spectacles. Memories of other loud voices are fresh in the furrows of his brow. “Please.”

“Where is he?” My cheeks blaze. Sweat collects along my spine. I loosen my scarf with one hand, the other braced against the doorframe. Beneath the wood, Vaiwyn matches my heated pulse. Heavy and erratic.

“Looking for Max?” Rhys starts gathering the broken pieces of his cup but gives up when his bad leg—an old injury from a riding accident, I once heard—seems to pain him. Vaiwyn isn’t drinking in the spilled liquid like it normally would. Another malfunction that’s not important right now. “Just missed him, I’m afraid.”

My stomach sinks. “When? Where did he go?”

He shrugs. “He left not two minutes ago. Going home, I suspect. I don’t know what is up with him and Tamzin but—*they’re hiding something.*”

This last observation he yells, my feet already racing down the main stairs again.

I encounter no resistance until I reach the third floor—I surge into a stream of petitioners that deepens with every step. More and more join as they leave their respective galleries, migrating toward Lyndell Hall’s entryway and making it hard to move. Shouts tail me as I shove forward, the noise an angry revival of this afternoon. I adjust my scarf higher around my face.

Reinforcements were quick to arrive and block the exits to the Council Chambers, but the greencoats still needed an hour to wrangle control of the riot. Another more to let us all go. I glance through the nearest window and note the city’s dim appearance—my throat tightens, knowing how much daylight, how much time, I’ve lost.

I should head straight to Vanya’s apothecary, the tracing in my pocket weighing heavy, but I have to catch Max first. And not just because I value

his opinion and want his support in questioning the herbalist about Bastian's possible weaknesses. That uncertain expression as he peered up at me—he may need something stronger than a spoonful of sleep tonic.

But what hurts most is that Vaiwyn seems to disagree. Twice since leaving the Chambers, a hallway door has slammed shut before me. No matter how I pounded, kicked, or prayed, the doors refused to unlock. With every detour, I couldn't help but wonder if the city didn't *want* me to find Max. Perhaps by barring my path, Vaiwyn thinks I'll reconsider my decision to seek him out.

Well, it's wrong. Because Max needs a Withering Healer as much as I do. I may no longer have a bell to care for, but a tall, exhausted boy will do as replacement. And I intend to help him as much as I need him for the same.

Caught in the current of people, I spill across the foyer and through the doors.

Snow falls light and elegant over the courtyard. It salts the bushes and naked trees that line the wrought-iron-and-gold fence that surrounds Lyndell Hall, but melts upon the cobbles. Drifts of white gather between the exposed ribs of the one remaining frozen horse.

Shoulders bump mine as I halt atop the steps, but the cold seems to have drained people's fury. They pick up their pace, buttoning coats and sheathing hands inside gloves. I rise on my toes to scrutinize every figure shuffling home, searching, hoping to—There!

A head of dark-brown hair, taller than most, and headed for the open gates.

He looks to the side, and even through the snow, his profile partly concealed by the collar of his jacket, I recognize the sharp planes of that face.

I skirt around the massive fountain in the courtyard's center, my chase watched by the Lost Alchemist from her iced plinth. Sculpted to tower in full armor, she tears a hole in the clouds with her fabled sword. A deceptive warmth shades her noble face as the lamps edging the courtyard alight. Half the flames are weak, starved for breath.

"Saints," I curse, walking faster.

Time is running out. The last two nights have witnessed Bastian's attacks; I doubt tonight will be different. At this rate, Max and I won't reach Vanya's before sundown, but his apartment is close. I'll spend the night there, and tomorrow ...

Confusion yanks my heart into my throat as Max breaks through to the main street and turns right. Not to the east and the tiny flat he holds over a

small bookshop, but west.

And I follow.

He strides down the middle of the street, jostled on both sides by opposing tides of people swept up in fear. I see it in the set of their mouths, the stiffness of their shoulders—a panic crafted by the approaching night. They pack up their wares spread out to sell, close their shops, and rush home to locked doors and shutters.

“Max! *Max!*” My shouts may as well be a whisper; he can’t hear me. Nor does he slow. No matter how swiftly I move, the distance between us stays a maddening twenty paces. The bitter air stings each breath, but my heart blazes hot as ever.

Talons of worry tease the back of my neck as he veers down streets that lead to Kafkan Bridge and the Judicial District on the south bank. The next turn into the isle’s western market square only brings him closer there.

Where is he going?

I don’t want to lose sight of him; my boots strike the ground harder, faster.

I finally have a clear view of Max across the square—now almost empty of its stalls and vendors—and break into a jog. Again, the snow devours my shouts. His coat flaps behind him as he draws level with the Church of Tears and disappears down its side.

Smaller than Elke Cathedral, the church honoring the Weeping Carpenter is no less impressive with its dark stone and sweeping buttresses. High above the doors, two men atop a scaffold work at removing one of the dozens of sculptures adorning its facade. I assume they intend to lessen the threat of attack, but there are too many carvings for it to make a difference.

A loud crack sounds at the same time a frantic voice calls, “Look out!”

I raise my head and jump back with a shriek.

The statue smashes against the cobbles in a macabre imitation of Rhys’s teacup. Basalt legs buckle from the impact, splitting at the waist. The head separates from the neck and rolls into my feet. A face, twisted by a silent scream of terror, stares up at me. My mouth dries as I recognize him as a local metalsmith. Snatched from the streets and consumed by our confused, corrupted city.

These men aren’t minimizing the risk of attack—they’re retrieving victims.

They hurry down to collect the remains of the metalsmith, and I leave before they delay me further. I can’t lose Max.

I fly around the corner of the church and slip to a stop.

A sickening cold slithers through me as I face an empty alleyway. A dead end. No doors, no windows—only walls three stories high and a gate to the churchyard, held shut by a padlock encrusted with frost.

My hands dig into my damp hair. I swear I saw him come down here. He turned down *here*. Max—

What if I was wrong?

The terrible thought forces me to stagger against the church wall. My fingers claw into the divots between stone, as if the mortar will have the answer engraved within. What if that wasn't even Max? What if the snow and my desperate need to find him ... Shit. *Shit*.

I back up and collide with a constable waiting at the alley's mouth.

"You can't be out here!" His sharp remark quavers, unveiling how full to the brim his fear is as the world darkens, the shadows reaching down.

"I need to go." I shove past, feeling almost drunk with stupidity. What was I thinking, going so far this close to curfew? My heart thrums so hot I half expect the snowflakes to sizzle where they land on my coat. I inhale too fast, my vision sparking black. All around me, I hear shutters crashing shut, deadbolts locking, including those of the Church of Tears.

"Easy," the greencoat says, his hand at my shoulder as I double over, struggling to control my breathing. Panicking won't help. I need to think, *think*.

Where can I go? I straighten and pull out my watch, taking a few precious seconds to listen to the steadying tick before considering my dwindling options. Mother lives the farthest, and I've gone the opposite direction of Max's apartment. That makes me want to scream. Aida is too far on the south bank, Isaac too far on the north. And unless I can find somewhere else along the way, Lyndell Hall is all I have.

My watch snaps shut. So that's where I'll go.

"It's practically sundown," the greencoat accuses. A skip enters his pace to match mine, his rifle rattling. I glimpse the name stitched above his heart: BAUER. He's younger than I first assumed, early twenties at most. There's a softness to his face that, despite his unease, makes him appear eager.

"You should be inside."

I struggle to keep my voice level. "Could say the same about you."

"As an officer of the Constabulary, I'm sworn to—"

A loud screeching interrupts him, freezes our feet to the slick ground. Slowly, I turn toward the center of the square, a whimper trapped behind my teeth.

Atop its pedestal, the bronzed stag is a regal beast, larger than any found in the wilds along the Alosse slopes. In a misguided hope of keeping the pigeons away, its antlers were hammered to fine points long ago.

Massive antlers that now shiver free of the snow stashed between each tine as its metal head tosses.

Time's up.

Fourteen

My brother was a shining light in my childhood. One memory I cling to is of Isaac taking me to the park near our family home. Small and unassuming from the street, tucked behind high, crumbling walls, it was one of Vaiwyn's most beautiful secrets. It had a babbling fountain for a mouth, crunching gravel for its tongue, tidy ribs of poppies and hydrangeas. Flat on my back in the grass, I saw nothing but a wide-open sky above the juniper trees.

My favorite part, though, was the park's lone sculpture. A white marble horse, majestic wings outstretched and feet eager to dance in the clouds. Isaac would set me astride its back, and I'd wish for that statue to come alive and bring us both closer to the Saints.

But that was a different Mina. One with fancies of flight not yet spoiled by growing up and facing mistakes. If she stood where I am now, she'd realize just how foolish she was to make such wishes.

Another screech rends the air. I grab Bauer's arm as the stag stamps its hovering hoof. That definitive sound—bronze on stone—is danger knocking on a door locked with twine. More snow falls from its rump, its shoulders, but the patina of frost remains, glittering in the lamplight.

With a fistful of Bauer's sleeve, I retreat. Small steps, my feet kept nimble by an enormous hope that we'll leave the square unseen. I fight back the whine building in my throat as the stag leaps from its plinth, and a tremor rocks through the cobbles. It's impossible to miss the glint of those sharpened antlers—like daggers.

An odd, strangled yelp emerges from Bauer's mouth. He pulls free and fumbles for his rifle.

The memory of bullets striking stone forces me to wrap my hand around the barrel and wrench it down. Isaac's pitiful shots did little more than

cosmetic damage to those gargoyles; any bullet aimed at this statue would ricochet into a window, or worse.

The stag stills. For one witless moment, I believe it's become nothing but bronze again. That within its metal shell, the city's tainted marrow has dried up.

But then it turns, smooth and quiet, to gaze directly at me and the greencoat. Bauer's shaking hands drop the rifle. A hoof rasps across the cobbles in a spray of sparks, and lips pull back from rusted teeth.

Saints, no. No.

I snatch Bauer's jacket and tug. When he staggers to the side, wide eyes locked on the stag readying for a chase, I let go and give in to the command pulsing through my veins: *Run.*

Snow pelts my face, making it difficult to see as I race out of the square. My skirts are a more pressing matter, though. I gather them into a fist, able to at least keep the damp hem clear of my feet. I tell myself I don't care if that oaf constable follows, but I feel a drop of relief when his footsteps smack behind me.

Relief that turns venomous when his aren't alone.

Four hooves beat a steady rhythm that nails dread further between my bones. Against the cobbles, the sound is indistinguishable from the gallop of horses. Except horses don't lower their heads to skewer every obstacle. Crates, wrought tables, ceramic planters—the destruction is tremendous.

Bauer and I fly up the streets that lead to Lyndell Hall. Fear flirts with the iron grip squeezing my lungs. I don't think I'll make it the rest of the way up the hill. Every gasp has claws, my muscles screaming. Again, I curse myself for having gone so recklessly far from home, from safety, but self-pity won't help me now.

"This way!" I shout over my shoulder, angling for the close-set columns that mark the entrance to a shopping arcade. An opening too narrow for antlers to fit through.

When the shadow of the archway swallows me, it's a small victory. Bauer and I skid to a stop beside the shop nearest the entry, and like a figment of my imagination, the sound of hooves fades.

I double over, coughing to clear my heart wedged inside my throat. Each hard-won breath tastes of the winter jasmine draped over a florist's doorway. I seize my skirts and tuck the hem into my belt, freeing my legs.

A street sheltered but still vulnerable to the elements, the arcade is dry yet colder. Every surface glitters with frost. Snow drapes the vaulted glass ceiling, suffocating an already restricted space. Most of the lights in here are dead; those alive flicker weakly against glazed shop windows and the smooth cobbles that twist into the gloom.

It's enough light to limn the edges of the marble wolf pups residing on the fountain at the first bend. Three of them—they drop onto the ice and peer over the lip at us, teeth bared.

Fuck.

I whirl, pawing Bauer aside.

Through the columns, on the other side of the street, a granite faun breaks from its pedestal.

“Look out!” Bauer yanks me away from the pillar.

I scream as the bronze stag smashes into the corner. Shards of brick spray the ground. The niche of safety I thought we carved out shrinks with each bang of the statue against the columns that bar it from entering. Its head rams into the left pillar, then the right. Back and forth, warping its antlers. Remaking itself to *fit*.

Small wolves trapped in a fountain are the least of our worries.

A murky darkness streaks my vision as we race into the arcade's depths. I can't take the turns fast enough. My shoes slip, stone corners collide with my shoulders. More statues quiver and crack to life as we pass, the stag always close on our heels.

I bang on windows and jimmy doorknobs, but there's no time to linger. Bauer and I are two frantic rabbits, our scent caught by a predator, and nothing will put it off the hunt.

I veer around the last corner and sob at the sight of the outside archway. Somehow, I dig deeper. Scrape up dregs of speed. Behind me comes a strange wail, echoing inside the stag's belly like a knell.

Worse, the call is answered when we spill onto the Pyke Stairway.

Bauer tries to turn south, but I yell for him to follow me. Maybe he thinks descending the wide steps shaded by trees would be faster than climbing to the top of the isle, but no safety lies at the bottom. Only the River Riga and bridges riddled with sculptures.

More statues stumble out of the gardens we race by. Some seem unsure of what to do with their limbs, stiff from disuse. A marble woman teeters

forward. Her dress tangles about her legs, but she clutches tight the dagger in her hand.

Still, the stag chases us. The Pyke slows its pursuit, but it clatters after us all the same.

Tears stream down my cheeks, freezing in the air's bite. The world blurs. Lights rise over the top of the stairs behind a healing clockface. More appear below that, left to burn in Lyndell Hall's offices. My lungs are full of glass, my heart pulsing pure fire.

A new screeching reaches my ears as the tall iron fence surrounding the Hall comes into view. In the courtyard beyond, I catch flashes of people rushing inside or back toward the gates. Gates with four greencoats apiece throwing their weight into shutting them.

"Wait!" My shout shreds at the edges. I wave my arms over my head, cresting the steps. "Wait for us!"

One greencoat pauses, then moves into the street. He gestures wildly, yelling something I can't hear over the clack of hooves behind me. The creak of the gates slipping shut—that I do hear. Like a hook of terror around my navel, it forces me across that final distance.

"Hurry!" I catch from the officer at last. "We can't hold it!"

The immense gates are heavy, the going slow, but they steal an inch of freedom with every footfall.

Only one foot of clearance remains for me to pour through. My sleeve catches on a latch and tears. Bauer slams into me as I pull free, his own frame barely squeezing by.

I turn and add what little strength I have to the gate on the left, Bauer to the right. The iron is icy to the touch, the city's pulse a sticky drumbeat against my sweaty palms. I feel the gates trying to stay open, Vaiwyn fighting back.

Both gates meet with a mighty crash that rattles my teeth. Someone rushes forward with thick chains and a solid padlock. The definitive click declares a historic first: Lyndell Hall has closed itself to Vaiwyn.

A pitiful, exhausted cheer rises from those on this side of the gate as the stag launches over the last Pyke step. It clatters to a stop in the middle of the street, then treads closer. Scraps of red fabric hang from its sharp antlers, fluttering in the frigid breeze that kicks up. It looks like the remains of a truce flag dipped in blood.

The gates shake as several greencoats jeer at the approaching stag. They

whoop and holler; one even jumps up and down, resembling a child who's seen his birthday present.

I can't join in. The steely look in that stag's eye keeps me quiet. Keeps my fingers tight around the bars and my shoulders high.

Every inch of the statue is crafted from the same bronze; etched in frost with a splat of bird shit on its left flank. Its blank, unmoving eyes are impossible to decipher. But it's watching. Thinking.

Suddenly, that strange, resounding bray trumpets from its mouth again, and it charges. Four feet hit the ground as one, pushing toward the gate in two leaps.

I lurch back several steps. The stag collides with the right-hand gate.

Those bars judder with a violence akin to an earthquake, but they hold.

The chains creak, but they *hold*.

I release my trapped breath, only to choke on it.

Bauer hovers above the ground. The toes of his boots twitch against the wrought iron, his hands limp at his side. Rivulets of blood drip from each finger to form a puddle on the cobbles. Bright red, fresher than the stains still soaked into the stone from butchered horses.

With a horrible, wet sound, the stag wrenches back, and Bauer falls from its antlers.

The bars were close enough to stop its head, but not the sharpened tines that slid through to the man standing on the other side.

A foolish young man, who now lies crumpled in a spreading pool of his own blood. It pours from the five holes punched into his chest, from his ears and nostrils and gaping mouth. Indiscriminate words like *Mama* and *please* drown in it. A gargled mewl, and he stills. Snow lands in his hair, on eyes frozen and staring at the sky with empty terror.

The stag shakes its head, and sprays of crimson hit the cobbles, fleck my coat. With a metallic huff, it turns and canters into the night.

All around me is grinding stone, the crunch and scream of metal.

Three constables recover and pick up the fallen Bauer. I have a single-minded focus as I grab an arm and help lift. *Get inside*.

We're a clumsy group, rushing toward Lyndell Hall. Blood still drips from the leaden body, Bauer's coat unable to absorb it all. In my head, I count each of my backward steps—a poor distraction from the noise of a courtyard waking up.

Inside. We'll be safe inside.

We shuffle around the large fountain when the greencoat beside me staggers. The dead horse's ribs crack as he falls on top of them, then rolls off. All four of us lose our grip on Bauer in the sculpted shadow of the Lost Alchemist. I trip, too, and land on my knees.

A boot treads my hand, but my shout of pain vanishes beneath the echoes of the courtyard as the three greencoats abandon me and the still-warm corpse. As they take the steps to the doors two at a time, my curse sticks in my throat at who I see standing atop the stairs. One foot on the landing, the other a step down, beckoning for people to get to the Hall.

I rise to my feet and move forward.

Max's eyes snap to mine, then widen. He slips down another step, mouth forming more words I can't hear.

He's here. Max is *here*. A gash of some feeling I can't name—or perhaps don't want to—unspools cold and jagged through my stomach.

Max didn't leave the Hall. Flashes of the figure in his high-collared coat with a profile so familiar deepens that sickening chill. I followed the ghost of him like a languishing widow.

Something shifts out the corner of my eye. My gaze falls to the silhouette splayed across the courtyard, to the movement of a shadow belonging to a statue, to a sword.

A shower of snow mires my vision as I roll out of the way. From her pedestal, the Lost Alchemist's polished granite blade slashes. She misses me, sword wedging inside the edge of the fountain instead.

With an almighty crash, the Alchemist jumps down. Stone feet shatter the ice coating the pool. The grating of her limbs is another noise undercut by the rumble of Vaiwyn breathing malice into the courtyard's sculptures. Pockmarked fingers wrap around the hilt of her sword, taller than us both, and tear it free with impossible strength.

My feet slip out from under me as I scramble upright, only to be nearly knocked down again as the sword sweeps through the air. I leap back. The tip narrowly avoids slicing my chest. A button bounces off my toes.

It's a cruel, twisted joke from Bastian, from Vaiwyn, using the stone image of his downfall against those who worship her. A woman who once saved us all, now hell-bent on making me a head shorter in the name of *his* revenge. And the Saints can't stop it.

I bolt for the doors as the statue pulls back for another swing. Tamzin appears beside Max, both gesturing for me to hurry.

I stumble on the last step and fall into Max's arms. Whatever words pass between us are brief, the relief buried under panic. He and Tamzin drag me inside, and the doors slam shut behind us in a hollow, decided way.

Fifteen

Granite fists batter the aged oak doors. Over and over, the Lost Alchemist searches for a weakness. A flaw. A way inside.

Bang.

Lyndell Hall's entryway is a maze of shadows, but silhouettes traced golden by the blazing fireplace wreak havoc. Seated on the stairs, I watch through a shimmering haze as people flip tables, drag benches, tear portraits from the walls—all to form a barricade against the doors.

Bang.

I flinch away from the noise but hear the calls for help. I reach for the banister and stop.

Blood. So much blood covers my hands. I ... I don't understand. Is it mine?

Bang.

A tattoo of red—it stains my fingertips, shines bright against my palms. But from where? I'm not hurt.

Bang.

A distorted voice at my shoulder. I turn. Stone, claw-tipped fingers seize my throat before I can scream. Crush the sound to a crumbled wheeze. I'm frozen, unable to move.

Bang.

Crimson tears spill from Max's bone-white eyes. Twin rivers that flow between the marble crevices of his face and drip heavy as coins into my lap. Blood smears fanged teeth, filling each space like ink as he leers. Leans closer. I don't fight him. I don't know if I want to.

A thumb pulls my lower lip down, then his mouth claims mine.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I jerk free of the nightmare with a ragged gasp.

The skewed image of Max, the sheer *wrongness* of it, burns my vision, but I blink it away as I look wildly for the source of the thudding that woke me.

Frosted morning light streams through the right-side windows of the entryway, the dusty rays accentuating the haphazard clutter piled before the doors. Councillors, aides, and greencoats stir in shadowed corners and from where they've sprawled on the steps below me.

A pounding comes at the door again.

My heart skips faster. I shake off the twisted dream, leaving behind last night's memories it sought to change.

Persistent as the click of a clock and loud as bells, the stone Alchemist rammed against the doors for hours. That her statue would try to trespass when no others had before—it made no sense. Locked doors were supposed to promise safety, but that promise wore thin with each new assault. With nowhere for us to go, all we could do was ride out the storm. Count the seconds between each splintering crash and wonder if she'd soon move farther away.

In the gleam of day, that sound's abrupt echo strings tension through the room. People rise to their feet, but none seems brave enough to act. No one wants to know what waits on the other side of that door.

"Hello?" A frustrated voice filters through a crack of light in the oak that wasn't there yesterday. "Open up, damn it!"

An aide at the bottom of the stairs nearly collapses from the release of her muscles. "Thank the Saints—Junia," she mutters, and rushes forward.

Her obvious relief is a spring thaw to the rest of us. When she tugs at the corner of a bench tossed before the door, several people jump to help clear the pile. The banging from outside continues, despite shouted assurances it'll take a few minutes.

My shoulders ache as I let them fall. I tip my head onto what served as my pillow before, only to lurch away as it shifts.

Tucked against the railing, Max looks down at me through bleary eyes. Not blank, not white and bloody—just tired. A normal and easily fixed kind of tired.

"Hi," he says softly.

"Hi." Joy shakes the word. That depraved dream version of him pales as I drink in the sight of *my* Max.

The back of his hand grazes my cheek. Aching tender, he pushes a strand of hair behind my ear and readjusts my coat draped around my shoulders. There's color in his cheeks and a spark in his gaze. I worried over him for nothing, and I couldn't be happier that I was wrong.

I press a lingering kiss to the corner of his mouth before fitting myself under his arm. His hand finds mine and stitches us together. It feels like a home I made for myself.

He must have joined me on the stairs after I nodded off. The moment the door shut behind us, we were enlisted to help barricade Lyndell Hall. Separated by Tamzin to run through the building and ensure every ground floor entrance was secure. When I returned to the main entry after midnight, many of the people here now were still in other wings, shoving desks through the hallways and jamming fire pokers through door handles.

For a moment, I consider telling him about my irresponsible mistake, about leaving Lyndell Hall last night because I thought I was chasing him. But as three people heave on one warped door, struggling to open it, I decide against it. We're both here, both safe, and that's all I can stomach right now.

"You know, I think once this is all over—" Max pauses to clear his throat. His voice re-emerges smoother, a touch deeper. "When this is over, I need to go home."

At his side, I stiffen. My head assumes he's referring to his apartment a few blocks from here, but my heart knows he's not. The emphasis on the word, the wistful note that slips into his tone—for Max, *home* means the seaside. A small, coastal village, a week's journey to the west. The place where he grew almost entirely into the nineteen-year-old man he is today until two years ago, when he let Vaiwyn shape the rest of him.

"Oh." I close my eyes, hating how much dismay that single syllable contains, but I don't know what else to say. I can't tell what hurts worse: that he wants to leave Vaiwyn the first chance he can, or that he's going where I can't follow.

"How long would you be gone?" I ask, deepening the trench for my disappointment.

"How long I'll—no, Mina, you're coming, too." He twitches his shoulder to push me off and swivels to face me on the step, our knees knocking. A trace of my favorite crooked grin lifts his lips. "You think I would go without you? Every letter Ma's sent for the last three months asks if I've proposed to

you yet.”

My eyebrows raise, heat sliding through my limbs. “Really?”

“I told her we’re too young for that right now—” He blushes, as though realizing he said too much, and it’s the most endearing he’s ever been. In a hurry, he says, “I want you to meet them all. I think you’d like them, especially my younger sister.”

“Lena?” The name enters my thoughts effortlessly, recalled from a dozen stories he shared over dinners in my apartment and walks through gated parks.

He nods. “And I could show you the best places to find mussels and take you to the spot on the cliffs where the wind sings between the rocks. Or—” Max’s excitement makes the spark in his eyes bloom. “Or I’ll bring you to the cove where we swam as kids. I know,” he adds quickly, “you can’t swim, but I’ll teach you.”

His eagerness is infectious, and I can’t help but revel in it.

We never discussed leaving Vaiwyn before because I never could. Our entire relationship—first as friends, and then eventually as partners—I’ve been chained to Arbutus. The understanding that my life would remain within this mountain valley is one I’m at peace with. Always have been. This city *is* my life.

Or rather, it was. I bite my lip, failing to hide a grin.

There is no Vesper to watch over anymore. No bell I need to stand beside twice a day. And Max—he’s here now, waving possibilities before me like the first pearl found after opening a thousand oyster shells. It delights me more than it should scare me.

My smile fades, though, knowing how many obstacles still stand between us and that rosy future. Too many, and all too big and dire. Namely, the fallen Saint that started this entire mess. “Do you really think this all can be over?”

“Sure.” He gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “I have faith the Saints will find Bastian’s host. And if one person needs to die for the rest to live...” He stares at my ear as he mulls over his next words, then looks directly at me. “I can live with that.”

One person *will* die. I swallow, my mouth dry. With their relics and what influence they can still exert over this abused city, the Saints won’t allow Bastian to survive death a second time. I have faith in that, too. But it reminds me of my questions for Vanya. My heart gives a sharp twinge.

I reach for my pocket, the folded inscription still nestled inside. “I’ve been meaning to show you—”

An almighty splintering announces the door giving way.

“Junia!” Tamzin hurries past as Max and I stand. She leaps off the last step, weaves through the debris, and wraps the newly arrived councillor in her arms.

“Are you all right? Is everyone okay?” Junia’s dark eyes peer over Tamzin’s shoulder at the disheveled figures creeping closer, drawn to the fresh air like moths to flame.

“We’re fine. All fine.” Tamzin seems to remember something and shoves Junia out before her. “What’s happening out there?”

Junia’s chest heaves as though banging on the door is equivalent to running up all six floors to my bell tower. She opens her mouth, but falters. Her gaze flits over the expectant faces near her, as if considering the right weight to give her answer. I descend the stairs, unease looming once more.

Finally, she says, “I think they found the person responsible.”

“Responsible?”

“Yes, for all of this. They found them, Tamzin.”

“What?” My shout resounds in a strange, taunting way, at odds with the lightness that fills my chest. My hand whips free of my pocket, abandoning the damning inscription and what it may have meant the other night. *I’m not the host. If they found someone else, caught them in the act, then it can’t be me.*

I push through the bodies knotted around the two councillors. My questions stumble over one another in my elation. “How—Who is it? How do they know?”

Junia shakes her head. Uncertainty still sketches her features. I reach for her jacket, ready to shake an answer free, but stop when my gaze roams over the door.

Deep gouges scar the wood and entire chunks are gone. Dents mark the iron brackets, the one at eye level hanging by a single rivet. Among the splinters, shards of granite flecked with black quartz glitter over the threshold. A sparkling trail, leading to an icy fountain.

Returned to her snowy plinth, the Lost Alchemist is a mangled whisper of her former glory. A mockery of herself. The sharp rubbed raw, curves cracked to serrated edges; her sword is a pathetic nub. I don’t know when the

attack stopped—if she rallied until dawn or retreated before then—but I wonder, if given the chance, which would have surrendered first: the doors or the city.

“I don’t know the details, Mina, but word is spreading,” Junia says, calling my attention back. “Vaiwyn must have blocked messages from moving through its walls last night; I heard nothing until a dozen reports and notices dropped all at once from my ceiling twenty minutes ago. Did you know the Bane was using a citizen’s body? I didn’t expect—”

“Never mind that, what else?”

“They arrested *someone*. Down at the Courts, and they’re passing sentence...” She breaks off as bells across the city announce the half hour. “Now.” Louder, “Saints, now!”

I rush outside, blinking against the sudden onslaught of daylight as I shrug on my coat properly. The grey overcast sky seems inked with liquid silver. Several voices shout for me to wait, but what for? I have to see this. If they’ve truly caught Bastian inside his host, then I *need* to see the end of what my Vesper unleashed. Witness justice for what I could never stop.

“Mina, I’m coming with you!” Max’s long legs bring him level with me as I cut around the fountain.

Passing by the Alchemist’s defeated likeness, coupled with the knowledge that Bauer still lies on the other side of the fountain in a frozen, bloody pool—it fills me with rage. An anger that tempers my heart with a merciless heat and pushes me to move faster through the ache in my muscles.

Chains lie in a cold pile on the ground between the now-open gates. Max and I run between pedestrians and carts on the main street and onto the Pyke. As we hurtle down the stairs, my thoughts brim with vicious curiosity.

Who will do it? Which Saint will deliver Bastian’s true demise? The Seething Glassmith with those fangs and claws. Or Vanya, with a more subtle, venomous approach ...

Max bumps me as he sidesteps a beheaded tin lion near the bottom of the Pyke. He grabs my elbow to balance us both. “Sorry.”

The River Riga unwinds to either side, and I look at Schaden Bridge. Its shape is a mouth with teeth knocked out; not every statue returned to its plinth before daybreak.

We race along the riverbank. On our right, painted doors wear heavy scrapes, the shutters gouged and awnings torn. Any wares locked up

overnight in vendor stalls are smashed. Elegant, slender trees display long gashes through their bark, and soil spills across the copper and gold between the cobbles. So much destruction, and for what—melded hunks of metal and stone to test their strength?

The shadows beneath the towers at either end of Kafkan Bridge embrace us like ice, cold and unforgiving. But as we enter the Judicial District on the south bank, the loud hum swelling between buildings is a warm summer's kiss. The noise takes shape as we round the corner and come face-to-face with an impenetrable wall of people.

A man pushes past from behind, shoving me into Max's steadying hands.

"Watch it," Max barks, but the man ignores him, turning to his friend.

"How do they know they've caught the right person?" he shouts.

"I dunno." They cross in front, stepping on my toes as they hunt for a way into Liberty Square. "But Schaefer saw whoever it is from his ma's window. Running about Schaden Bridge during the night, shouting and waving—the statues never touched them. Just skirted by. Who else could that be if not the Bane?"

A hole opens, and the crowd swallows both men.

Straight ahead, movement atop the towering Constitutional Court captures my eye. I grip Max's forearm. This is wrong. Bastian's corruption is only supposed to work in the dark of night, but to either side of Aida's bell tower, those statues—they're still *alive*.

Across the square, yells shiver higher as a figure of white marble topples from the roof. Comprehension dawns bright. I don't see the statue shatter against the ground, but rather the four men who pushed it.

The silhouettes I mistook for sculptures are actually people, getting in the last word on Vaiwyn. Another statue falls from the courthouse's far corner. More voices are punched upward by raised fists, propelled forward by the bodies clustering around the square's centerpiece.

My stomach bottoms out, my already stolen breath harder to reclaim.

Whether by human hands or the city's, the gallows are erected whenever a death sentence is passed. A rare verdict, execution, yet it's petty recompense for the poisoning of Vaiwyn, the rot of its citizens. Inconsequential even, when held against the loss and terror of the last few nights, but no one intends to miss this.

Normally deserted but for the lawyers and judges crossing between

Ingmund's trio of courts, Liberty Square—a misnomer since it possesses only three sides—strains at the seams. There must be a thousand bodies here. Feet trample the barren flower beds as people clamber onto their ledges, and trees shake loose snow as others scale their boughs to better view the scaffold.

The shouts of the mob rise, and I lift on my toes. But I can't see. Only an empty, swaying collar of rope.

"Here. Come with me." Max pinches my sleeve and maneuvers us along the front of the Administrative Court to one of its limestone columns. He climbs up. "Give me your hand," he says, elbowing aside the woman angling to take the space meant for me.

Nestled between Max and the stone, I stand above the sea of heads, the gallows in plain sight.

My heart lurches. It's odd that this would be made so public. I don't think this is the Saints' idea. Vanya made it clear that no mortal means can harm a Saint. Only their divine hands and relics can tear a vengeful soul in two, and surely they would perform such a violent act in private. Why all the theatrics?

But as another statue plummets to the ground, as the cheers continue, I understand.

The hanging itself *is* nothing but a spectacle. A way to appease without giving away the secret. The existence of the Saints, the true shape of the Bane—none of these people jostling closer understand the truth. And I doubt they'd care. They're just here for a show. When the curtain falls, and they go home comforted in knowing their families are safe, the Saints will end it once and for all.

To the left of the gallows, before the Criminal Court, the crowd unravels. Like a finger dragged across the surface of a pond, bodies part to clear a path for the quartet of constables and the figure herded between them.

Despite myself, a smile creaks up my face. Excitement catches in my chest, stoked by the raucous heat of my heart. Fierce and brilliant. A noose won't kill Bastian's spirit on its own, but I'll be damned if I won't enjoy watching that demon suffer for all the pain he's caused.

Still, a touch of pity lurks beneath my exhilaration. Whoever Bastian invaded, I doubt they deserve an execution like this. I wonder if there's anything left of them. If they still have their wits about them and are unaware, or if they've ceded to Bastian's cruel influence.

And if one person needs to die for the rest to live ...

Max's earlier words repeat in my mind as the greencoats carve a path through the square. Knowing what this city has lost, not just in the past few days but in the years and bodies the Pox struck, and seeing every possibility that lies ahead of me now with Max—I can live with one person dying, too.

More movement from above, and my gaze finds Aida and my mother on the Court's balcony, observing the procession below. Aida, decked in her black court robes, must have been involved in this sentencing. She joins in the shouting, her mouth a constant shifting mark of shadow.

My fingers graze the folded tracing still in my pocket. A pinch of regret hits me that I never got to ask my questions or help fix the mess Arbutus caused, but the thought is overshadowed as the greencoats mount the scaffold's stairs.

One shoves the culprit in the back, meant to push them along, but it only makes them stumble. White hair peeks through the corral of greencoats.

Through the column against my shoulder, the city's pulse stutters, taking on a strange, staccato beat ... like laughter. Wrong and chilling.

A sharp yap rises above the noise. I look back to the balcony. To the terrier, squirming in my sister's arms while a pair of constables escort Aida off the balcony. Even from here I see the fury in her expression as she yells between the men at my stoic mother.

It's then that I scream.

"No. Stop." I don't recall jumping down, but now I thread through the crowd. My fists fly, punching those that won't get out of my way. "Stop!"

On the platform above their heads, Quinn is turned to face me. Her hands are bound before her, but the tremor in her Pox-tipped fingers is unmistakable. She looks as though she'll be sick but has nothing more to give.

"You have the wrong person," I shriek.

Max calls my name, but I won't heed his shouts for *me* to stop.

I paw someone aside, creating a narrow space for me to slide into. But the fabric of people is too thick, the bodies woven together like burlap, not silk. I can't get through.

I can't get through.

This can't be happening. It can't—Quinn is a wretched drunk, held captive by her grief and loneliness. But that's *all* she is. A harmless woman coping with loss the best she can.

“Move—out of the way. *Please!*”

She has the Pox, damn it. The gargoyles tried to *take* her. The puppet master of a city wouldn’t waste time on deflections like that. She’s a danger only to herself, not an unhinged, devilish Saint!

“This is a mistake!”

The crowd’s jeers rip my screams apart as they inflate higher, louder.

The noose slips around Quinn’s throat. Tugged tight enough for her to wince, to stagger. Her lips move, eyes cast upward to the heavens. If she’s praying for help, I’m trying.

I’m *trying*.

Strong hands grab my shoulders, pulling me back and pressing my face into a solid chest. The embroidery of his jacket scratches my nose, but I hope I inflict worse upon Max as I fight to escape his arms.

In my ear, Max pleads, “Mina. Stop—just stop. It’s too late.”

The crowd hushes. Even the pigeons under the eaves still. The square suffocates as everyone seems to draw in a collective breath, and my shouts are finally heard. They echo between the courts, but Max is right: I’m too late.

Max spins us both away, clutching me as if he can absorb me. Protect me from this.

I hear it all anyway.

The floor swings apart, the crack of the drop, the creaking rope.

Then the cheers.

Inside my chest, my heart is a frightened bird struggling to free itself from my ribs. Air comes in unsatisfying gasps, stars of black burst across my view. I fist my hands into Max’s coat as everyone celebrates.

These fools don’t know what they’ve witnessed. What was just *done*.

Max holds me tighter as the joyful chaos buffets us about. My blazing heart races faster from the tumult, but against my ear, Max’s beats impossibly slow. Hardly there at all.

I shove him aside and retch all over some stranger’s shoes.

Sixteen

The room from which the frenzied barking flows is already open wide, but I shove the door anyway, announcing my presence to those standing within. Max follows on my heels but hesitates in the doorway.

“Oh, good.” My throat, scuffed from acrid bile, gives my snarl an edge. “You’re still here.”

Mayor Bergen and the two constables still flanking my sister startle as the door slams against the wall. Aida only clutches a squirming Tolly tighter to her chest. Tears wet her cheeks, and her hushed attempts to soothe the terrier are flimsy at best, but her expression is lethal.

Mother, unflappable as ever, straightens from leaning over the shoulder of the magistrate.

Seated behind his great desk, the head judge lowers his quill and steeples his fingers. His powdered wig, too big for his scalp, swamps his weasel-like features, but there’s no hiding the satisfaction evident in his gaze. This man is just as responsible for the anger stewing behind my ribs. It was *his* yes that made Quinn swing.

“How could you?” I shout. Tolly yelps. His claws tear Aida’s robes as he scratches for escape, earning him as much success as I found in the square before. “An innocent woman!”

“Mina—” Max lightly grabs my shoulder, and I brush it off. Step to the side. “Mina, you need to calm—”

“Don’t you dare, Max. Don’t you *dare* tell me to calm down.”

Again, he reaches for me, and I move farther away. I know it’s a reminder to consider how I’ll be perceived, but I finally don’t care. This hollow, frothing heat within me—I don’t *want* to be touched. I don’t want comfort, or to hear that everything will be okay. What I *need* is to be in control, just for

once. To act, not react. It feels as though my skin will peel off my bones if the wrong word touches it, so I fill the room with mine.

“All of you. You’re murderers—monsters—just as bad as *him*. Quinn wasn’t behind this, and you *knew* it!” The end hitches on a sob, and my fingers curl into steadying fists. I swallow hard. “You knew *her*. She was dying from the Pox, but you had no right to feed her to the wolves.”

“Magistrate,” Bergen says, rushing to the door and peering into the hall like the paranoid little man he is, “if you’ll please allow us the use of your study for the next hour, it would be most appreciated.”

Although I despise the way he assesses us, the magistrate’s confusion as he looks between me and the others is genuine.

“And take that damn dog with you,” Bergen snaps, all civility gone.

Aida twists away to protect the writhing terrier. One greencoat tries to help and earns his finger an introduction with Tolly’s teeth. It isn’t until Mother says her name with the force of a slap that Aida relinquishes him.

“He’s coming home with me,” she hisses at the judge before fully letting go. The tracks of her tears glitter like broken glass. “Lose him and it’ll be more than a finger lost.”

Rattled, the magistrate leaves in a cloud of chalky scent, the constables following.

Bergen forces the door shut and leans back against it, a bluster building in his chest. “You insolent, misguided, *stupid* girl.”

“Sir!” Max exclaims, indignation puffing him up.

“*Out of line*,” my sister retorts.

My jaw drops. From a mouth that doesn’t resemble Mother’s, his strong words seem foreign in my ears but burn all the same. I’m struck dumb long enough for Bergen to move to the desk, but if he wished to sit in the vacated chair and exude a sense of power, my mother has already claimed it.

“This is bigger than you and your feelings, Miss Strauss,” he continues, settling instead on standing before the imposing bookcases. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Understand?” I splutter in a quiet voice. “Understa—You just put an innocent woman to death because you thought it would appease the mob begging for *your* head. What more is there to *understand*?” Heat rises in my cheeks, my nails digging into my palms.

Bergen inclines his head. “For a day of peace, it seemed a fair trade.”

My teeth click together, speechless. I look at Mother, but for once she's letting Bergen take the reins. Remaining silent, as though it'll keep the blood off her hands. As if she didn't pull the strings for this to happen. Bergen might believe it all fair and reasonable, but he's not clever enough to think this quick, this far ahead with implications of such magnitude.

Aida's laugh is dry and acidic. "It's a fucking farce." She crosses her arms in the corner by the balcony doors, closing off her body.

"Well, then it's fortunate this wasn't your decision to make," Bergen barks, clearly drunk on some bloated sense of power. "After last night, a mutiny rose with the sun, and something had to be done." His fist pounds the shelf, and a wooden griffin figurine topples to the floor.

"By falsely accusing a woman you consider an easy target?" And to think he called *me* stupid. "Did you even interrogate her? Ask what she was doing last night? Or was she just a means to an end?"

"There were multiple witnesses!"

"To what? She was ill!" I shout back.

The conversation I overheard at the edge of the square comes back to me. *Running about Schaden Bridge during the night, shouting and waving—the statues never touched them.*

That was it. That was the "proof" they built their sham of a case on. My fury doubles.

"Quinn numbed herself with absinthe. She needed help and support to grieve, not the end of a rope so you could stay in charge an extra day!"

"Wilhelmina, that is en—"

"Enough?" I whirl on Mother, taking quick steps to stand before the desk. "Why? Because *you* say so?"

"Do not use that tone with me."

"Are you serious?" I place careful hands on the desk, leaning over to take the full brunt of her flashing gaze. "After everything you and I read the other night—about Bastian's relic—you thought *this* was the right course of action?"

"This *was* action," she says, almost indifferent. "What we found in that book—don't tell me you are ridiculous enough to believe *we* could have found it, let alone done anything with it. This isn't some heroic fairy tale. Grow up like you constantly tell me you have."

I barely refrain from touching my pocket, the tracing she made tucked

inside. The plan to speak to Vanya about it seems like it was made a year ago, not yesterday.

“You are more than welcome to think what you like, Wilhelmina, but I wasn’t going to sit by for another night, wasting time on wild theories, while this city fell apart around me.”

“And what’s the plan now, Mother? You manipulated your way into a day of supposed peace, so now what?” My voice is as dangerously quiet as hers. “When the sun sets, what are you going to do about Bastian when the houses themselves begin swallowing people whole?”

Bergen’s nose lifts higher in the air. “What *now*, young lady, is that the curfew stays in place, but we have a day to regroup and reorganize our search without every butcher, baker, and candlestick maker whining in our ear.”

My sharp laugh is hoarse. “Search for *what*? We’re no closer to finding the body Bastian stole, and killing another poor soul you want off the streets won’t work the same tomorrow.” I fling an arm toward the window. “Listen to them. *Listen to them*, rejoicing in her death.”

Mother rises. She’s close enough for me to count every crease in the corners of her eyes. Lines from judgment and suspicion. There’s no joy in Imogen Strauss’s life to leave a mark.

“That,” she says, low and dangerous, “is the sound of faith restored in a democracy.”

“Sounds a little bloodthirsty to me.”

By the window, Aida makes a small noise of agreement.

“Unless you have anything of use to share, Wilhelmina,” Mother continues, “I see no reason for you to be here.”

I search her stony face, peer into eyes identical to mine, but she’s retreated. The weary woman who agreed to a truce the other night, the one who came to me because only I could give her answers—she’s gone.

It’s almost a relief. We’ve come full circle, Mother and I, just as we’ve done for the last eight months. I swallow a crazed giggle. And I thought we’d hit a turning point. Our fangs, filed down by exhaustion and space, are sharp once more.

“No,” I breathe into her face. “Why would I ever be of use to you? I’m the family’s biggest failure, after all.”

Aida sighs my name, sad and small. But it’s not her opinion that matters to me.

And honestly, the woman staring back at me doesn't matter all that much either. Not anymore.

I push off the desk. "I'll leave you to save the city, then."

When I turn on my heel, I almost collide with Max. It seems to knock him out of some daze. Saints, was he even listening to what just happened? My ire, nowhere near drained, latches on to him before I can think beyond myself. "One person dies to save the rest, right? Turns out *I* refuse to live with that."

Cold and unfair, I regret my words instantly. A piece of fight chips away as Max's eyes widen, his shoulders drooping. But my anger is stronger than anything else right now, and I don't know how to put it aside.

I wrench the struggling door open and storm out.

"Mina."

Aida catches up to me at the top of the stairs, not grasping that I ignored the first two calls of my name on purpose. I stop a few steps down.

"Be honest with me," I demand, interrupting her. I glare up at her through my lashes. "This trial—did Quinn even stand a chance?"

"They had her fate decided before she even entered that courtroom." Her level, bloodshot gaze is enough for me to believe her.

Something inside of me slips out of place. The walls feel like they're closing in.

"I tried to stop this." It's the most aggravated, most defeated, I've ever heard my sister. The system she put her entire life into spat in her face today and expected her to say thank you. "All of it. I defended Quinn this morning, but they wouldn't *listen*. Everyone has lost their Saints-damned minds. Mother included."

My heart is beating too fast. "Look, I'm glad we're on the same side about all this—"

"Of course we are," she insists, a touch insulted.

"—but, Aida." I descend a step. Another. My eyes roam over her court robes, the tear in her left sleeve from an orphaned dog, and flames stoke higher in my chest. "I can't be here right now. I just ... I'm sorry, I can't."

The tracing weighs down my coat like a brick as I disappear from her sight.

Despite my best efforts, I don't enter the Dahlia Wilted with a satisfying crash. Instead of cooperating with my temper, the door defies me, swinging open with slow and measured indifference. Worse, the merry bell above is at odds with the bitter corset of anger, grief, and helplessness that squeezes my ribs.

With every step between the shelves, I itch to smash something. I shove my hands inside my pockets and inhale the apothecary's thick sweetness. Viewed through jaded eyes, the impossible magic I once thought wreathed all these strange items dims. They're another secret. Lies for sale, displayed in plain sight.

Vanya doesn't raise her head as I approach, her concentration fixed on pulverizing what smells of peppercorns laced with sage. "Your heart treatment isn't ready," she says.

"That's not why I'm here," I bite out.

At this point, I doubt any remedy she has will work. Nor do I want one.

Somehow, I know that the heat within my heart simply belongs to me. Days ago, it was a sporadic and troubling illness I couldn't make sense of. Maybe it's Bastian, maybe it's something else easily explained. But right now, I stand before Vanya with a raging inferno tucked behind muscle and bone—and it doesn't hurt. It's a piece of me finally exposed. A fragment of my soul, its shell rubbed thin by misery.

I unfold the charcoal tracing and slam it down on the wooden counter. After a day inside my coat pocket, the creases in the parchment are stark. The dark lines my mother captured are smeared, but that spiked foreign language from my Vesper's side is legible.

Vanya continues grinding without a word. She seems unbothered by my fingers drumming her counter. I almost take the pestle from her—if only to placate my destructive itch—when she glances at the paper.

"Why is that important?" she asks, hands still moving.

"Why can I read it?"

She looks up and raises an eyebrow. "Can you now."

My demand for an answer stutters as Vanya throws down her tools and flips up a section of the battered counter for me to join her. The parchment flutters to the floor. I snatch it and follow her through the curtain to a stuffy back room, then out to her greenhouse, a space I am certain no patron has ever set foot in.

I have a firm grip on my dark, simmering mood, but when I'm met with the symphony of fresh, earthy scents, the clash of greens all around—I nearly let it go.

The wildest corners of the world exist within this warm, glass-enclosed space. Plants tower in pots, crowd atop long trestle tables, and drip from hanging baskets. As I walk over bricks cracked by moss, some flowers seem to beckon with their perfumes; others warn to stay away, beautiful as most poisonous things are. Overhead, high, ivy-draped walls and a patchwork of snow add shade to what broad leaves already extend, yet the air itself glimmers with a drifting diamond light.

In the greenhouse's heart, Vanya stands before a clay pot packed with rich soil. She plunges two pinched fingers in and draws out a green shoot. It's not a smooth endeavor, though. The seedling seems to put up a fight, stretching from the dirt like an unwilling earthworm. An acrid taste fills my mouth. Something so small shouldn't resist like that.

Nevertheless, Vanya quickly wrangles the rebellious roots, and a fully mature peppermint plant rises. Its soothing fragrance mingles with that faint saltiness I've started to associate with the Withering Healer's magic. She drags a nail down each leaf, collecting them as their stems separate.

I drop into one of the wrought iron chairs encircling a low, rickety table. On its surface rests a round tin box, similar to what Grandmother had used to store spare buttons and thread spools. But when I pop open the lid, a variety of buttery cookies dusted with sugar lies inside.

"Help yourself," Vanya says. She offers me a chipped cup of peppermint tea, steam curling over the brim. Two moths crawl out of her sleeve and take flight.

Startled, I look up, but her face is still that of the herbalist I've always known. Another moth digs out from under the scarf tying her hair back. It's as though Vanya, in the privacy of her verdant domain, is loosening her disguise.

I accept the tea, eyeing the cookies as Vanya sits with her own cup and lets out a groan. It's almost noon and I've yet to eat, but I'm not up to moving my arms in such a mundane manner. Instead, I put down my drink and smooth out the tracing on the table between us.

"This writing." I tap the paper. "What is it?"

With a dirt-smudged hand, Vanya lifts the parchment to peer at it more

closely. She takes a maddeningly slow sip of tea, swallows, and puts the tracing down. “You can’t read that.”

Irritation trims my voice. “*Beneath this bronze shell—*”

“Stop.” Deep lines knit between her brows. “That script is divine. A language belonging to the heavens alone.”

A rush of confusion buries me as I stare at the letters, the words they form. “So why the hell can I read it?”

“Hell has no answer for you either, Mina.”

She watches me over her cup, and her eyes seem to pierce straight through me. Meeting her level gaze, I have the sense I’m a dog at the end of its leash, foaming at the mouth while she stands just out of my snapping teeth’s reach.

“It shouldn’t be possible for you to read it,” she says, curt as ever.

The horrible thought I’ve held since the night of the second attack knocks at the back of my throat, ready to be invited out. I retrieve my cup of tea just to feel warmth again. It’s part of the reason I came here—there’s no point delaying this.

“What if...,” I whisper, hoping that will make it less daunting. “What if I’m *his* host?”

“That you even asked is proof you’re not,” she says instantly.

“Oh? I can suddenly read this—” I flick the paper with a shaky hand. “And even if it did start before the Vesper rang, neither of us knows what this heart thing is.”

“Bastian was arrogant. He always wanted everyone to know when he’d done something important. This—” She gestures me up and down. “Voicing doubt is the last thing he would ever do. He’s not why you can read that. I’m intrigued, though.”

In those three words, it’s clear she won’t investigate further. Her lack of an answer is disappointing, yet all I feel is relieved. Despite logic exorcising it half a dozen times, the doubt that tracing created was a wraith lurking at the back of my mind. Vanya’s immediate dismissal of my fears is the purging of it in one fell swoop. My body is my own, however faulty it may seem.

I line up my next question only to swallow a bitter laugh. Yesterday I left my tower with such *optimism*, thinking I may have found a way to help. Since then, I’ve witnessed Vaiwyn slip deeper into chaos, watched two people die without cause ...

Whatever hope I still have, it’s one wrong step away from plummeting to

its death.

I seize a rectangular cookie, turning it over as I ask, “Saints can use each other’s relics, right?”

“Within reason.”

After a beat of silence, I tip my head back, frustrated that she’s not elaborating. “Vanya, I swear to the Sai—to *you*, if you don’t help—”

“Then ask the right question.” Unruffled by my rising voice, she watches a moth climb over her fingers, its wings fluttering. “We can use one another’s relics—carry them, wield them—but we cannot *use* them. Our tools were infused with divinity as extensions of the power Vaiwyn already gifted us. Damien’s axe is only that in my hand, just as Amalie would pick up my vial and fill it with nothing more poisonous than liquor.”

“But you *can* use them to kill each other.” The cookie snaps in half.

“Ah.” She flicks the moth into the air. “Made that connection with Elora’s sword and Bastian, did you?”

“And Bastian has one. A relic.”

When she doesn’t correct me, I grin. *I knew it.*

Mother may think it useless knowledge, but that book was right. Written in this same divine script, it had to be. He may not have ascended like the five Saints did, but he became something *other* all the same. A being stripped of humanity for greatness, with a twisted magic all his own.

“Could *I* use his relic?”

Vanya’s quick answer surprises me. “Any mortal could. More on this plane have touched the infernal than the pure, even those closest to the heavens. Simple human nature.” She leans back in her seat, eyes narrowed. “Why you?”

“Because someone will find Bastian, and if it’s not you Saints, then I want it to be me.” The cookie crumbles inside my fist. I thought about this with every step from the Courts to here, and now that the host was definitively never me, my conviction is ironclad. “And I want to hurt him.”

“Why *you*?” Repeated slower, her emphasis is obvious. As is her dawning disapproval.

I snort. “Because I’m so fucking angry. Isn’t that enough?”

“Not usually.”

“He’s taken so much from me, Vanya. This city, my home—my entire purpose in life was obliterated because of his shit. That stupid greencoat last

night. Quinn. My *father*.” My voice cracks, and her suspicious expression hardens.

Vanya knows where his relic is, but she has no intention of telling me. Even in ancient eyes that have mastered the twitch of every emotion, her skepticism is plain.

“Why shouldn’t I use it against him?” I demand, rising to my feet. For a moment, Mother’s voice echoes in my head, a smug warning of all those *feelings* she wants nothing to do with. I let it fall to the ground like the cookie crumbs from my hand. “That mint barely cooperated with you. You need help if Vaiwyn is pushing back that much.”

Without so much as a flutter of her lashes, the pots throughout Vanya’s greenhouse rattle. From dozens all at once, long leafy shoots unfurl with audible sighs. I recognize them as stinging nettle from a painful hike a few summers ago. An obvious warning to back down, but I won’t be deterred.

“If there’s a weapon we mere mortals can use against him, why keep it from us? *We’re* the ones dying!”

“Mina, don’t be so naive.” Again, her response startles me, this time for the weariness that bathes each word. “Bastian’s relic is hidden because no stone in this city will be safe if he gets his hands on it. He is so entwined with Vaiwyn that he could manipulate the entire city at once. That he’s only claimed a body is our biggest advantage right now, and you’re asking us to throw that away by placing our faith in an angry teenager—”

“I’m eighteen,” I say, my defensive tone undermining the statement.

“A *child*, dreaming that she’ll do what we can’t: find Bastian and kill him before he does so to her.” She places her cup down with a clatter, her moths swarming around her. “That’s not a risk I’m willing to take. We Saints will handle it.”

I think I expected—dreaded—this answer from her, but that doesn’t make it any easier to hear. Despite the events we’re both wrapped up in, Vanya and I are little more than friendly acquaintances. My trust in her extends to knowing she’ll listen, be honest with me, and won’t poison me with her remedies. But she’s not the one talking to me.

Without realizing it, my fingers find my Lost Alchemist medallion. She doesn’t stand before me, but it hurts just the same.

I’ve never questioned my faith. Not even when Father lay dying in the most excruciating pain—I couldn’t. How could I, when the evidence of the

Saints and their power and creation surround me at all times, their sacrifice my inherited obligation to protect. And still, after all the grief and heartache, I remain steadfast in my beliefs.

But for my faith to question *me*?

Almost desperate, I drop the medallion and fumble for my pocket watch instead. The cool metal and steady ticking should calm me, but it's just another reminder of loss.

Where her words are tired and old, fire and rage coat mine. "Vanya, he took my father from me—Ow."

I wince as heat slashes like a knife across the right side of my face. My vision blurs, and my fingers find hot tears spilling down my cheek. I clutch my watch tighter. The sharp burning sensation vanishes as quick as it came, but the tears stay, my voice thick but level.

"He and his Pox stole the one parent who gave a damn about *me*. Not what I could do for them or how I might make them look—"

"Oh, I am very intrigued." The quiet interruption is jarring, as though Vanya's carrying on from our previous topic. Her head cocks to the side, her gaze almost ... reverent. She's not looking at me, not really—her attention is riveted to my wet cheek.

I swipe at my face again, but it's not tears like I first thought that glisten on the back of my hand, my fingertips.

Blood. The copper smell becomes the only bloom in the greenhouse.

"What the—" I lift the pocket watch, catching my reflection in its silver surface.

A streak of red paints my cheek, tears of blood from the faint scar that remains of the cut Isaac tended to in the library. A wound that mysteriously healed along with the others after I chased gargoyles. Did it ... reopen?

That doesn't make sense. Two fingers nip the scar; spread it apart—my skin is whole, still sealed at my cheekbone. But there's nowhere else for the blood to have come from.

"What is happening to me?" I murmur, true tears swelling.

Vanya hands me a handkerchief. I shake off the moth that lands on it and scrub myself clean with the help of some spit. I just ... One thing at a time. Saints, *one* at a time.

When I return to my seat, I clasp my hands together with the bloody linen between them. To anyone peering in through the steamed glass walls, I might

look like I'm praying. Begging.

"Where is his relic, Vanya? My bell did this—I want to fix this." I brace myself for her final refusal, her criticism of me. Perhaps she's right. Who am I to think I can be the one person to stop him? Still, if she becomes another figure in my life who doesn't want me involved in helping save my city from ruin, I'm not sure where to go from here.

"Please let me help fix this."

"You truly mean to use Bastian's relic against him?"

I nod, heart pounding faster. "If there's a way to stop him, to hurt him as much as he did me, yes."

For one long, quiet, and unnerving moment, she stares at my cheek, still warm from how hard I rubbed the handkerchief over it. I fidget with the chain of my watch, waiting, hoping she'll see through to my intent. That I just want to put things to right, however I can.

Normally I would hate how beseeching I've become, the distress that grips my throat, but I fear this is my only chance to do *something*. To show everyone that I *can* defend this city I've tried to give my all to these last eight months. Especially after this morning, learning what the people in charge are doing. All this anger rippling through me—it has to count for something.

I *need* this, and I'm not even ashamed of it.

Then Vanya stands abruptly, and my hopes crash down around me before the word exits her mouth. "No."

"Wh—"

She holds up her hand. "However much you want this, however capable you might be—" Her gaze skims over my cheek again, almost unwilling.

"What did you see?" I demand. I narrowly keep from touching the scar.

"Whatever you think, I'm not jeopardizing this city for a girl and her thoughts of revenge. This isn't your problem to solve."

Before I protest further, she ushers me out of the greenhouse and into the Dahlia's back room. I reach for the curtain separating us from the shop proper, seeing this for the crushing dismissal it is and aching to be alone, only for her hand to clamp down on my shoulder.

Vanya looks over my face, a resigned hardness to her features in the dim light. "Let this go, Mina. There is so much grief within you, but dwelling with the dead cannot help you. Hug your brother, kiss that Max of yours, argue with your mother for all I care.

“But for your own sanity, and before you get yourself hurt: Let. This. Go.”

Seventeen

Once I descend the steps tucked behind the altar and pass through the high, sculpted archway leading beneath Elke Cathedral, the temperature shifts from the thin warmth of stone to the damp, leaden cold of the dead. A chill that grows claws, scratching at my heart as I enter the catacombs.

Unease moves my feet with needling slowness. After returning to Lyndell Hall to trade my frozen skirts for trousers and choke down whatever food I could find in my cupboards, Vanya's parting remarks to me echoed in my ears like nails on glass.

There is so much grief within you, but dwelling with the dead cannot help you.

Sage advice imparted to someone racked with useless thoughts of retribution. Yet it's also the kind that sticks with a person. Guides their already obsessed mind to wonder, to connect the dots on where a certain object might be.

I should have known a hunt for Bastian's relic would lead me into his former kingdom, but that doesn't mean I have to be bold about it.

Lanterns ignite only long enough to reveal a few steps below before they splutter out behind me. With darkness pressing at my back, the gleam ahead is a path to the one family member not involved in the inane political scheming of this morning. It's an assurance that bolsters the heat in my chest as I sink deeper and deeper below Vaiwyn.

My breath clouds thicker. The air grows stale. Old and stagnant and tasting of dry *nothing*. Deeper still I descend, and when I reach the bottom at last, I'm far below even the River Riga's bed.

The cold in the catacombs is a living thing, whispering over my skin and lifting the fine hairs at my nape. And the quiet—so empty it feels as though

the world itself has perished. I unhook one lantern with trembling fingers, its flame already faded against the yawning dark. My head tips back, but no light skims the high ceiling.

As I walk the street of bones, a sense of foreboding grows. The feeling of being watched. Followed. I pull my coat closer at my throat and lift the light higher. Gentle rushes of air stir my hair first from the front, then the back—Vaiwyn, breathing slow and sure. I move a little faster.

How can Isaac stand it down here? Undiluted by rock and timber and metal, Vaiwyn's heartbeat is a sinister presence that bends the very air. Each thump rattles through my body on all sides. I clench my teeth against it, but it skitters up my jaw. Something I draw stability from now speaks of loneliness and despair. I gaze around for a distraction from the hollowness filling my chest ...

And find only death.

To either side, the orange glow of my lantern licks off bones stacked thrice as tall as me. Femurs, tibiae, scapulae, clavicles—all arranged in orderly, unsettling designs and patterns. Rows of skulls leer with vacant eyes as I pass. A rat chirps from between the gap in one skull's teeth. Another pokes through the hole in the middle of a forehead.

I entered here for a reason, and Saints above, I hope it's worth it.

I traipse along the spines laid in the packed earth. Sometimes the vertebrae branch off at a crossroads, disappearing into the devouring dark, but I never stray.

All the while ... *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

After what feels like an entire lifetime, voices trickle into my ear. I break into a jog, a heaviness lifting as they grow louder. Familiar.

A left at the next fork, and I enter a long stone chamber. Made warmer by a pair of enormous hearths yet *reeking* of the chemicals that always cling to Isaac. Were it not for the already blazing fires, I wouldn't dare strike a match for fear of the air erupting. The voices stop as their owners notice my arrival, but I ignore them a little longer.

Vaiwyn refuses us cremation, extinguishing the flames once they touch flesh, and coffins are expelled from the earth like paint from a tube. Between its ribs is the only place the city allows us to inter our dead, and the deep shelves chiseled from grey marble hold all the materials necessary to complete the traditional death rites.

Jars of oils and chemicals to seep into the skin and eat it away; buckets to carry organs salvaged for science to play with; bandages to wrap the decaying corpse; and shining tools to finally slough the bones clean of the dead. Bones to embellish and expand this macabre realm below the living.

Lanterns larger than mine cast their glow against mirrors angled to illuminate one cold slab in the center. The broken body upon it still resembles someone I used to know.

They never let me see my father after he breathed his last in stone, and I was fine with that. To warp my precious memories by seeing him so empty—I don't think I could have borne it. I lived the past eight months believing that adage, that the dead look like they're sleeping.

What a lie. From where I stand frozen, it's clear Quinn is dead.

While a newfound peace relaxes her face, shaving off the sharp edges where absinthe couldn't soak in deep enough, the gaping hole of her broken sternum from the ongoing dissection cannot be fixed. Some waxen quality traps a terrible dullness beneath the skin not encased in stone; an eerie stillness seizes her limbs. And her *neck*. My stomach roils.

"Mina."

A gentle nudge at my upper arm shakes my gaze from the shell that used to be Quinn.

Isaac comes into sharper focus, his brow furrowed in obvious concern. The promise of finding my brother instilled me with the courage to walk among the dead, but now I shirk his touch. Quickly, he realizes his hands are greasy from oils—and Saints know what else, judging by the red that drips from the slab to the floor.

Wiping them clean down the front of his apron, he asks, "What are you doing down here? You shouldn't ... you shouldn't see this."

"V-Vanya sent me." I rarely lie to Isaac, but it comes out easier than I expect. Perhaps because there's some truth in it. Her words unintentionally brought me down here, after all, even if it feels a little tasteless now. "I was hoping to find some answers."

The lines on his forehead deepen and he moves to escort me out. "You could have waited for me upstairs—"

I dig in my heels. "No, hang on."

The other person in the room turns away from the shadows—Patrik, the high priest of the Cathedral that sprawls somewhere above our heads—and

into the light. He pulls a sheet over Quinn, altering her form into a vague suggestion before facing me.

Usually seated too far back in his congregation to notice, I always forget how bright the old priest's blue eyes shine. Where Isaac looks between us in confusion, Patrik's gaze behind his spectacles is steady. Only a slight lift in his bushy eyebrows indicates a reaction.

"I think you both can help me," I say.

"With what?" my brother asks slowly.

Fresh wariness lowers his tone, and I accept it. No one comes down here just because they can. I can't meet his questioning stare, though. I'm drawn to the dots of red on the white sheet covering Quinn's body. Small patches that grow each time I blink.

"Isaac," Patrik cuts in, "fetch me a chair, will you?" He assumes an apologetic expression. "These knees of mine aren't what they used to be."

I wait until Isaac returns from the far side of the room before speaking. "Didn't think the high priest would involve himself in the death rites of the drunk responsible for Vaiwyn's destruction." I can't keep the scorn from my words.

Patrik removes his bloody apron, and I'm grateful for one less morbid thing to look at. "I haven't done it in *many* years, but I can make an exception for a woman wrongfully hanged." A shade of disappointment enters his voice, but it's what simmers beneath the surface that catches my attention.

"You know, don't you? About the..." I swallow the thickness building in my throat. "The Saints among us. Bastian."

"Of course. Here will do fine," he adds, directing Isaac to place the requested stool in front of the fire. The light of the crackling flames glazes his bald head and glasses as he sits with a groan.

My laugh is without mirth. I don't know why I'm surprised anymore by how many secrets are stowed behind time and privilege. Patrik, my mother, Vanya, even Bergen. The religious texts may have burned, but the information was never lost in the ashes.

Isaac hops up to sit on an empty—and hopefully clean—slab and drapes his discarded apron over the side. A rag removed from his back pocket works at his hands. Since I'm alone in my disbelief, I assume he and the priest already discussed what transpired in the Council Chambers. He notices my accusing glare and shrugs. "Patrik mentioned I looked a little green that night

and everything came spilling out.”

“All of it?”

“He did not tell me much that my predecessors or I didn’t already know,” Patrik says calmly, rubbing his left kneecap.

I edge around the priest and lean against the icy wall opposite the doorway. Having so much emptiness and *quiet* at my back, the spirits that might inhabit this place—I can’t think clearly. And I’d prefer to see the darkness coming.

Patrik doesn’t rotate on his stool to face me. Rather, he picks it up and moves so that his back remains to the wall, both the entrance and I in his line of sight.

It seems I’m not the only one ill at ease down here.

“Let me guess.” My eyes narrow. “The records all went up in flames, but the church already knew them inside and out. And with them gone, you could be *selective* in what you taught your devout congregation. Feed us what you felt was important and hoard the rest. Am I close?”

He chuckles. “Hoard is a strong word, but not wrong, I suppose.” His fingers drum both thighs, the right ones pausing to brush away lint. It’s odd to see the high priest void of his robes. Like a lion without his mane, diminished and vulnerable.

“The fire was an accident,” Patrik continues. “A candelabra knocked over by a parishioner coming to pray late in the night.”

I suppress a smile, sharing a knowing look with Isaac. So, the priest doesn’t know *every* detail—the Glassmith himself admitted to starting that blaze.

“But as you surmised, it presented an opportunity once the smoke cleared. Between the church and the Saints, we agreed to ... decorate the events with a touch of divine intervention.”

“And then it’s just a single step from white lies to completely erasing history.”

“You, of all people, should understand.” Exasperation gravels his voice. “We withheld information to nurture the fear of Vaiwyn’s potential downfall—even forcibly removed information with the Withering Healer’s concoction, following the rise of Bastian’s acolytes. The church filled in the gaps left behind. Calling him the Bane was your ancestor’s idea.”

So, lies, lies, and more lies. How am I to *understand* with all these secrets? I don’t see how any of it was worth this calamity we now find ourselves

totally unprepared for.

“In hindsight, it may not seem fair to you, Mina, but it ensured the Vespers were revered, both false bells and true. Guarded day and night to be thwarted, however possible.”

That bell was never to be thwarted, and I can’t help bristling.

Patrik reads the shift in my shoulders and waves a dismissive hand. “I’m not blaming you. Isaac told me what happened up at Lyndell Hall. Now.” He looks over the top of his glasses at me, expectant. “You came all this way for a reason. What answers can we help you find?”

I consider the shadows outside. The need to push spills a shiver down my spine. I touch my cheek, reliving trickling blood and Vanya’s reluctance to share. Patrik isn’t the person I came down here expecting to find, but it’s clear the priest is the only person in the entire church to speak to about this.

My brother sets his dirty cloth down and clasps his hands between spread legs, his expression open. I don’t know the extent of his knowledge, if any, but I’d bet every memory I have he won’t like where this goes.

The weight of the world above looms, threatening to crush me as I ask, “If you know about Bastian, what do you know of his relic?”

Isaac freezes. “*Relic?*”

“Oh, dear.” By contrast, restlessness seizes Patrik. He readjusts his seat. His eyes imitate mine by flicking to the unending darkness. Such obvious discomfort is a slap to my senses, drawing my nerves tight. One hand covers his collarbone, and I realize the translucent blue Analith that signifies his clerical position is hidden beneath his shirt. Another missing part of the priest’s image, marking him as oddly exposed.

Enough time passes for me to reach the conclusion that my hunch is wrong, and it’s an added blow. What am I even doing, looking for a way to kill a Saint? Now that my anger has boiled off, it doesn’t seem quite so possible anymore. Perhaps Vanya is right: Maybe I should let it go.

I no longer expect a useful answer, so I’m surprised when Patrik says, “I know a great deal about his relic.”

“Such as?” I blurt.

“I-it is a lancet. A crude thing, not much longer than a pen and made of bone.” He reluctantly points to the door, a gesture meant to encompass the entire catacombs—Bastian’s very own kingdom. “Necessity required Bastian to work swiftly. The bodies killed by the Talus Pox piled up faster than any

one man could handle, and his method of removing the bones needed one tool. He did in minutes what takes us days.”

Despite the gory subject, Patrik’s tone is serene, but dread knots my stomach as he continues to glance at the empty doorway.

“There were accounts of Bastian in his divine form, readying a body with only five lacerations. One to crack apart the stone exterior; the rest to separate enough bones for the skeleton to come undone.”

“It’s a misconception that the Pox turns the entire body to stone,” Isaac interjects for my benefit after a beat of silence. “Really, the bones are the only part left untouched. We chisel them out, give the stone back to Vaiwyn, and bury the dead.”

Patrik nods. “I have doubts about that lancet being heavenly blessed, though.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, too fast to be deemed as anything other than impatient. Over the last few days, the entire story has unfolded in single bites, and I am a girl starving.

“The other five Saints’ tools were blessed to help channel their powers. I believe Bastian’s lancet was twisted by his own malice, just as he did Vaiwyn’s heart. He fed his own relic power until they were in balance.”

My mind races. A kernel of hope returns in my chest that someone other than the Saints knows something. Can help me do what I begged Vanya for, what she refused me.

Bastian wouldn’t have battled the Lost Alchemist without the one item strengthening his power. And if he died at her hand, there would’ve been no time for him to hide it before she trapped his soul in the Vesper.

“Do you know where it is now?”

My brother’s gaze burns into me, familiar enough with the details of my face to recognize I’m up to something. “Why are you asking that?”

“I do know.” Patrik crosses one leg over the other with some difficulty, then clasps his knee. “But I see no reason why I should share that with you.”

A wick lit and blown out in the same moment. My jaw clenches, and I brace to have my age, my position as a mere mortal girl, thrown in my face again. If I must work for this supper, Patrik should know that my hunger has teeth.

“Come on, priest. Surely you know a relic is the only thing that can kill a Saint.”

His skin blanches as he finally pieces together why I've come. Hears the vicious curiosity that laces my every question, every word.

"Fuck, Mina," Isaac groans, burying his face in a hand. "*That's* what this is about?"

"Vanya sent you here?" When I nod, Patrik adds with an almost relieved laugh, "Forgive me, but I don't believe that she would. They took measures to ensure no mortal can find his relic. Not even Bastian can sense it until it's right under his nose."

"But how can you be so sure?" I push off the wall, itching to pace.

"I think that's quite enough." Not unkind, but as definitive as a line drawn in the sand. He pushes to his feet, several loud cracks accompanying the movement, and I want to scream. I crossed another threshold I'm not welcome to.

"If you would just—"

"Go home, Mina," Patrik says over my protest. "It must be near sunset—wouldn't do to be out when night falls."

His words send a jolt through me. Saints, he's right. The oppressive silence feels worse for its utter lack of bells. I dig out my watch and curse.

The night already has its talons hooked on the mountaintops, ready to climb over.

"It's all right," he says. At his gesture, my brother jumps down. "Ready a bed for her. She'll stay with us tonight."

"Come on," Isaac says, soft and resigned but full of the warning that we *will* be discussing this further. Dread already sits like a brick in my chest.

Patrik stops me in my tracks with a raised hand. "I want a moment with your sister first."

I don't dare breathe so as not to scare away the hope stirring.

Isaac looks as though he'll object, but I give him an encouraging nod. With a shake of his head, he grits out, "I'll meet you in the kitchens."

Patrik waits until the taps of Isaac's footsteps are concealed by the spitting flames before speaking. "Whatever you're planning, Mina, I promise it is not worth it."

"I just want to save my home before someone else I love gets hurt." My arm jerks in a weak gesture toward Quinn's form. "That's worth it to me."

"I understand, but I think you know this war is best left to powers higher than us both."

My teeth gnaw the inside of my cheek. Vanya said as much, but it's not that simple for me to just ... sit back and pray for the best. The heat in my heart gives an uncomfortable lurch in agreement.

He moves back to the shrouded slab and reaches for his stained apron. The ties drag through the red seeping too slowly into the floor. "I assure you; his relic is safe. Bastian can't get it, and the Glassmith would die before he helped him."

I startle. *The Glassmith?* What does he have to do with this?

That crushing weight hovering above me shifts, lifting. My muscles tighten, unsure of what the priest will say next. *Do next.* What is divulging a secret worth to him?

But Patrik only puts the stone slab between us. "I still don't believe that Vanya sent you here—and don't lie to me. You would not have asked all this otherwise, but I hope now you will let this go."

I stop listening, my mind tracing over the copper-and-gold-lined streets above that lead to the Seething Glassmith's workshop. I don't think Patrik realizes what he just gave me. If he even meant to mention the Saint. If it was intentional to put me off, or to comfort my disappointment, Isaac clearly never told the priest anything about me.

It's another step, another question, but it's finally *something*. Much more than I had before. A giddiness that feels almost sacrilegious floods my veins. Vanya wouldn't tell me where the relic is, but perhaps I was asking the wrong Saint. And maybe, just maybe, the Glassmith will be more sympathetic to my wish to put things to right. After all, he seems more bloodthirsty than the others. I can use that to my advantage.

"Find your brother," Patrik says. "I believe we're having rabbit stew for supper."

I offer my thanks, snatch up my lantern, and hurry out into the dark. My head is full of thoughts on how to convince the Glassmith to give me answers about his role in all this tomorrow, each dogged by the optimism that Vanya won't discover what I'm doing—and the fear that she will.

The cold sets its claws in me again, tearing away the fire's lingering warmth. Soft prayers spill under my breath as I imagine what might shudder to life in Vaiwyn tonight. What monsters of stone or metal are shaking off snow and cracking free of ice.

My prayers don't last long. I suspect they're stuffed down my throat by

sheer surprise. Because the voice I hear behind me greeting Patrik isn't my brother's.

It's Max's.

Eighteen

Every bone in my body locks together. My blood turns to ice. The promise of food and a safe place to sleep, the possibilities of the morning, now resemble a fever dream. It's no longer important, no longer real in comparison.

Max's achingly familiar voice is low, steady. Anywhere else I shouldn't have heard him, but the catacombs have a way of warping the quiet. His words carry a slight echo, as though coming from the mouths of the skulls on either side of me.

"I almost forgot how it feels down here."

I set my lantern on the ground and creep back to the chamber's doorway.

Where did Max come from? I didn't hear him follow, didn't see a flame in the dark. My brow furrows. Why he's down here at all—I left him in the magistrate's office. And I told no one where I was going, so he can't be here for me.

"Who are you?" Patrik asks, a startled note hitching his tone. "You shouldn't be here. Not with sundown—"

"The night is of no concern to me." Max's disdain rolls over my skin like velvet stroked against the grain. Coarse where you expect smooth, prickling when you need soft.

I stop before the warm firelight touches my toes, balanced on the cusp of shadows to see around the wall with one eye.

Max's back is to me. He wanders the room's edge with agonizing slowness. His posture is straight, at odds with how leaden by exhaustion he's seemed these past few days. His head tips from the floor to the ceiling as he surveys every tool and bottle stashed away.

"I have nothing to fear of the dark," he says, almost to himself.

Patrik chuckles and lays a hand on the corner of the marble slab by Quinn's

feet, as if to find support. “We all do in these trying times, I’m sorry to say.” He moves toward the door, and some unnamed instinct urges me to step farther into the black of the catacombs, rather than reveal myself. “You’ll have to stay the night, too. Let me try to catch Mi—”

“No need. I’ll be leaving once I collect what I came for.” It’s Max’s voice, and yet it’s not. The ghost of another tone layers his words, plunging them into a ringing hollowness that walks cold iron up my spine.

Patrik shuffles to a stop, then turns after a moment of silence. I peer inside once more.

Max stands at the back of the room, facing the spot where I was minutes before. He inhales deeply. Great draws of air through his nose that seem to drag the flames closer.

It alarms the priest as much as it does me. “Why are you down here, boy?” A stirring of fear breaks Patrik’s attempt to inject authority into his voice.

Max whirls and sets his hands on the slab, one on either side of Quinn’s veiled head. He twitches the sheet off her face and stares down at her. “It’s amusing to me,” he says quietly, “that they all believed *this* pathetic body could hold such power. Almost insulting, to be honest.”

“I won’t ask again—”

“Still, I suppose her demise was useful, however unintended.” Max’s eyes slip shut as he breathes in again. On his exhalation, he says, “How could I have forgotten how sweet it smells? The scent of death beneath this city, it’s like a wine aged to perfection. So potent, so...” He lifts his gaze. “Invigorating.”

Threads of confusion unravel, pulled apart by a growing apprehension. This isn’t right. I should move. I *need* to move, but I’m transfixed by Max. Everything about him still looks tired but the light in those brown eyes. Crystalline bright ... and unholy.

Even now, as warning bells crash in my head, I ignore them. I don’t want to make sense of their discordant notes. If I do, it will change everything.

“There’s no reason for you to use that, priest,” Max snaps. He cricks his neck, and Patrik yelps. The small surgical blade he picked up from the nearest worktable drops. “I admire your drive to defend yourself, but it won’t help in the end.”

He straightens and moves around the slab to stand before the old man. Faster than I might have thought humanly possible, yet there’s barely a rustle

of clothing, his limbs sinuous in a way Max has never been. Denial shrieks within me.

“What *are* you?” Patrik asks for us both, because that’s not Max.

I’m unsure how, or for how long, but whatever that person is, it’s not my Max. Somehow, I know that *this* is who I chased through Vaiwyn last night, and it draws a whimper into my throat.

“You know.” Max drags a finger almost tenderly down Patrik’s cheek. “And I think you’ve been waiting for me.”

Patrik flinches but doesn’t step away. Out of stubbornness or terror, his feet root to the floor as Max’s touch runs along the top of his collar. It would be intimate if done to me with consent, but to the priest it’s nothing short of predatory.

“I-it’s not possible.”

“Yet here I am.” Max’s arms fling out to the sides, baring his sweater-clad chest. His voice continues to wander between his own and the ghostly version, dropping into an echo every dozen syllables. “I can’t shift into my true form, but this host has served its purpose.”

The bells in my head quiet, and I swallow my gasp. My hand clamps over my mouth, eyes wide as I take in his words. Sort them out and lay them down. Extract from them the simple explanation to the complicated state of Max.

The exhaustion, the strange moments of dissociation.

None of them symptoms of overthinking a silly work assignment.

Saints. Oh Saints, *no*.

Bastian.

A tremor rocks through Patrik’s hand, as if fighting to keep from touching something. “How did you know where to find it?”

“I didn’t. Not until Mina led me down here.” His laugh is chilling, sliding in and out of the hollowed notes without delineation. I feel sick. “You all must think yourselves terribly clever to hide it so well. All those years trapped in that forsaken bell and not once did I feel its call. But now—”

Patrik’s skeleton seems to shrivel into his core as Max—no, *Bastian*—runs a hand down his chest, halting where the Analith rests under his shirt.

“Now I take what’s mine.”

There’s no chance to brace for what comes next. All I can do is stifle the scream that tears up my throat.

Claws the dull white of bone burst from Bastian's fingertips and sink into Patrik's chest.

The small sound the priest releases is buried beneath the splintering of his ribs as Bastian's fingers dig inside his body.

Dig and dig, searching through the blood that streams down his forearm. More red dribbles from Patrik's nose and slack mouth. His eyes bulge as they look from the intruder inside his chest to the callous young man, to the infernal Saint watching from within.

A flicker of something menacing passes over Bastian's face, and a wide, depraved smile spreads his lips as his hand wrenches back.

The snap of Patrik's spine is deafening against the heavy silence.

His knees buckle, his body collapses, and the priest keels over onto his side. Blood splutters forth from the great, ragged hole in his chest. A ruby pool blending with the rust on the floor. His blue eyes are empty, the life drained from them before he even met the ground.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my hand across my mouth suffocating as I try to keep from screaming. Sobbing. Shouting.

For the third time in nearly twenty-four hours, I witnessed someone die before me while being helpless to stop it. I just never thought I'd see it happen at the hands of my best friend.

But that can't be my friend anymore, nor the boy I've come to love.

No. No, he has to be gone. From me. From this world.

Taken over by a devil who now opens a fist slick and dripping with gore. His passive expression fools me into believing the blood no more than mud scooped from a spring puddle. Unbothered by the carnage he incited, Bastian sifts through the bits of tissue and bone, letting the pieces of spine plink to the ground.

And among the murk of red and viscera, the Analith.

Torn from its chain, the crystal is untouched by blood. Its blue color has blushed nearer to purple, but the stone itself is clean, the sliver of Vaiwyn's heart down its center a white line. The gleam that enters Bastian's eye as he holds the pendant between thumb and forefinger—how that awful smile thieved from Max spreads even farther—sweeps frost through my soul.

He didn't have to do that. Bastian *knew* where the stone was. If that was all he wanted, he could have taken it with no more violence than tearing open Patrik's shirt. Instead, he ... he *eviscerated* him. Just for the fun of it.

I need to go. I don't care what might wait on the surface—anywhere is better than what's down here.

Along my entire body, the thud of Vaiwyn's heart is a nudge. Pounding louder, harder. Excited that the source of its corruption is so very near.

Every muscle draws taut beneath the sensation, ready to turn on my heel and sprint to the stairs, but I'm terrified of what will happen once I break the silence.

When I take my first step, a soft laugh comes from inside the room.

My second lands in time with his croon, hushed and thrilled.

"Mina-a-a-a..."

I run.

My fingers hook the ring of my lantern as I pass, and my only thought is to hide.

Bastian repeats his chilling taunt, and once more it sounds as though my name pours from the empty skulls that watch my flight. The lantern rattles in my sweaty grip, the flame faltering as I veer left into the first crossroad I approach.

Saints, surely there's somewhere in this labyrinth I can lie low. Then I can think. Plan. Mourn.

My eyes dart between the walls of bones as I hurry deeper into Vaiwyn's belly. A shallow alcove emerges on the right, and I claim it.

My breath comes fast and furious, and I can't slow it down. Can't get myself under control. I clap a hand over my mouth again, smothering the noise as best I can. The cold wraps tight around me, but it makes my frantic heart blaze hotter. A constant refrain of curses rushes through my mind as I strain to hear if anyone approaches.

"Oh, Mina-a-a-a..."

I scratch at the lantern, trying to open the glass door and extinguish the light. The delicate latch clatters each time my fingers slip. I wince, pleading for my hands to stop shaking.

And above it all, Vaiwyn's erratic heartbeat, forcing me back against the uneven wall—*thump-thump-thump-thump*.

"Hello, my love."

The lantern falls. Smashes. Glass sprays in every direction, but the flame persists. Flickering against bones and shadows and *him*.

One moment I'm alone, the next Bastian looms over me in his stolen body,

a fourth wall to barricade me in.

I whip my arm out, fingers curled into a fist. The blow glances off his jaw. His head doesn't even turn. I lash out with a foot, knocking him back enough for me to slide by.

There is no escape, though. His hand shoots out and slams me against the bones. The length of his forearm presses into my collarbone, pinning me in place with a strength that Max's slender frame shouldn't possess.

Bastian leans in close, his features cut with darkness and firelight, made sinister in their familiarity.

I tilt my head away. Jerk forward. Strain to break free of his flattening hold, but he's just too *strong*.

The tip of his nose runs along my cheekbone, and I'm assaulted by the sudden scent of *Max*. Ink and dust and evergreen cologne.

And blood.

I choke down a sob. *So much blood*. Splashed on his face, drenching his sweater, coating the fingers that would once gently pinpoint each freckle on my neck. And it's not right, not *fair*, Bastian using Max to manipulate. To terrorize. And I never saw it.

"Look at you," he breathes against my skin before pulling back. "My darling."

Shadows twist nearer, lured to him with every blink of the toppled flame. His brown eyes glitter abnormally bright. The hand a twitch away from squeezing my windpipe reaches up, and the fresh memory of Patrik's spine ripped apart makes me flinch farther into the wall.

He merely tucks a flyaway piece of hair behind my ear with a care that I almost mistake as genuine. So tender, it should make me cry.

Instead, I seethe. Dampened by terror before, the fire in the pit of my heart now rears with a mighty roar. Spreading swift and sure to my fingertips, my toes. It burns away the fear, boils off the horror of what I saw those hands do, leaving only anger and hatred in its wake.

Bastian closes his eyes as my mouthful of spit lands on his cheek. His expression remains impassive, but the arm across my collarbone slides upward, pushes harder.

"I am not *yours*," I snap.

He drags a hand down his face, sloughing the spittle off yet leaving behind a streak of gore, and when his gaze skewers me once again, I understand my

mistake.

Fingers slick with blood and saliva grasp my jaw, his palm fitting underneath my chin like it was always meant to rest there. The final piece to the puzzle of us. His grip is tight, firm enough to bruise. A little more pressure, and I'm lifted onto my toes.

"No?" he purrs in that strange, hollowed half voice. "Max seems to think so."

What the fuck? Reckless hope flickers in me that he might still be in there. Still *alive*. But I don't see Max, don't hear him. Only a demon wearing his paper-thin skin.

"Get off me!"

The arm at my collarbone falls away. His hand grabs mine as it moves to hit him, then collects the other mid-swing. My fists are nothing but butterflies caught in a net to him. He gathers both against his chest, and the desperation teeming through me falters.

There is no heartbeat. Bastian's—Max's—heart is as quiet as the catacombs, as lifeless as Patrik's leaking onto the floor. Vaiwyn's pulse speeds up in response, deforming the darkness at the edge of my vision.

My anger braids into something feral, but it's all for nothing. Nothing I do makes a difference. My hands are trapped. Balanced on my toes, I can't deal kicks the way I want, nor does he notice the ones I land. Fire burns inside me, with nobody to scorch.

"Is she there?" Bastian whispers. His head tilts, as if inspecting me for defects. His crushing touch turns my jaw from side to side, but I don't unhook my glare from him. "I don't see her."

Saints, he's insane. I renew my struggles. "Unhand me, or I will—"

A snarl ravages his throat. "Or what? Tell me, what will you do ... *Oh*." Something alters his expression. A softening that draws firelight higher up his profile. "You think I would hurt you."

I still at the dismay that seeps into his voice. As if he cannot believe I would ever think so little of him. And for a moment, I almost believe it myself, that it's *my* Max regretting what his body is doing to me.

"Rest easy, my love." Bastian leans in closer, my knee useless between his legs. His voice caresses the shell of my ear and makes me shiver. "You are the last person I could ever hurt in this city." His breath strokes the delicate skin beneath, finding a sensitive spot I didn't know I had. Teeth nip at my

lobe. But his next words are an invasion inside my head alone.

Perhaps the only one safe from me.

Then his mouth is on mine, and I have no more defenses against him.

His body pins me to the wall. The contours of him align as they should with mine, not a drop of space between us. Lips softer and cooler than I remember beg me to respond. Tease and coax—pleading for me to give in.

And damn it, I don't know why—but I do.

Whatever comes over me, whatever ensnares my entire body with an explosive heat, I despise it instantly. A wicked impulse I act upon without wanting it but somehow *need* to survive.

Faced with the terrifying unknown, my traitorous body succumbs to the familiar.

My lips part without permission, letting him in, and I kiss him back.

Kiss him with a ferocity that I don't understand but matches the blaze in my heart, the fire pouring through every limb as he holds me in place against my will. Once his tongue sweeps inside and a small, involuntary sound escapes me, there's a tangible shift. In the air, in the tension of our bodies, in the kiss.

It transforms from intimate to outright hostile.

Our kisses become violence itself, each stealing back what the other heartlessly claimed. Over and over, exchanging blows with lips and tongue and teeth.

Bones dig into my back, but the pain is nothing compared to the cold touch of *Max* on my skin. I feel dangerously out of control. Blood fills my mouth as I bite his lower lip, and the growl that rumbles low in his throat draws him even closer.

Where before our kisses were something to be shared with each other, these are consuming. Devouring. Selfish. Both of us starving and clawing through whatever it takes to be satisfied.

This is me, and this is Max, and it's right. *But it's not.* Even as my burning fingers ache to run through his hair, to clasp him tighter to me, I know it's not. It's not me and this isn't Max—and all of this is wrong. He would never treat me like this. Never *push* me so far on his command.

I should shove him away. Use a shard of broken glass to coerce him out of Max's body, to give him back, but still he traps my hands against his silent chest—and I *hate* him for it. A charred and vicious hatred that fuels a desire

to best him in this moment. To take more from him than he can from me.

To bring him to his knees.

“Safe, for now.”

The grip under my chin disappears. My heels drop to the ground with such force that I lose my balance. I slam to all fours, breathing hard enough for my lungs to sear, coughing through a ragged throat.

Bastian is gone, vanished into the shadows, and so is something inside of me.

There’s an emptiness left behind. Like a layer of skin has been stripped away, leaving me raw and exposed to the cruel elements. Bare to the bewilderment of what I just did.

The hatred, the anger, every ounce of heat in my heart—missing. All that remains is the desolate feeling of grief that between us ... he won.

Nineteen

Seated in the front pew of Elke Cathedral, I can't keep still. Too much adrenaline courses through me. The bouncing taps of my sticky heels echo through the nave. I stare at my clasped, trembling hands until their veneer of red blurs into something akin to an illusion.

Between my palms and under my nails, the blood is tacky and clinging. It pulls at my cheeks and mouth, my throat where fingers squeezed. The sickening metallic scent curls inside my nose, weaves between the fibers of my sweater like rot setting in. Not even the heady incense burning throughout the Cathedral can mask this fetid perfume.

"Come on."

Isaac slaps the column at the end of the pew twice, as though he can force-feed Vaiwyn his scribbled message. He successfully sent two folded notes through the stone—Emiko seated behind me for the last five minutes with a healthy measure of discomfort is proof of the first—but dozens more lie scattered about his feet. Missives rejected by a city wallowing in a malevolent night.

Still, my brother will not be deterred. His flattened palm is gentle, his tone cajoling. "Take this one to Aida, please. I know you can do it."

He found me standing over Patrik. There was nothing left inside the priest's husk to spill, yet it's his blood that paints me. Maybe it was the emptiness of my gaze, the shivering that wouldn't stop, or my utter lack of acknowledgment that kept Isaac from asking questions.

Perhaps he thinks I'm Bastian. He left me alone with Patrik, after all, and surely his silly little sister isn't capable of such violence on her own. A maniacal giggle presses against my teeth, and I feel rather than hear Emiko slide a few inches away from me on her bench. How fucking funny to recall I

once thought I was Bastian, too.

Whatever anyone thinks, Isaac treated me like glass as he led me out of the catacombs. Fragile and capable of shattering if prodded wrong. And for that, I'm grateful.

I only have one retelling of the tragedy in me, and I'm not sure how to phrase it.

An hour has passed since he deposited me here. I glance at the marble fount steps away, desperate to wash my skin clean, but I won't do it. If I do, I'll probably drown myself when I need to live with this sin instead. The feel of *him* along my body, the swollen touch of my lips after he disappeared. That a *monster* could so easily make me do what I did—and that I *liked* it.

Saints, that was the worst of it. I kissed him back, even if it makes zero sense.

No, the blood stays for now. As a reminder of my sorrow, of how wrong I was, even if it's not my fault. None of it is.

A series of loud *thunks* resound through the Cathedral. I turn back to watch one heavy door creak open.

Two women enter, silhouettes against the lamps ringing the square outside. Once the hefty sound of locks dies, their scuffing feet are horrible, condemning whispers to my ears.

Isaac slithers between the pews and hurries up the aisle to intercept the newcomers.

"Tamzin," he exclaims. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Imogen was in my office when she received your message." The councillor's voice is smooth, calming. "I hope you realize the risk we took in coming here after sundown."

"I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important," he insists.

Mother doesn't falter in her step as she walks past Isaac. "Where's Aida?"

Isaac brandishes the note in his hand. "I'm trying to contact her. It's worse than last night—Vaiwyn keeps spitting my messages back out."

"She's probably home with Nikole and Hana. I don't know why an attack hasn't started yet, but it's best she stay—Mina!"

My mother *trips*. If I hadn't watched it happen, I wouldn't believe it. Stopped in her tracks by the ghastly sight of me.

I offer a glum smile, cracking the blood drying on my cheeks. Mother strides forward. Her eyes dart over every inch of my face as she kneels before

me. But for all her distress, she doesn't know what to do. Her hands hover over mine, my shoulder, my knee, but nowhere is without someone else's blood.

"What did you do?" she whispers in horror.

"I—I didn't do anything. It's not mine," I assure her, almost as startled as she is. That's ... that's genuine alarm crinkling her features. Concern for *me*. I nearly burst into tears and tell her everything. It's been so long since my mother looked at me like this—like I matter to her.

But I force my eyes shut instead, a wariness igniting. The last time I thought I had my mother back, she orchestrated an innocent woman's execution. I've already lost Max because I didn't read the signs—I can't fool myself again by seeing what I want. It would break me completely.

I blink her face into focus and wave away her hands. "It's. *Not*. Mine."

"Mina," Tamzin says gently. Emiko moves to stand beside her and Isaac, each of them staring at me with a tentative expression. Instinct tells them that fear is the correct response, but they don't understand how to apply it to me. "What happened?"

"I didn't do it." Shock seems to have whittled my vocabulary down to two wobbly phrases, both true. "I didn't do *anything*." Also true. But no matter how many times I replay fingers punched through flesh and bone and everything in between—I couldn't have stopped that.

Somewhat satisfied with my answer, Mother sits beside me, but there's an altered sharpness to her posture. Like she wants to help, but not knowing how frustrates her.

Suddenly, she shrugs out of her coat and, after an uncharacteristic flinch of indecision, slings it around my shoulders.

I freeze. Warmth soaks the fleece interior, the collar grazing my jaw threaded with faint notes of rose hip oil. Now *I* don't know what to do. She rests her pale hand between us, and I have the mad urge to grab it, to clutch it. If it had been my father, I wouldn't hesitate, but this is uncharted ground.

Instead, I look beyond her to the sculpted features of the Lost Alchemist. The gathered darkness draws her with fierce edges; marble surfaces washed in cold blue where candlelight can't reach. There's barely time to wonder what she might think of me—about Bastian—before the gloom of the false onyx Bane beneath her foot shifts.

Rendered into being by scraps of shadow, three towering figures emerge,

each from behind a different column. One look at them and I realize they've come from the hunt. A gaze veiled by stone, a face wet with silver tears, and a body swathed in crystalline cobwebs. A sculptor, a carpenter, and a healer. If Isaac called them, these Saints have paused their search for Bastian to be here.

They converge on our small group with that terrible, preternatural grace they all possess. The radiance that embraces their bodies casts a sheen over us, polishing away lines and years. Vanya comes before me and cups my chin with hot fingers. Not like *he* did, but the memory exists in the bruises that twinge.

"*Not yours,*" she says softly in our heads, her eyes piercing, "*but whose blood is it?*"

"The high priest's," Isaac answers for me after a moment of silence, and again I'm thankful for my big brother. Over Emiko's and Tamzin's gasps, he adds, "I—I left him down below. There's just ... there's so much of it." He gulps, and I worry he'll be sick.

The Carpenter nods, their sadness even more pronounced in the downturn of their lips, the hood of their gaze. Their hissing tears run faster. "*I'll see to it,*" they say, then vanishes through a fissure in the world that only they can discern.

Another memory forces itself upon me. Of falling to my knees, the punishing hand that lifted me up disappearing.

A strangled sob bursts from my throat, and I cover my mouth. Too late, I register the taste of blood. I lower my hand and inhale deep. Through gritted teeth, I say, "It was Max."

Mother stiffens further, her shoulders so rigid a well-placed tap might shatter her, too. She cuts a hard glance at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it was *Max*. Max did *this*." I hold out my palms, daring her to mistake the red for ink or paint. "He ripped Patrik's spine out like it was a damn ribbon."

Every stare turned upon me gleams with a different degree of understanding. Some too slow to grasp my meaning, others grim and full of resignation. Gazing at the floor, Mother wraps a hand around her throat. Each eye on the Sculptor's stone wings closes, as if unable to bear the news.

"How is that even possible?" Isaac asks, aghast.

"It's not hard when there's an unhinged Saint compelling your body from

the inside out.” My tone is harsher than I intend, quick to pierce and eager to disguise my pain. It cracks, though, amid my next declaration. “Bastian has claimed Max.”

Tamzin clutches the nearest pew for support. Of us here, the councillor knows Max as well as I do, and it appears the blow has hit her almost as hard. I hope it doesn’t sit on her like it does my chest. A weight laced to my ribs, threatening to drag me down to the depths of hell.

“Then young Max is most certainly gone from his own body,” Vanya says softly, confirming what I already feared like a punch to the throat. *“It belongs to Bastian now.”*

In little more than a fractured whisper, I ask the Saints, “Why did he take the Analith?”

Their auras ripple, shrinking tight to their frames.

“What do you...”

“I mean he—” My fingertips curl into claws before I realize and spread them flat on my thighs. “He ripped it from Patrik’s chest. He knew the pendant was hidden under his shirt.”

“What does he need a hunk of rock for?” Isaac still appears quite green in the face. “Or a slice of Vaiwyn’s heart for that matter. Bastian knows where the whole thing is down there.”

“Inside is not a part of its heart.” Vanya says it slow, as if ensuring we catch the gravity of every word. *“That is Bastian’s relic.”*

No one utters a word, our shocked quiet answer enough. My own heart stops. I can’t unravel the riot of emotion that roars through me. Strings of anger, fear, shame, panic—so much tangled together I’m unable to tell where one ends and another begins.

“After the Lost Alchemist trapped Bastian’s soul in the Vesper—after she, too, perished—we decided it best that his relic never be used again. We concealed it and its power and entrusted the church with its safekeeping.”

The Sculptor gestures to the false statues of themselves. *“Along with the knowledge of our existence...”*

“That so-called Analith passed from priest to priest in the hopes it would never be found if the time came.”

And now it has been. Again, the urge to grab my mother’s hand, to take comfort I don’t deserve, rises within me. Patrik’s disquiet makes sense now. He was the last of hundreds of high priests to possess that stone, but the first

to be holding the helpless rabbit when the wolf came hunting.

I look at Vanya, cold teeth gnawing at my stomach as I meet her steady gaze. A sickening feeling that worsens as I remember how I raged in the Dahlia's greenhouse, so sure that I could do something. How her refusal to divulge information was for this very reason.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, voice thick with unshed tears. "I'm so, so sorry."

"*You didn't know.*" She plants no anger in my head, and that's almost worse.

"No, but I didn't let it go either. I couldn't, and I led him right to it."

"So, what now?" Isaac looks to Mother, then the Saints, brow furrowed. "What does it mean?"

Several moths take flight from Vanya's hair, their wings casting narrow, ethereal shadows through her radiance. "*Nothing yet. We must find the Glassmith.*"

"*Piotr is the only one who...*" The Sculptor's gaze drops with her statement.

Vanya nods. "*The relic is not encased in stone, but glass of his making. He is the only one of us capable of breaking Bastian's relic free. For him, it remains an obstacle. For us, it's a way to stall Bastian—Max,*" she adds, almost apologetically, to me.

My head falls into my hands, propped on my finally motionless legs.

This is what I don't want: pity that the boy I hold dearest in this world is now an infernal murderer. It makes me *want* Max dead rather than still in there with Bastian.

I claw at my face, my desperation to remove the gory reminder of his touch outweighing my need to sit with my crimes. Over and over, I tell myself I can't feel disgrace, guilt, because that wasn't Max. I wasn't in control of myself. That wasn't *us*. But the refrain is like catching the wind with my bare hands—a paltry thought against a fact stronger than me.

The heat Bastian's departure robbed my heart of has slowly returned, but it seems ... different. Odd. Already unnatural to begin with, there's now a fizzing quality to it, as though acid pumps through instead of blood.

Vanya continues. "*I don't know why Piotr hasn't yet answered my summons, but I know where he's hunting tonight. We will accompany him shortly. If Bastian wishes to come to us, he'll make our task much easier.*"

Her statement settles into the hallowed silence.

I reach inside my pocket for my steadying watch but stop when I remember it's one of the few things not covered in blood.

Make our task much easier.

Before, that *task* had seemed simple: find Bastian's host and destroy them both before Vaiwyn falls to ruin. Even I thought myself capable of it scant hours ago. But that was when the host was faceless, nameless. A stranger with no ties to sever, no memories to linger within. A ghost forgotten by the city long before we met them.

Now that ghost has a name. Strings tied to so many other hearts.

Those around me don't notice the grief that sets the world swimming in my eyes.

The Max I know is gone. Lost to me. My hands clutch my knees. I have to accept that. Force myself to accept that—it cracks me in half, but it's the least painful way for me to face knowing that the Saints mean to strike down his body. With the entire city in danger, they won't risk being careful.

And if one person needs to die for the rest to live ... I can live with that.

The sob still lurking in my throat threatens to reemerge. Max deserves so much more. The silent goodbye I say in my head to the person who mattered the most these past months isn't enough. I want to scream, want this building to take that sound and magnify it tenfold. Max let me be me, exactly as I needed, and he won't even die as himself. It's not fair; it hurts worse that there's no other way forward—but I bury those feelings.

My Max is *gone*. All that remains is Bastian.

"A-and us?" Isaac asks, breaking the leaden quiet. "What are we to do while you hunt?"

"*Whatever you hear, whatever you see—stay inside.*" Vanya coaxes her moths back, and her mouth twists with malice. "*If we find Bastian tonight, his end will not be kind.*"

"Well, off with you then." My mother rises, smoothing her skirts. "You have your plan. Don't waste more time or lives standing here." The eyes on the Sculptor's wings narrow, but neither Saint acknowledges the clear dismissal.

I don't trust myself to speak when she turns to me next. "Come with me. All that blood makes you look like a corpse."

As I meet Mother's gaze, every last ounce of feeling leaves my limbs. There's none of the disapproval or disdain I always expect and dread from

her. All that reflects in those grey eyes is worry. Despite cautioning myself earlier, that expression cracks through my heart with an almost physical pain. She does still care.

But before I can chase that thought, the rose window of the eastern transept shatters.

The crash echoes through the Cathedral, winding between columns and skimming the vaulted arches—the individual trails of the sound collide and breed a louder din. Shards of sapphire, ruby, and emerald rain down in a sparkling shower.

At first, I wildly think a cat crashed through the window.

Black and hairy, the round object hits the ground with a hard smack. It bounces once, twice, three times, and with each lessening slap my horror increases as I realize how wrong my assumption was.

Another bounce, and it rolls across the floor. Everyone stands frozen, watching its uneven path until it stills inside the light of the Saints.

Emiko shrieks. One long note choked with fear. If my voice wasn't chiseled apart by disbelief, I'd join her.

The Seething Glassmith, face slack and empty, howls in death.

He is a mottled mess of mortal and Saint, bear and man. One eye large and brown, the other a bloodshot blue; both ringed with white. Yellowed fangs fill his single mouth. Fresh blood mats black fur. Drops seep thick and slow from where his head was severed at the neck. The flesh is tattered like fabric torn by a careless hand.

My knees give out. First one, then the other, but that pain is nothing compared to what spears through my skull, piercing every soft, vulnerable part of my mind and melting it gold. Mother's coat falls from my shoulders as I grasp both sides of my head. I squeeze my eyes shut against the onslaught, against his voice burning through me.

Familiar yet not, shifting from full and rich to hollow and cold.

From Max to Bastian.

"Rest tonight, my love. We begin soon."

I scream at last.

Twenty

Through the healing rift in my tower's wall, the shriek of wind is that of a wailing widow. As night closes in and cold exhales into the mountain valley, the mournful storm gnaws at ropes and slips between the teeth of the clock wheels. Loose parchment rustles in the corners; the wooden stairs and beams creak. Dozens of ravens scuffle overhead.

The tedious gesture of sweeping my belfry keeps me warm, but not distracted. The crunch of broken glass, the sparkle of its jagged edges—it forces me to relive the night before.

Memories of blood drying against my skin. A sound of bone hitting the ground, and the touch of breath at my ear. The Seething Glassmith's head, thrown as both threat and boast.

Max.

A groan rolls in my throat as I give myself a shake and glance at the southern wall.

Several more bricks have grown in, shrinking the hole like a flower closing its petals, but it's still too slow to heal. A stark reminder that Vaiwyn is not itself. Somewhere, out in those dim-lit streets, Bastian roams free—relic held in a hand that doesn't belong to him, and his full powers ready to be unleashed upon a city caught in a false sense of security.

Bergen and Mother sacrificed Quinn for a day of peace, but not even they imagined Bastian would offer more. The horrible, mangled voice that brought me to my knees yesterday spoke truth: *Rest tonight.*

Aside from Piotr's beheading and Patrik's murder, Vaiwyn earned a reprieve. No part of the city came to life. Every citizen slept soundly, tucked safe in their beds with the belief that Quinn's wrongful death was the end.

A month ago, when we watched a fiery sunset from the warmth of my

small kitchen, Max said something peculiar. Delivered in a knowing way from a childhood beside the sea, it was a rhyme old enough to fray at the edges.

Red sky at night, sailors' delight; red sky in morning, sailors take warning.

It meant nothing to me until today, when newly hopeful people opened their front doors at dawn, only to find every curfew still in place and a patrolling Constabulary shouting for them to remain inside.

This peace is nothing but the calm before the great storm, promised by the rest of Bastian's words: *We begin soon.*

I stab my broom into the corner with unnecessary ferocity. One piece of straw bends too far and snaps.

This lull in awareness, the dulling of fear across the city, all of it serves Bastian in whatever he's planning. And I don't know what to do about it. I laugh softly. I *can't* do anything. Last night proved that. He was under my nose this entire time, and I was oblivious. Brazen enough in my anger to think I could make a difference.

Cold lips and bruising fingers ghost over my skin. I scrub at my eyes, sick and tired of feeling so ... well, just that. Nightmares plague my sleep, of headless bodies trapping me in dank corners; the hands of a stranger forcing me to my knees and reaching inside my chest. I have no appetite. No desire to eat or drink, and I doubt I could keep it down anyway.

Worse is my heart. That hateful kiss stole the heat I came to embrace as my own, and what returned in its place is no companion to my body. An unsettled and effervescent pain, an agony that requires a conscious effort to not cave inward. At least it's a hurt to distract from the grief of losing another person I love.

A crackle at the door whirls me about, the broom held before me like a spear. The handle clacks pathetically against the floorboards when I recognize my mother.

She enters the belfry with ginger steps, navigating around the debris I've not yet corralled. Without a word, she picks up the dustpan and crouches. I right the broom, placing the bristled end on the floor, but don't clear away the glittering pile. Not until she breaks the spell by scraping the dustpan closer.

This is the longest we've ever been together and not spoken— time made uneasy by the reality that she washed someone else's blood off my hands mere hours ago while sequestered in the small bathroom next to Isaac's

quarters. With her attention focused on gently scrubbing me clean, not a syllable passed between us. A dozen white cloths dyed red and nothing said.

And yet, for once, there was so much to say that I just ... couldn't. The way she looked at me, with such unfamiliar concern. It prevented the words I needed to express from pouring out. Instead, they sat in a messy jumble on my tongue, and remain there now.

I don't know how long this carries on, us working in such stiff silence, but half of the belfry floor is clean before Mother speaks.

"I don't hate you, you know." She registers my jolt of shock, and a rueful smile lifts her lips, lightening her taut expression. "You and your brother aren't always as quiet as you imagine yourselves to be. I've heard you two talking. And I've never hated you."

Of all the things she could have said, this is the most unexpected. I wonder what it took for her to say it. If that's why she came here, or if it was spur of the moment. I can't tell from her face, and I don't know which I'd prefer. She dumps the dustpan full of glass and wood fragments into the bucket we've been using, content to let me digest her declaration.

"You had a funny way of showing it." My voice is quiet, but I know she hears when her mouth purses. I'm almost relieved. This exchange already seems like treacherous territory, and I don't have the strength to repeat myself.

Weariness drags on her shoulders. "Perhaps I did, but I want you to understand that the way I was with you ... it was never because I didn't love or care for you."

My throat feels tight; it's difficult to swallow. I startle when I realize why: I can't remember the last time she spoke of love with me as its target. It hurts as much as I want her to say it again.

"I'm your *mother*," she says, correctly interpreting my expression. "I've always loved you. Some days were just ... harder than others." She sets the dustpan down and brushes her palms across her skirts. "I thought I needed to be tougher on you."

"But why?" I follow her example and lean the broom against the wall. Only now my hands don't know what to do with themselves. I jam them into my pockets, finding some security in the coolness of Father's watch. "You were never that overbearing with Aida and Isaac, and the last year alone, you made my life a living hell. I felt like I was being set up to fail."

The lines at her eyes deepen. “Because I wanted you to be the best Bell Keeper you could be. The best *Strauss* you could be. You’re so much younger than them and I didn’t want you to feel you were in their shadows in your training, or that you weren’t part of this family. I wanted—”

“Ma, you made me feel an inch tall. How was that any better?”

My hands fist inside my pockets, the seams straining as I recall my last visit to the family home. Every visit, actually, for the past eight months. After the Strauss Five dropped to Four, and our world shifted. They all ended the same. Me, storming out the door and bleeding from emotional blows, and Mother, the wielder of the sword. What’s stopping this conversation from following suit?

When she says nothing, gazing at me with a strange sort of patience, I seize the silence.

“All this time, it seemed as though you forgot I’m more than just a Bell Keeper. More than just another name in our family’s legacy. But I’m your *daughter*, Ma.” I lay a hand on my chest. “*Yours*. And suddenly I wasn’t allowed to hold that role anymore.”

The words tremble, rocked by memories of our fights, of all the nights I spent alone afterward, steeping in hurt. With the snap of a finger, I went from Imogen Strauss’s youngest child to her own personal shame. The prodigal daughter who wouldn’t be welcomed back no matter how hard I tried.

“Ever since Father died, I’ve not felt like part of the family. Max was all I had. And that was your fault.”

Mother at least has the grace to wince. “All I wanted was for you to meet your full potential, and I think I forgot you *were* so much younger than your siblings. Separate; different. Aida and Isaac poured themselves into their training when it came time, and I couldn’t understand why you wouldn’t.” She waves vaguely around the tower that I love, broken and all. “But then, you spent so much time here with your father that you probably knew more than they did at your age.

“Still.” She shakes her head. “The *earful* I got from your grandmother every day you didn’t show up at the Bank.”

“Yes,” I say, deadpan, “I so enjoyed spending all my time with Grandmother.”

To my surprise, Mother snorts. A warm and indelicate sound that makes my heart ache. “I don’t blame you. My mother was not a flexible woman, and

you were so..." A fond smile shines in the lamplight, rare as a diamond. "Saints, you were so headstrong. Your father always said you got the worst parts of me."

A watered-down laugh escapes my throat. It's easy to remember snapping back whenever Mother told me to do something. All the times we goaded each other, caught in a tempest of spite and needing to have the last word.

But there were good moments, too. The evening card games that only ended when she left for the nightly Herald because neither of us could accept defeat. Or when our old dog knocked over an ugly figurine my parents received as a wedding gift. We spent hours gluing the pieces together rather than tossing them out so Grandmother's wrath wouldn't notice it missing.

"But," she continues, sadness creeping inside her voice, "you got the best of your father." Her eyes sparkle as she looks at me. "You're so much like him."

Whatever I meant to say dissolves on my tongue, vanishing beneath the tears that gather in my vision. I loosen my fist until my watch slides into the cradle of my fingers.

The ice wrapped about Mother's spine seems to melt, serrated lines becoming blunt edges. "I told myself it was out of love, but I have too many buried regrets—for my actions, for my words toward you." She clasps her hands together. "Your father was the second husband I lost, but nothing—*nothing*—could have prepared me for how difficult it was to truly lose him like that.

"And then before I could even wrap my head around it, arrange my thoughts into anything close to sane, there you were. Stepping into his space when you shouldn't have, wholly unprepared."

"*Ma*," I breathe. I take two steps forward before I realize and stop.

Every flare of light in the room is a pinprick of radiance to my eyes. Suddenly, I'm back on that damned, heart-wrenching day, reliving the news that my father was gone. Everything Mother says is a vivid paint stroke because I felt it then. The sense of being an impostor in a place I loved; the inadequacy of taking over a role that shouldn't be vacant.

"I-it *hurt*, Mina. The thought of someone replacing him so soon ... I took it out on you. And yesterday." Her voice cracks, her pale expression imploring. She shuffles closer with a few quick steps. Only a few more separate us. I draw in a shaky breath when I smell rose hip oil. Her arms lift slightly toward

me, and I swallow, reading the vulnerability in how she also freezes, unable to erase the distance between us.

“Yesterday, when I saw you covered in blood—I don’t think I realized how far I’d taken it until then. I thought it was your blood, that I was going to lose you, too. I was going to lose you, and your last memories of me were so unkind. All I want—” She bites her lip, dropping her gaze to the floor before meeting mine again. “I’m sorry, Mina. Saints, I’m so sorry.”

There it is. Everything I’ve wished to hear from her, laid bare as the final hand of a card game. Something to examine and extract understanding from. The question is, what to do with it now that I have it?

Do I accept? Toy with it? Cast it to the ground and spit on it?

Whichever I choose, I decide for us both what our relationship will look like forevermore.

Ever since that awful day, I’ve mourned two parents. I paved my own solitary way, but never without the smallest festering seed of hope that I didn’t need to be alone. A window thrown open at summer’s peak with the expectation of a cool breeze. And now, with the only parent I have left knocking on the sill, I do what she’s hesitant to.

Glass and wood spill across the floor as I kick the bucket over in my rush.

I throw myself upon her, clutch her tight about the middle. She staggers back from the attack. After a surprised pause, her arms come around me. One hand clasps my head to her shoulder, and I nuzzle in.

She feels smaller. More brittle. I can’t remember when we last did this, but there’s less of her. Maybe it’s because I’ve grown an inch since, or perhaps grief fed on her bones. Still, whatever of her is there, I hold it close.

As bells across the city toll the seventh hour, I hug my mother, and she hugs me.

Another minute passes before we let go, both almost reluctant.

It’s easy for her to reach for me again when I double over in exquisite pain.

I clutch my head, crying against the molten burn within. My legs give out and I slip through Mother’s grip. Crash to my knees. I scream as pain knocks into the front of my skull like nails driven by an iron-wrapped fist.

“There you are,” Bastian croons inside my head.

Twenty-One

No. No no no—

“Oh, yes, my love.”

Bastian’s twisted voice fills every space of my mind. Chars everything black and reforges it in his sickly gold. There’s room for nothing but *him* and the pain that he thrives on, thirsts for, nurtures into so much more.

Get out of my head!

“But we have much to discuss.”

I’m lost in an endless maze of his making. Each thought is stripped of coherency before I can push it forth. Mental threats and pleas splinter apart as they barrel into dead ends. Somehow, my mother’s panicked voice finds me through the torture, but it, too, lacks sense, structure. More useless touching of me. Perhaps she means to comfort, but it’s too late for that.

“Shall we talk? Or would you rather we played?”

“He ... he’s here,” I manage through gritted teeth, and taste blood. Hair sticks to my sweaty face and the back of my neck. My eyes squeeze shut as I struggle to breathe. I press my forehead to the ground, slam both fists against it as the hurt unfurls further. The wood vibrates beneath the weight of fleeing feet.

Then the agony disappears. A scalding poker doused in ice.

I claw feebly against the floor. Shards of glass dig into my palms as I push to all fours. A few fall between a gap in the floorboards with gentle clinks.

From the silence, I know Mother is gone. To fetch help I suppose. When I gather the courage to open my eyes, the belfry holds an ethereal haze of gold and grey. The rays of dusted lamplight, stirred by wind and cut by the swaying pendulum, settle as a halo around the dark silhouette in the far corner.

I lurch upright, only to lose my balance and pitch over again. More glass scatters as I scramble backward. My spine slams into the wall, and I use it to stand. All the while, my gaze remains stitched to the figure emerging from the shadows.

Every strand of rationality rejects the truth before me. That careless, slow saunter doesn't belong to Max. Even though the light unveils his handsome, familiar face, no part of it fits.

"Hello, darling."

A cloying unease thrums through me as only Bastian's cold and empty voice flows from Max's tongue. He doesn't need to speak as a mortal would. The dregs of pain inside my skull prove that. His choice to talk aloud is calculated, made to wound. The way his mouth moves, how his lips shape every word, is so painstakingly Max, but again, none of it's right.

He is a stranger to me. A villain. An enemy.

"Did you miss me?" Bastian asks, drawing level with Arbutus.

I drop my hand from the wall. My feet inch toward my worktable as he prowls nearer. "Can't miss something that wants me dead," I croak.

He chuckles, and this time *Max's* mirth layers over the fallen Saint's voice. The deformed echo of it inside the broken Vesper's throat is sickening. My unease swarms my heated heart, and I nearly bend double.

"How quickly you forget. I already told you, I won't harm you. Not yet."

Halfway across the belfry, Bastian halts. The lamplight seems to cling to his frame. His skin appears thinner. Flimsy. Light passes through it as parchment, tracing his edges with a faint red glow and marking him as something otherworldly.

And I'm not taking any chances with him.

Close enough to my worktable, I dive over its messy surface and turn with the clapper shears in hand.

The sharp point presses into Bastian's chest, and I stumble, knocked back against the scarred table. He moved in a blink to stand in front of me.

Before I think better of it, I lunge, the shears grasped in both hands as I stab that frozen heart.

Serrated blades plunge into *nothing*.

The stool at my hip crashes onto its side; the shears clatter to the floor. My feet tangle together, and I struggle to regain my balance.

A low laugh drags my gaze to the first landing of the stairs encircling the

bell tower.

Bastian leans an elbow against the rail, and the pull of his mouth displays cruel amusement. It's out of place on a face that only ever looks at me with love and patience.

"Why?" I shout. I reach for a small metal wheel and throw it. It lands short, but the anger behind it digs a chunk out of the step it finds. "Why take him? Out of tens of thousands of people!" Papers cascade to the ground as I knock them over and hurl a hammer. It bangs against the railing near his dangling hand; he doesn't flinch. "You could have taken anybody. Why. Him."

"Why not him?" His smile turns wicked, indulgent, a mockery of Max's best crooked grin, and he tilts his head to the side and back so fast his neck cracks. "He was always so near. It didn't take much effort to reach him, even days before I finally woke that miserable bell."

The pinion slips from my grip.

Days before. Saints. I swallow the rush of emotions that threaten to consume me, especially the one tasting of infidelity. My mind casts back, struggling to pull out my moments with Max over the last week. The conversations we had, the things we did. What he heard and saw—not just from me but everyone else involved. My stomach knots.

Who was I even talking to for any of it?

"Ah." He stills. "I see you're wondering how much was him. Who you've been speaking with, touching." A frigid, toying light enters his eye. "*Kissing.*"

I snatch up another wheel. The indentations bite into my palm.

"Fret not, fret not. Last night's little tryst"—the word draws out like a hiss to make me shudder—"was our first in this body."

If that's supposed to make me feel better, it doesn't. He shouldn't be in that body at all.

Bastian straightens, looking on the verge of pacing. "I confess, it has been difficult for me to find a foothold. Dearest Max has fought me well, even if he never realized he was. Poor boy was draining himself to keep me at bay. I was only able to take control a few times each day. But try as he might, I was always inevitable, and now..."

A flash of white in his hands distracts me, my damned curiosity stifling my swelling anger. Bleached bone, no longer than a pen.

His relic. If only I could get my hands on it—but to do what? I can't even

move fast enough to try anything.

He twirls the notched lancet with practiced ease, flipping it between each finger as though it were smoke. “Ever since I reclaimed my possession,” he drawls, eyes never leaving mine, “I feel more complete. It grounds me in this body. Helps ... settle me.”

“What have you done to him?” I shriek and fling the wheel at him. “Why are you doing this?”

“How else would I hurt you best?”

I ... what? What does that even mean?

Bastian tuts. “It was a simple choice. One *you* made for me, really.” His cruel smile returns. He shakes his head. I’m little more than an amusing child to him. His relic has vanished, stowed somewhere I could never reach alongside the reckless ideas of it I was entertaining. “Surely you see the beauty. The poetry in choosing sweet Max.”

I chuck a journal. It passes clean through him and hits the wall, then smacks to the landing. Again, Bastian doesn’t so much as blink. Merely tilts his head in a slow, considering manner, watching as I grab an awl. “You still haven’t figured it out, have you?”

He fades into shadow, and I wince when my hair flutters over my cheek, his breath cold against my skin.

The length of his body is flush with my back. Phantom kisses press the freckles at my throat. I try to stab behind me, but he catches my wrist. Grips it so tight my fingers splay, forced to drop the awl.

I can’t move, can’t turn as his other hand snakes around and flattens across my stomach, drawing us together. His very touch spears that effervescent heat deeper into my thrashing heart.

My head tips away from the coolness of his mouth, but his lips find my ear anyway. This time, he steals Max’s voice and poisons his words.

“I know you’re in there, my love. You can’t hide forever, and my patience is wearing thin.” His hands squeeze, and I gasp from the shot of pain. “My promise to not harm this body won’t last much longer, so I propose a little ... incentive.”

A loud crash rises from the floor below our feet, followed by several more off in the distance. One after the other, like the ravens now flying from the belfry. I almost cry for them to stay. *Don’t leave me.*

The cacophony of breaks and thuds through Lyndell Hall coils my muscles

tight with a desire to flee, but Bastian's hold is unforgiving. My skin wants to curdle beneath his touch.

With his mouth pressed to my ear, I feel rather than hear his murmur. "The night is coming inside." He turns us toward the doorway, and a ghastly shadow looms against the wall beyond. "Shall we see what I can do with it?"

I hold my breath, ready to scream as the silhouette scratching up the stairs takes on a more distinct, winged shape. Bastian's exhalations are fast and short, rife with excitement.

A copper angel, now tarnished green and clotted with moss, steps into the belfry. I test Bastian's grip for weaknesses, only for him to fortify any there might be.

I know this statue. Have seen it many times before in the smaller northern courtyard. Black lines of corrosion spill from its eyes and down its cheeks. In a lyrical sense, it could be weeping over the lifeless figure draped in its arms.

Everything in me shatters apart as ice.

"Ma!" I shout.

My efforts to break free double, yet my only reward is to be wrenched even closer to Bastian. His spread fingers slide into the divots between each rib and press. I stomp and kick, but my feet pass through him like mist.

The angel scrapes nearer; I can't tear my gaze from my mother's limp body.

Her eyes are closed, her frozen expression scrunched as if in pain. A gash at her hairline seeps blood into the pale strands that have come loose from her usual knot. She's still breathing, though. I see the rise and fall of her chest now, and it splashes the smallest drop of relief into my gut.

My yells strangle into a sob. "What did you *do*?"

Bastian's chin drops to nestle into the crook of my neck. "Nothing irreversible. Not yet."

His grip on my wrist readjusts. A finger skims across the back of my hand, curling over my knuckle. He squeezes tighter, lifts my arm, and uses it to guide me closer to Mother and the halted angel.

The nail of that index finger elongates into the same bladed bone I witnessed tear through Patrik. Where moments ago I fought to get away, now I cower into Bastian's chest. My heels dig into the floor, hoping to stop him in his tracks.

I can't watch this happen again. Not to her. Not when I just got her back!

Still holding my hand and making me an accomplice to his actions, Bastian slashes down. Swift and delicate.

The sleeve of Mother's blouse splits, and for one wild moment, I think that's it. That's all that happened.

Then a thin line of red opens, leaks. The surrounding skin puckers. Not angry and pink, but of stone. Cracked and blackened and harrowingly recognizable.

The Talus Pox.

"You have something I want, and I won't wait much longer." His voice in my ear drops to barely more than a suggestion, laced with both Bastian and Max, sending a shiver down my trapped spine. "The hourglass has tipped, my love. Consider this the first grain of sand."

Twenty-Two

As the infernal Saint behind me escapes through an impossible void, a cold rush of air carries the music of shattering glass and graveled roars inside the belfry. Suddenly free of Bastian's callous embrace, I stagger forward with a gasp.

A ring of frostbitten red snares my wrist. My hot pulse drums in my ears, drowning out the world. I feel the sway of the pendulum through the floor, the clack of the clock within my bones.

Bare feet cast in copper step into view. I lurch back, head tipping to look at the whole of Bastian's creature, my mother still its captive. Empty eyes fix on me.

Before I can imagine an attack of my own, mount a defense, the angel drops my mother with an unkind and hollow thud. Aged, creaking wings spread wide.

Metal toes slam into my shoulder as I throw myself atop Mother's body. The angel steps over us both. It launches into the night, tearing through the hole in the wall. Like a scab lifted, its wings slice through the newly healed bricks, ripping the wound open further.

"Ma?" I push back to my knees and peer into her lifeless face. "*Ma.*"

I try to brush aside strands of hair, smooth her untucked blouse, but my hands hover instead, unable to press through the last inch of uncertainty. Faint lines of pain crease her nose and forehead, branch from her eyes. I call her name twice more, each louder and angrier.

No response.

Her fluttering lashes feel like a cheap trick. Blood no longer drips from the gash at her hairline, but that was never intended to kill her.

Trembling fingers cover my lips, and I push until my teeth ache and my

vision crystallizes. Steeleed with reluctant resolve, I grip her elbow, lift her arm over her chest, and turn it so the halves of her sleeve fall apart.

Smooth Talus cracks the pale skin of Mother's bicep. Neat and tidy, only a finger's width to either side of the long cut. Already bigger, I realize with numb horror, than it was when Bastian's claw made it.

Not that it matters how fast it spreads. Whether it starts as a slash down her entire body or as a grain in her gut, every strand of Imogen Strauss will calcify.

The same hand that took my father away from afar has dealt my mother a direct and crumbling death sentence.

A web of overwhelming *loss* settles over me. Gossamer thin yet impossible to peel off; each attempt to remove a string of wretchedness only makes it cling elsewhere. I want to scream, to throw something. The awl Bastian forced me to drop pings off Arbutus's split belly, prompting a deeper, reverberating sound from within the rusted bronze.

An incentive. That's what he called this. But an incentive for *what*? What does that bastard want with me? Surely this is all just part of the power-hungry madness that twisted him and Vaiwyn's heart together.

And what more is there for him to take from me? First my father, then my Vesper, then Max, and now this. My mother, *dying*.

The last thought is a furious whisper: *What am I to do anymore?*

A window smashes in my apartment below. The thump of something solid landing on the floor lifts my red-rimmed gaze to the doorway.

Whatever it is, it's big. Crafted of stone, perhaps, if the abrading sounds are any sign. I close my eyes and track its movement in my mind. From the clattering din, it just knocked over my kitchen table and tore Max's star chimes from their hook.

A rumbling snarl echoes up the stairwell as the creature exits my apartment. Only two paths lie before it now: down or up. Streaks of fire spread from my heart through my body, coaxing me to move. My fingers find Mother's unresponsive ones and squeeze, waiting.

I release my held breath when the growls fade. The harsh scraping along the curving walls descends to the top floor of Lyndell Hall.

Much of what Bastian said was a riddle to me, but one part makes sense with piercing clarity. The night *is* coming inside.

From the chaotic sounds rising through the dark, I envision gargoyles and

sculptures wrenching away from the buildings that have hosted them for centuries, only to turn around with stone fists and copper wings. Windows and doors are no obstacle now.

No sooner does this thought form than a shout echoes up the stairwell. Perfectly human. A ragged cry of surprise.

Then fear. A deep, terrified scream.

I can't stay here. I don't know what I'll do, but I can't do *nothing* while Bastian hurts more people.

Splinters of glass flake from my trousers as I scramble to my feet. The cobwebs of sorrow blow away with the wind. My mind flips over itself, parsing through the dozens of scenarios that might wait below while steered firmly by the one I do *not* want unfolding in here.

Mother is so heavy as I tug her by the wrists that I worry her insides are half stone already. Twice my clammy hands slip, dropping my hold on her as I trip backward. Eventually, I maneuver her body into a small alcove. She'll be safe here, for now. The wooden steps act as a shield, but I shake out a dusty sheet to hide her fully from view.

Before I drape it over her face, I press a firm kiss to her forehead. "I'll come back, I promise."

I meant the decision I made earlier for us. I want my mother back in my life, and I won't lose her like this. Not if I can help it.

If giving her the Pox was an incentive for me, then there must be *something* I can do. Some way to reverse this. Bastian's words in Max's mouth were as much a warning as they were a threat. He doesn't care who gets in the way of his monsters, but I'm not letting that hell beast of a Saint steal Mother away from me, too.

I race down the stairs, not bothering to disguise the clamor of my descent. My shoulder ricochets off the wall while my feet slip down the narrowest point of the spiraling treads.

When I leap off the landing that leads into a storeroom, a loud, repeated *thunk* rises to meet me. Ringing like a bell and clashing with a strange screech.

I slow once I near the bottom. Shards of white lie on the carpet running between the offices. More spray the rug with each thud. Unable to place the odd sound, and realizing I've come downstairs empty-handed, I peer around the corner.

The ugly head of the gargoyle standing in the dim hallway flies into the wall opposite, separated from its body. Its hunched figure falls apart, revealing Rhys with a bust in hand. The sculpted portion has broken to pieces, but the iron base will still pack a punch as it hurtles toward *my* head.

“Wait!” I hit the ground half a second before a huge divot chips from the archway where I stood. “It’s me!” I shout. “It’s Mina!”

“Are there any more?” Panting, Rhys snatches up another bust and heaves it above his shoulder as he leans heavily on his cane. He takes an aggressive step forward. “*Are any more up there?*”

“No!” I scramble to my feet, arms raised to ward off Tamzin’s aide. A finger tips to point at the rubble between us. “That was the only one, I swear.”

“Move.” He shoves me aside, toward the Hall’s main stairway. The carpet peels up underfoot as I stumble. I clutch the banister for balance as Rhys glares up into my tower. His usually neat and slicked hair hangs across his forehead in oily strands.

When nothing appears, every ounce of fight dissolves from his bones. He drops the sculpture, the porcelain smashing. “Sorry,” he mumbles, kicking the shards. “Didn’t mean to push you so hard.”

“It’s fine,” I say. Days ago, I ran from Bauer in the lower market square, unwilling to wait for him to come to his senses as that bronze stag charged. Survival makes our choices for us, whether they look like us or not. “I get it.”

I lean over the railing to study the six floors below. Only half the candles in the great chandelier have spluttered to life, but I don’t need light to hear another window shatter, another shriek. That note of fear steers my mind back to why I left my tower, despite having no plan.

I move closer to Rhys as my heart emits a sharp, heated twinge. “Can you barricade yourself—”

A sudden rumbling noise, the crash of something massive, drowns out my question. The door behind Rhys explodes open, and he turns to face the dense silhouette that fills the doorway.

It snatches Rhys by the throat and throws him.

There isn’t time for him to scream; his head smacks into the wall.

“*Rhys!*” I cry.

He slaps to the floor, limp as a rag doll. His cane clatters from his grip.

I trip and land hard on my hip. A shard of porcelain slices through the meat

of my left palm, spilling warm blood. I attempt to crawl toward Rhys, praying that he's okay, and stop.

A single scone ignites—too hot, too high—unveiling the gargoyle hobbling through the doorway.

Its neck grinds as an ugly, wolfish gaze finds me on the ground. Pocked and frosted limestone features droop into a menacing snarl. Feathered wings sweep wide, knocking loose a portrait.

In the same breath, we both make our move. It lunges. I *run*.

With few options before me, I'm forced down the main stairs.

"Fuck!"

It's a frantic curse that repeats in time to my footfalls. The terror that rises sits like a lump in my chest, if only because it can't break past my heart rabbiting in my throat. I jump the last several steps to reach the first landing, only for my knees to give out. A screech draws my gaze back.

The gargoyle launches toward me in a straight, dangerous line.

I scream, tumble to the side, and get clumsy feet under me.

Stone claws narrowly miss crushing my skull. Gritty frustration keens in its mouth. A wing flares out, catching me in the shoulder and knocking me down.

My aching body is a tumult of growing panic as I scramble up again. Bastian—the damned *liar*. I race to the next landing, but his gargoyle is right behind me. His assurances that I'm the last person he would harm were as reliable as sugar cubes thrown into the River Riga.

I can't outrun it. Flight after flight, I try and I try, dodging the gargoyle's attacks and sliding down the banister where I can, yet it's there at every turn.

Between disjointed thoughts, I realize there's a deliberateness to its actions. As though it's herding me, *guiding* me toward a chokehold it means to exploit, and I'm helpless to obey if it'll keep me alive a little longer.

Just as I was at the University, I'm the mouse running from a falcon in an open field.

But when the gargoyle drives me down the third-floor hall with a swat of its wing, I remember where to find a burrow.

Each corridor passes in an indiscernible blur of shadow, stone, and ashen-green carpet. Dust coats my burning throat and sparkles in the feeble light. My feet pound past shut doors, and still the gargoyle remains close on my heels. Its wings gouge the walls; its claws tear the rugs. I don't dare look to

see if it's gaining on me.

One last turn, and as I'd hoped, the pair of intricately carved doors now before me burst open. I careen into the upper gallery of the Council Chambers.

Stone pummels my back. My spine arches as I'm thrown across the gallery and land sprawled on the hard floor. Stars wink in my vision as the monster steps inside, shaking its rough head.

My sight is still unfocused when I find my footing. I swallow a whimper of pain. My bones feel jarred out of alignment as I limp for the tapestry and the rickety staircase it hides.

Over the violent rattling underfoot, the gargoyle's screams seem aggravated. It must not have seen me enter the stairwell. Despite the dread blanching my skin, I smile. A hunter cheated out of its meal.

When iron treads give way to marble tiles, I slow. My eyes dart about as I creep alongside the Council benches. Shadows cloak me when I pause in a crouch, peering up the aisle at the Speaker's chair and the hidden door at the back of the dais. A door well fortified for councillors in need of an alternate exit, as they'd been during the recent riot.

If it can withstand dozens of angry petitioners, a gargoyle should be no match for it.

The Chambers itself is empty, haunted. The broken window has yet to heal, and my breath fogs in the cold.

From above, the gargoyle's disgruntled purrs resonate ominously in every recess. It gives the impression that an army of stone lies in wait. Last thing I need is for the giant columns to come alive as well. I peek over the benches, and duck once I spot the gargoyle perched upon the middle column.

There's nothing to distract it as I run out.

A heavy, screeching bulk slams into me. I skid across the floor, the soles of my boots squeaking. Pain barks through my knee, my elbows, as they crack against the marble, but fear devours it. Blood from my injured palm smears the tile as I flip over. My foot kicks out at the ugly hunk of rock crawling atop me and I manage to scramble upright.

I mount the dais, but barely pass the Speaker's chair before the gargoyle swipes at my ankles. My body twists to stay standing, and my shoulder rams into the back wall.

Items rain down around me. Framed medals and sashes, rotting shields and

grimy sabers—all ringing and crashing against the ground.

The gargoyle topples the Speaker's chair, leaving no obstacles between us. Only ceremonial detritus littered across the floor and a paneled wall pressed against my spine. Every inch of my skin is on fire from the inferno of my heart. Wetness sizzles down my cheeks. The bulge of stone muscle and the flex of claws tell me what's coming.

Desperate, I crouch and blindly grab the first object I find. A sword of some kind. No doubt dull as the dust that infests this place, but better than nothing. It's heavy in my grip, the hilt cold but instantly warming to my touch.

A terrible, grating roar rends the air. Limestone feet leave solid earth.

I swing the sword up with both hands, a fervent prayer to the Saints quiet on my lips.

The blade cleaves through the thick neck of the gargoyle.

Its severed head falls and shatters into indiscriminate features. The rest of its body freezes, two claws caught in my sweater. A crack spreads down its chest, jagged as lightning. More snake through each limb, one after the other, until the entire sculpture explodes in a cloud of ash.

I double over, hacking to clear the grit lining my throat. Remnants of the gargoyle cling to everything—inside my nose, my lashes, skin, clothes.

Everything except the sword. Clutched tight in my hand, its edge glitters bright and true through the haze. I don't understand. The blade should have snapped in two, yet it slashed through pure stone as smooth as through water.

I straighten, waving aside the dust to examine the sword more closely. Not a dainty saber or corroded cutlass, but a real weapon.

The blade, as long as my arm, burns with a heat that kisses my fist. I readjust my fingers to reveal a hilt wrapped in slender filaments of copper, gold, and silver. Intricate, shining threads that pour from a pommel of raw quartz and spill over the cross-guard, down the sharp steel itself.

When the voice invades my head, I'm numb to all else but the shock that throttles me.

"Hello, my love," Bastian croons. *"Will you join me now?"*

The sword tumbles from my grip. It crashes to the floor, not with a clatter, but with a dense, flat *clang*.

I stagger back into the wall, hand over my mouth. Black presses in at the edges of my vision. The world tips, swims, but not *it*. No, it remains a beacon

of clarity. A cross of stark realization.

I collapse to the ground, staring at the weapon I wielded.

Mierlin, fabled and untouchable to all but those with divinity in their veins.

The Lost Alchemist's relic.

Twenty-Three

A deafening bang rolls through my exhausted stupor. I jolt, a scream trapped in my throat. My eyes focus. The daydream of a marble head—tucked under my arm and dripping rubies from where I severed it—is replaced by the sight of crumbled debris, and by memories. They're fragmented, slow to connect, but each is as real as the nausea that floods my gut.

The chill of the fragile dawn seeps beneath my cheek. Distant bells ring in time to my throbbing skull as I force myself to a seated position and lean back against the wall.

Fragments of glass and metal glitter atop the dais where I spent the night, drifting in and out of consciousness because I didn't trust myself to move. That awful gargoyle ash still clings to everything. I cough to clear my throat of the bitter stone taste, but a worse sensation remains.

I feel ... Saints, I feel *strange*. Upended, somehow, and remade. As though every organ spilled onto the floor and sand now fills the empty spaces between muscle and bone. It kicks my heated heart into a sickening gallop; my breaths come a little faster.

Trembling fingers reach for my father's watch, needing that reliable tick—
It's not there.

My stomach bottoms out as I turn both pockets inside out to reveal only lint and a single coin. Hurt shoots through my left hand. Blood crusts my palm—the consequence of landing on a shard of porcelain.

"Mina?"

I startle, lifting my chin and looking to the galleries.

For one moment, I dread that my name came from the mouths of the stone giants supporting each balcony, but I spot a familiar face staring down from the highest level. The ashen haze blurs his features, but I know my half

brother.

“Mina—Aida, she’s down here!” he calls over his shoulder.

A second person appears, a flash of white teeth. They both vanish, and the rattle of descending feet erupts through the Council Chambers.

I return my searching gaze to the rubble scattered around me. My relief is a palpable thing in my chest when I find my beloved watch beneath a splintered frame.

Pain hisses through my teeth. I wrench my hand away; the watch cracks against the marble. Flames seethe through me, barreling down my veins to my scabbed palm. The cut isn’t deep, but it hurts like *hell* when it tears back open. A distinct copper scent blooms as fresh blood wets the cuff of my sweater.

“Saints.”

I raise my hand for a closer look, scooping up my watch with the other.

That heat flares again, and this time it tears *me* apart—body, mind, and soul. An iron fist around my lungs, an axe cleaving through my heart, a dagger plunged into my spirit. Exquisite torture that dies before it even begins.

The wound closes. Flesh knits together and seals into an angry, thin crease. A memory of pain, hidden inside a pink scar.

My foot slips, kicking my bent leg out straight. The heel of my boot hits a hilt topped with quartz, and I freeze.

I clutch my watch tight. The world fades, leaving behind only a steady ticking and Vanya’s words to me on this very spot.

Only a divine Saint can wield a relic.

Isaac and Aida fall to their knees on either side of me. Glass crunches beneath their weight, too loud.

“I’m fine. I’m *fine*,” I lie, shrinking away from their fussing.

“I’m so glad you’re okay.” Aida reaches for my hand, sticky with blood but whole. “We came as soon as the attack ended, and when we didn’t find you or Ma—”

“Don’t touch me.” The hoarseness of my voice, and the sharpness that lies beneath, startles even me. I pull my arm back, masking the gesture by tucking my watch inside my pocket. Whatever that was with my hand, I don’t want it spreading to them. “Please. I’m fine.”

Isaac falters, fingers about to smooth the hair off my cheek. His dark eyes

roam over my face. There's an unnerving quality to his gaze, as though he sees what's different.

"Mina, you're not. *Look* at you." Aida moves with the unruffled speed only a new mother could possess and ensnares my wrist. Soft and gentle and unwanted.

I twist away and explode to my feet. Somehow, Mierlin comes with. Shaking, I stare down the blade's length at my siblings, both pushed off the dais in alarm at my outburst.

"I said: Don't. Touch. Me."

The trembling tip steadies as heat pours down my arm. Every vein turns molten, the hilt shaping to my white-knuckled grip.

This is it, then. My reckoning.

I am irrevocably changed. The heat in my heart has shifted. Spread. Scraped across the inside of my body like a second skin, one made of starlight and steel.

Unbidden, another remembered voice flits through my mind.

It grounds me in this body. Helps settle me.

Bastian's cold words fill my mouth with an answer I'm not brave enough to admit out loud. The divine name belonging to the second soul that sits behind my rib cage.

The Lost Alchemist. Elora.

Deep down, I think she's been there for weeks, waiting in some dusty corner. The missing piece to the puzzle of me, but I don't feel grounded. I'm one touch away from losing my grip on everything.

"Mina," Isaac murmurs, stepping closer.

I swing the relic in his direction. Aida gasps, watching with ill-disguised horror. My brother holds up both hands, not in surrender, but as if calming a wild animal. "Why do you have a sword?"

Despite a straight spine and an unwavering arm, a whimper laces my voice. "I—I don't know."

My composure shatters.

The filaments of metal twining through steel sparkle as my hand shakes anew. I slip down a step and sit heavily atop the dais. The tip of Mierlin digs into the space between tiles, and I lean my forehead into its quartz pommel. I breathe in deep through my nose, then out on a frazzled exhale.

Once the silence stretches so taut I could play it like a fiddle, I lift my head

yet direct my words to the floor. “I hid Mother under the stairs in my belfry. She needs help. Badly.”

“What?” Aida snaps out of the shock invoked by me brandishing a sword. Her stern, courtly persona locks in place. “What happened?”

“He ... *he* came to me.” To taunt. To toy with. “When she was with me. Ma went to get help but ... He did it because of *me*.” A chisel of hysteria cracks my voice.

“Did what?” Aida asks shrewdly.

“He gave her the Pox.”

Their eyes widen. Something must alter my expression, too, because Isaac clenches his fists in a steeling gesture and moves to sit beside me. This time, when his arm comes around my shoulders, I lean into the comfort of it.

“She may still be unconscious. It’s ... it’s spreading quickly.” The effort to keep from sounding pitiful dies almost instantly. “I didn’t know what else to do—I couldn’t leave her out in the open for some stone monster to trample.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Aida says, reading my tone. The gentle squeeze at my shoulder repeats her firm statement. “Saints, this was *not* your fault.”

I stiffen. When I tell myself that, all I hear is *his* voice as he held me fast, showed me the things he could do, the ways he could hurt *me* without laying a hand on me. My reconciliation with Mother felt akin to the joyous end of a decade-long war, and he ripped that away like a wilted petal from a rose.

My mouth opens to tell Aida she’s wrong when the ground-floor entrance flings itself open.

Tamzin strides inside a moment later, shoes striking the marble with such force I half expect sparks to follow in her wake. Instead, Rhys trails after the councillor, his limp more pronounced than usual. A clumsy bandage wraps his head, and a tendril of relief unfurls in me that he, at least, is all right.

“Good. You’re here,” Tamzin calls as she approaches. The beads at the ends of her braids clack like hungry teeth. “Bergen is dead. I received word an hour ago. His garden statues turned on him ... What is this?” She freezes mid-step, voice petering away in dry confusion.

“*She has returned.*”

The remaining Saints appear in separate corners, each born of different facets in the stuffy air. One from the clotted shadows between benches; another from the smoke wafting off the few candles daring to thrive; and the last from between the streams of dust. A trio of unearthly people who all stare

at the sword.

I adjust my hold on Mierlin's hilt, and the blade slides free from the marble, scratching the stone. The warmth beneath my skin slithers, as if preening from the attention.

"You said she wasn't here," I accuse Vanya weakly.

She tears her gaze away from the sword, only for it to slide up to my exhausted face. "*I thought her gone,*" she replies after a beat. "*We all did.*"

"What is going on?" Councillor—or rather, Mayor—Tamzin demands.

Saints. I run a hand through my hair. Although Tamzin is the better leader twice over, not even a man as intolerable as Bergen deserved death by this city. The number of lives it's claimed ticks higher and higher, and no one is safe.

"*Who is here?*" she asks, voice firmer. She shakes Rhys's fearful clutches off her arm with more force than necessary. This must be the first time he's seen these eldritch beings, and she has no time to coddle him.

"*The Lost Alchemist...*"

"*Is among us,*" the Carpenter finishes for the Sculptor. They incline their head toward me, their tears dripping from their cheeks to the floor.

I purse my lips, swallowing the vomit that threatens to emerge. The act leaves thorns in my throat.

Aida bats the moths away from her face. "What the hell does that mean?"

"*That Mina is host to Elora, much as the boy is for Bastian.*"

"Prove it," she responds instantly. "You must have evidence for such an absurd claim."

Rhys's eyes grow wider, looking between my sister—a formidable understudy for my mother—and the towering Saints. I wonder how much Tamzin shared with him. Does he know what's become of Max, that his colleague and friend is now the enemy of an entire city?

The Carpenter's tears run faster, hissing like a serpent. "*Her hold on that sword is proof enough.*"

They point to me, and I drop my forehead back to the pommel, closing my eyes.

This inner heat—*Elora*—slips down my arm again, and horror seizes me as my hand begins to unwrap from the hilt, lifting of its own accord.

"*Absolutely not,*" I blurt. I force my fingers into a fist and slam it onto my thigh, refusing her any control. Isaac's arm flinches around my shoulder in

surprise. Softer, to the lost Saint I say, “Over my dead body.”

Perhaps she senses my discomfort—she recedes a fraction and returns to a wider spread across my bones. Warmth wraps gently around my roiling stomach, as if to soothe. I prickle at even these liberties taken within me, my muscles tightening. A gentle flick of warmth bleeds into my head, and somehow, I perceive it as a wordless offering of camaraderie. A gesture of good faith.

I’m not sure how to feel, now that I know what to call this warmth. Too many fluttering emotions, and not one wing caught to pin to a board. I truly thought this blasted heat in my heart was a side effect of anxiety. I *wanted* it to be anxiety. That I could fix. Instead, every small, unusual symptom—cataclysmic shifts under the surface.

I flex my hand, aware it’s not the first to heal. In the Dahlia’s greenhouse, begging for Bastian’s relic, the cut on my cheek opened and closed just the same, even if I didn’t understand it at the time. And the other night, when the gargoyle carried Quinn and me over Schaden Bridge—that statue *tore* through my shoulder, yet nothing remained but drying blood. Even my sudden ability to read that divine language across my Vesper and in that book.

None of it a medical anomaly, but a long-lost Saint, making a home inside of *me*. Remaking me as Bastian has done to Max. But where my body’s guest appears to be symbiotic, his is a fatal parasite.

“We stood right here, Vanya,” I say through the grit in my throat, meeting her gaze as I deliberately clink the sword point against the floor. “All three of us. You swore, ‘*like calls to like*,’ and we were *both* beside you.” Elora and Bastian, tucked inside bodies that were not their own. “How could you not have sensed either of them?”

For once, the brusque Saint seems at a loss for words. Her radiance loses some of its sharpness, her inhuman features gaining color of their own. “*I did not lie to you, Mina. There shouldn’t have been anything to keep her here. I didn’t sense her in you then, but I do now.*”

“*Like your own breathing*,” the Carpenter adds, thoughtful.

“*So subtle*,” says the Sculptor, “*you don’t notice until you’re told...*”

“*She’s there*,” they assure, “*but not as we expected her to be as it was in her own body.*”

“But why me?” I splutter. “Why Max?” *What did we do to deserve this?*

“Fate, proximity, bad luck—I think only the Saint within you can answer that.” Vanya’s aura returns like curtains thrown back. *“Bastian must have known she was still here, after all that time. I wonder if her presence in you is what finally allowed him to break free, or the other way around.”*

“Chicken or egg...,” the Sculptor says.

“Does it matter?” snaps the Carpenter. *“This is now more for him than just finishing what he started. Bastian must mean for you to join him, Mina.”*

My blood runs cold. *“What?”*

“Bastian loved Elora so much that even in the throes of his delusion of calling himself a god, he offered her his hand. And instead, she was his downfall.”

“If he hasn’t already, he will ask her—you—to take a place at his side in conquering Vaiwyn.” Vanya draws herself up straighter. *“Or he’ll retaliate and annihilate you both.”*

“It wasn’t clear before, but now...”

“Elora is to play a role once more.”

A dozen questions jostle inside my mouth, but none have the courage to dive over my lips. The implications of it, that Bastian may take Elora as his queen again—that Max might take *me*—and not accept no for an answer ...

All at once, every cryptic thing Bastian said to me over the last two nights is thrust into a different light. Harsh and unforgiving, unveiling the double meaning threaded between each of his words.

Surely you see the beauty. The poetry in choosing sweet Max.

I don’t care if he thinks it’s poetic—I want no part in this twisted dance of theirs. And if his choice hadn’t been robbed from him, I doubt Max would have died for it either. Bastian already lost his senses a thousand years ago, and time spent in that bell clearly hasn’t recovered them if he believes that threats and murder amount to love. To declare that level of toxicity as such is the same as labeling a bottle of arsenic poison as sugar.

“But wait—what does this even mean?” Isaac says. His question echoes back three times in the vast space, not in dismay, but anger. *“How can Mina have the Alchemist in her?”*

Aida cuts over him. *“If she wields the sword, then ... no, she can’t.”*

“Can’t be the one to end this?” Tamzin barks. The fierceness in her voice matches any I’ve seen in her gaze. Shoes tap loudly, and I look up to find her pacing. Her hands find each other behind her back as she wears a path

between the benches.

“Bastian—Max, whatever, has his relic,” she says, almost to herself. A poised new leader, untangling the crisis left to her by a bumbling predecessor. “A lancet, which you say makes him even more dangerous. And we have at our disposal the relic—and apparently the Saint—that thwarted him last time.”

Rhys raises a trembling hand. “Wh-what does Max have to do with this?”

Tamzin hushes him with a single finger. To the Saints, she asks, “You said only his spirit remains, his soul. Correct?”

“Yes,” the Sculptor says. “*He’s tied to this young man in...*”

“Max is all that’s keeping him alive, then?” Tamzin insists. “Without his body, Bastian wouldn’t survive? He would cease to be a threat to Vaiwyn and its people?”

All three nod, and Vanya adds, “*If struck down by a relic, yes. Otherwise, he will move into a different host if his current one dies.*”

“Then Mina will kill Max with that sword.” Her heels click together. “Simple as that.”

A spasm ripples through me. I clutch Mierlin tighter, its point screeching as it shifts. I force my expression to remain neutral as my siblings erupt, but inside I’m a maelstrom of horror.

Me, taking this fabled blade, and plunging it through Max’s chest.

Simple in theory, I suppose. But in practice? Disgust stirs my gut at the idea of murdering anyone, let alone *Max*. I don’t know how to do that. I can’t. It was one thing when the Saints intended to end it, another when I was recklessly angry and believed the host a stranger. Faced now with the real possibility, a certain weapon in my hand alone—I can’t do it. Even if Bastian smothered his soul, took his body, and left him beyond saving, that’s still Max.

I can’t.

“Mina kills Max. Elora kills Bastian,” Tamzin bellows over Aida, who is invading her personal space with impressive obscenities.

“Do you even realize what you’re saying?” Her fingers jab into Tamzin’s chest with every word. “You’re as bad as Bergen if you think that!”

“We’ve all heard the stories!” she retorts.

Isaac stands, cold creeping in where his arm had been around my shoulders. He turns to the Saints, imploring. “There has to be another way.”

“There may not be,” the Carpenter says, more morose than I’ve ever heard them.

The Sculptor’s wings blink shut, and I almost expect stone tears to plink to the floor. *“One way or another...”*

“The end is near.” Vanya’s voice is a confusing contrast of soft and loud in my head. *“Bastian has every piece he needs to play this game to checkmate. He has his relic, and now he has Elora awake. He will raze this city to the ground to finish what he started. We will help however Vaiwyn will let us, but our best hope is that she may defeat him once more.”*

“How can you expect Mina to do that?” Aida cries. “She’s barely eighteen!”

I almost giggle, feeling lightheaded. Vanya threw that fact back at me when she refused me Bastian’s relic, and now it doesn’t matter. Age is of no consequence once you serve as a cage for a thousand-year-old divine soul.

Isaac rounds on Tamzin. “Think of what Max means to her! You, of all people, should know. She won’t be able to do it.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” I ask.

Tamzin presses my brother back with a firm hand to his chest, giving herself an ounce of space. “She’s not the only one who cares about that boy. But imagine what will happen to us if we don’t finish this! She has to try.”

“Try what? Murdering the boy she loves?”

Aida adds, “How can you be so cold, to ask such a thing of her?”

“I’m a realist! Listen to you all—the writing is on the wall. Bastian already murdered one Saint. How many more citizens need to be harmed until he gets what he wants from Vaiwyn? Hundreds? *Thousands?* Already there are over fifty new reported cases of the Pox that will only make him stronger once those people die.” She points at me, and her voice splinters. “There is no other option. Mina is *it*.”

“Do you hear them?”

The frigid, hollow voice slips inside my mind without permission. I shiver, cricking my head to the side as if I can knock Bastian out. Elora stirs within my chest, her heat stilled, as though listening.

“Do you hear how they decide for you, and yet they doubt you? You, glorious and beautiful, and still they think you incompetent.”

My gaze skims over the arguing adults, the deliberating Saints. None of them seem aware of what’s happening, and something tells me Bastian isn’t

near either. When the Saints speak, they enter the minds of all those present, but Bastian, warping Max's voice, infiltrates only mine, abusing some unsolicited connection that we share.

But is he speaking to me—or Elora?

“Jealousy. Envy that they’re not the chosen one. They, who are judged unworthy by the heavens themselves.”

Get out, I snap. No one wants this.

“It’s for the best, I suppose. I may not have been as patient as I’ve been if it were one of them.”

I resist the urge to clutch my head, to quash his words by sheer force. Bastian seems to invade the quietest parts of my skull, preying on every weakness I have when he threads Max's voice through his.

Almost out of spite, I grip Mierlin's blade, let the sharp edge distract me. If I hope for the metal to be cool, I'm out of luck; the steel burns hot as a fever.

“You feel her now, don’t you?”

I swallow, closing my eyes against the tears threatening to spill. That he's right stings. Elora's presence, once tucked away behind my heart, now scorches through the entirety of my being, her mighty anger aligned with mine.

“I admit, I’m disappointed she hid for so long, concealed inside that sword, but I felt her presence in that bell tower. For years. A shadow of her former self, waiting for me, for the right time to claim her own host and face me again. We’re all here now, and I’ve missed you.”

Their voices cease to layer, the tussle between them ended. I hear only Max now, but the words that enter my mind are bold and frozen.

“Do you know what it’s like, my love, to feel the city’s heartbeat this way? To find a particular vein without a second thought and cut it open? Let it bleed at my every whim? Such power, thrumming through me, through these very streets. Through every brick and timber.”

Leave. Me. Alone!

“Come to my side. Feel this power as I do. Share it with me. Why else did you wait for so long if not to join me?”

You're sick. I can't tell who he's talking to, or even who is talking anymore.

“Why won’t you accept this? Again, I offer my kingdom to you, willing to share my throne after you stole it from me, and yet still you push me away.”

A pause, a scraping sensation, as though he's riffling through my innermost thoughts. Then: *"Ah. Mina, I see. You're afraid you'll fail to stop me."*

No, I shoot back.

"Yes." He draws out the word, drags the vowel over coals of his amusement. *"How delicious. You fear this will be a repeat of the bell."*

That wasn't my fault. My knuckles turn white, blood welling and dripping down the blade. *You were always going to break free.*

He continues as though I never spoke. *"You're terrified of it. To be given a task that only you can do, and again let everyone down. Especially your mother. How is she, by the way? Not long left for her, I suspect."*

Get out of my head! My scream rattles my thoughts.

"But this is getting interesting. We're reaching the root of the problem. Perhaps you are right. This isn't something you can do, and it's good to accept that. No point going through all the motions, only to get so close. To miss stopping it by mere seconds."

I fight back the sob building in my throat.

"And I'm sure everyone will tell you it wasn't your fault when you inevitably fail in your duty to stop me. That it was always meant to happen."

"Enough!"

My shout is for Bastian and his goading, but it silences everyone else in the Chambers, even though the echoes of their arguments linger. I meet the eye of every single person. *"I'll do it. Just ... enough."*

"Mina, you don't have to," Isaac says at once.

"Who else is going to do it? Tamzin is right: There is no one else."

"But just because you can hold her sword doesn't—"

"Why do you make it sound like I even have a choice in this? I feel her." I push up to my feet. The sword tip drags behind me as I step forward. My other hand bangs against my chest. *"She's been inside me for weeks. Weeks. If this is why she's here, if she knew this would happen, I can't ignore it."*

"But ... are you strong enough to kill Max?"

"I don't know." I shrug with a stilted laugh.

I don't think I can kill Max. Even if there's nothing left of him but an empty shell of malice.

Despite my best efforts to avoid it, I let my mind stare down that bloodstained kiss in the catacombs. Aside from the obvious, something about it bothers me. A nagging undercurrent that I was too timid to examine

because of what it confirmed.

My reaction to that dangerous intimacy, so far beyond my realm of comfort, didn't make sense. It confused and satisfied me in equal measure. And I understand why now: I was out of control. The living heat slithers around to my spine, Elora cowering in embarrassment. Some small shameful part of me relaxes. It was her the whole time. She left me my thoughts while guiding my body, snared in the conflicting emotions that accompanied her first reunion with her doomed love.

But Max. Not once has he forced me into a situation where I wasn't at ease. Never made any move toward me without first knowing he had my consent, that I was all right and still trusted him with my vulnerabilities. In all the months we've been together, he has only ever given himself to me.

What happened in the shadows of the catacombs was a theft. A selfish, heartless violation. A moment that thought of nothing but Bastian and what *he* wanted to take for himself.

That alone settles the matter. Max would never have allowed that if he'd been present as I was. I inhale deep, trying to stay steady. He's well and truly gone, just as I feared.

I feel neglectful for not taking any time to properly grieve. Disrespectful even. But the only way this stops is if I free Max's soul to peace and give him the justice he deserves.

"I can't kill Max, but that *thing* isn't Max," I spit. "Not anymore. This fucking ends tonight."

Beneath my boots, so faint I might mistake it for too heavy a footfall, Vaiwyn's heartbeat pounds. Thrilled and ready.

Twenty-Four

Over the hammering of nails, I hear the sloshing before the bottle raps my shoulder. The smoky scent of whiskey follows as Isaac sits beside me on the slick steps leading into Lyndell Hall. A large coil of rope slaps to the ground behind him.

“I need a break,” he says, and takes a measured swig from the dark glass bottle. Although snow falls in the space between us, sweat glistens across his forehead as the lamps at the courtyard’s edge ignite with uneven flames. “I’ve probably trussed up thirty statues by myself, and there’s *still* the northern square to do.”

“At this point, you’re better off helping board up the windows,” I say. The night is closing in too soon for him—or any of the dozens of people scurrying about outside the Hall—to tie down every statue before it arrives.

Isaac drags the back of a grimy hand over his mouth and offers the bottle to me. “Here. It’ll help settle your nerves.”

“I’m not nervous.” I aim for indifferent but speak far too quickly for even myself to believe it.

Nor do I fool my brother, who prods my knee.

I slam my heel down. It forces my leg to stop bouncing, but this restless energy within me has to go somewhere. I drag my fingers into fists the moment I catch them drumming the icy stone beneath me.

“Fine.” I seize the whiskey.

It goes down hard and stinging, nothing like the balanced spirit Father had stashed in my apartment. I don’t cough on the taste—I choke.

After Isaac pounds my back a few times, words push through the razors in my throat. “Did you pull that straight out of the trash?”

“Bergen’s office. From the bottles I saw in there, the man had no taste, but

it's not like he'll be—" Whatever he means to say, he swallows and replaces with: "They were going to waste."

The reminder of death draws sadness tighter around us both, threatening to suffocate. It's a feeling that's clung to my shoulders since Mother was removed on a stretcher bound for Vaiwyn's infirmary.

Watching them take her away, it was like looking at Father all over again. Reliving those terrible moments of waiting, *hoping* for a miracle that didn't exist. Only this time, a week has condensed into hours; my dwindling supply of hope tied to minutes instead of days. That miserable creature sits in my chest, waiting alongside me.

It hurts to hold the image of my indomitable mother, unconscious and laid low by the swift rot of stone within her. My fingers find my medallion, the barely there impression of the Lost Alchemist warmed from my skin. I stop myself from kneading it for more prayers, more wishes. No amount of rubbing will make the Talus Pox leave her body—and she is another person I don't even have the time to grieve.

As I've done whenever my mind wanders to Mother, I search for a distraction, which is proving to be more and more difficult. I shift on the steps as Elora's heat concentrates in my leg, ceasing the shaking I didn't notice I restarted. It seems every corner of my life requires a diversion now.

My gaze lifts to the sky. "Do these clouds seem ... *dark* to you?"

Isaac glances up. "Perhaps a blizzard coming in? I heard a few greencoats chatting earlier."

"Oh. Maybe."

I tuck my necklace beneath my collar and take another drink, letting it pour more smoothly down my throat now that I know what to expect. Still burns in my fluttering stomach, though, as I pass the bottle back.

With an eye riveted to the sky, I can't find it in me to entertain Isaac's assumption. Not with the pressing weight of my own doubt.

These aren't the elegant and pale clouds that descend upon Vaiwyn each winter. No, these are somber. Corrupted. Laced with foreboding violet and black, their bellies heavy with retribution. To the snow that falls, they lend the appearance of ash, tumbling from a burning heaven.

Despite the streetlamps flickering on, their flames merry but few, sunset is still a couple of hours off. But one would never know from the bustle of noise and frenzied activity that grips both the courtyard before me and the streets

beyond its fence.

Greencoats and councillors, citizens and Saints alike, working their fingers to the bone to fortify this city—*our* city—against the next attack. Young and old, some of the rich and all of the poor, spreading out to exploit every remaining drop of daylight. Chains wrapped around icicle-drenched statues; nets cast over leering gargoyles; windows boarded and doors barricaded with whatever is at hand, all in an effort to keep homes and businesses and families safe.

The result of a city banding together lies before my very eyes. It dusts my brother's hands and pulls my sister away to the Judicial District, Emiko to the Financial, and yet I still can't believe we got this far.

When the new mayor distributed a revised curfew and orders throughout Vaiwyn this morning, resistance was the response. Protests began anew, their shouts lifted like sparks in the frigid air.

Such loud voices, quieted only by the true Saints' emergence.

For the first time in centuries, the three remaining Saints walked the streets they built without disguise, without mask. Their purest, most ethereal and arcane forms, soaking angry faces with their divine radiance, and speaking to them all at once. The softest of words to explain what has beset Vaiwyn, and what will happen tonight.

Perhaps all these precautions are unnecessary—I won't even be here once sundown arrives. In an hour, I'm moving down the hill to Kafkan Bridge. The place I've chosen to take my last stand. A battlefield where I can control the ending of this tale. The Saints will be with me there, and together we'll all fight to the bitter end.

Bastian will come to Elora.

And Max will come to me.

It almost makes me laugh, how right Bastian was. The parallels between the past and present are too delicious to ignore. Elora was Bastian's undoing, and I'm to be Max's. Star-crossed lovers, destined for ruin.

Bastian's infection of Vaiwyn strengthens by the hour. Isaac hasn't returned to the catacombs since he found Patrik's body and me, but I overheard him and Tamzin discussing the loss of another twenty people to the Talus Pox. The result is the Saints are less in touch with the city than ever, but they haven't given up on trying to protect it from itself. From wherever she is in Vaiwyn, the Sculptor reaches through as much stonework

as it will allow, forcing new growths to bond wings and legs and fangs into shapeless lumps. The Carpenter as well—their mortar of oak spreads to seal window shutters and reinforce doors to shield those hunkering down inside.

My eyes dart to Vanya. Her long, bony fingers coax a hedge to grow tall around a statue in the far corner, trapping it in branch and root. Her cobwebs glow as though dawn itself dwells in each strand.

I didn't hear what she or the others said to the city at large, but it must have been enough to give the citizens of Vaiwyn something to believe in. Something to hope for. Fight for.

I only hope it wasn't me.

Everything about this night is to be a repeat of history, ink already dried upon the brittle pages. I have no choice in the path before me, but I don't want it. This is not the duty I was raised to claim, and I would never have picked it for myself.

After avoiding it as much as the thoughts of my dying mother, I drop my gaze to the sword at my feet. My hands clench as I close my eyes. Focus on the steady in and out of my breath.

Despite my fierce insistence earlier that Max is already gone, and my acceptance of that, I don't want to kill him. He didn't ask for this either. Bastian's infernal spirit has stolen his body, his voice, and I've never wished harder for Max to still be there, squashed into a corner of his own mind. But it's clear that what I want doesn't matter. Even if there was evidence that he still held on inside, I have no answer for how to cleave apart both souls. No solution for how to expel Bastian from between bones that don't belong to him.

All I know is a truth, grown into legend. A battle that shook the stars themselves. Elora cut Bastian down and, while she herself was dying, crafted the Vesper Bell. A cage of bronze and rust. Whether or not she meant it to be, her death was never the last page of their story, and tonight, I write the epilogue.

Vaiwyn's fate rests in my hands, and my ability to thrust Mierlin into Max's chest.

I think I might throw up.

That fruitless hunt for a distraction spills forth something else instead.

"Did you know I didn't even *like* Max in the beginning?"

Isaac gives me a soft yet bemused look, my rushed question taking him by

surprise as much as it has me. When he shakes his head, my heart squeezes. I suppose he wouldn't know. It's too surreal, telling the brother who means the world to me about someone he likely didn't know existed until recently, yet who is equally as important to me. Months spent hoarding Max, and I now regret that with marrow-deep bitterness. I kept him to myself when I should have shared how wonderful he was to those who matter most. They wouldn't have held it against me, and now it's too late.

"I find that hard to believe," he says, a playful skepticism entering his tone.

"Well, I did," I retort, staring across the courtyard. "Not like him, I mean. He started working for Tamzin last year and I think I passed him in the halls a few times before he approached me." I was visiting Father, and with Max's office right beside the tower—he popped out of his doorway as though he'd been waiting for me. "He came on so strong. Or maybe not. I don't know. For me, it's always too much at first and everything in me just rejects it."

I bite my lip, a chill creeping over me. That's another thing I never shared with my brother. Although, before I figured myself out with Max, I still felt like the broken doll in the toy chest, left behind. That wasn't something I wanted to tell my brother back then.

But to my shock, Isaac nods. "I get it. Always suspected you landed closer to where I was on that scale than Aida." When I tilt my head in confusion, he adds, "Aida kissed any girl who would let her before Nikole captured her entire world. I'm guessing you need to know a person first before you even want to kiss them. And I just don't feel the desire to kiss anyone at all."

I frown, trying to wrap my head around this new facet of Isaac. "How ... how have we never talked about this before?"

"Neither of us asked." He raises the whiskey in a mock salute. "And look, we're still us."

"Well, thank you for telling me," I say lamely.

"Likewise. You were saying?"

I gladly accept the bottle from him again. "Right, Max. I don't even remember what he said. Some line that might have worked on any other girl, but I'm pretty sure I just gave him a weird look and left." With distance and history between it, the memory makes me smile now.

"So, what changed?"

"Honestly? I think Father meddled." Color flushes my cheeks. I never told him my feelings about relationships either. But considering some of the

gentle comments he made, especially about Max after that first disastrous meeting, he must have pieced things together from the very few relationships I did try, and fail miserably at, navigating.

Isaac chuckles. “Of course he did. That man was far more perceptive than we gave him credit for.”

“The next time Max came up to me, it was to apologize and ask if I wanted to accompany him to the bookstore.”

After that, he would stop if he saw me in the hall and ask me questions. The things I liked, if I had a favorite tea shop to frequent, which season I thrived in. It made me feel so *seen*. Then, unable to help myself, I started peeking inside his office to say hello. Max steadily became my best friend over lunches in sheltered courtyards and walks to the post office. The day I first took his hand and tied us together, two months after Father died—I’ll never forget that perfect, beautiful look on his face.

The only person who made the effort to understand me first.

“The rest is history,” I whisper. Isaac gives my knee a reassuring squeeze.

My sigh is a thick plume of fog. I run clawed fingers through my damp hair, dislodging flakes of snow. Another gulp of the foul drink goes down. A bloody ring of lipstick smears the mouth of the bottle. I haven’t worn the color in several days, but today it felt right. A piece of armor all my own.

A greencoat mounts the steps, her arms laden with service-issued rifles. She casts an awed glance over both the sword and me, and it makes me squirm. The way her eyes gleam, it’s as though she sees only the Lost Alchemist instead of a scared eighteen-year-old. I draw Mierlin into my lap. Without a sheath, its heat is a match to the warmth beneath my skin.

The constable walks past my brother, never breaking stride as she hands him a rifle and carries on to supply those already settling down inside.

“What’s that for?” I ask Isaac, remembering how poor a shot he was the last time he used one.

He peers down the sight of the rifle before propping it against his knee. “Well, not all of us have fancy swords.”

I flinch but lay a protective hand over the hilt.

He notices and grabs my arm, twisting me to face him. The set of his features is as stern as I’ve ever seen it. It’s so out of character that a frisson of dread lances through my chest. “I wasn’t going to do this until you were leaving, but you have to survive, Mina.”

“That is the plan,” I say with a weak and unconvincing laugh.

“I mean it.” He gives me a slight shake. “I’m not losing you, too.”

A frail smile flicks the corner of my mouth up. I tap my heart. “I have faith in her.”

“Not her. *You*.” He wraps a firm hand around my nape and presses his forehead to mine. “Whatever happens, whatever you feel about Max, or whatever that sick bastard plants inside your head to sway you, *she* doesn’t get to throw your body away.”

“She won’t.”

“And you can’t let her.”

“Isaac, I *won’t*.” I pull back, breaking his hold, but catch his falling hand. His fingers are icy. “She’s not in control. I am.”

I feel the truth of that, too. Bastian has wholly claimed Max’s body, roaming Vaiwyn in it without his consent, but Elora has not tried to seize me the same. She hasn’t even spoken to me yet, but her warm presence throughout every cell is impossible to ignore. Now that she’s grounded herself, Elora is compatible and intimate, not hostile.

“Actually, I’m insulted you think I’d go down without a fight.”

“I’ve seen you do things out of pure spite just to prove you could.” He grins, then shrugs. “I’m making sure that’s still the case.”

I don’t think spite is how I would describe this skittering feeling. It’s too coarse a word. Too wrathful for a blur of emotion that seems incomplete.

“I’m coming with you,” he blurts. “To the bridge.”

“No, you are *not*.” Mierlin slips off my lap. “Saints, Isaac, no. It’ll be too dangerous.”

“You’re my little sister. You think I’m going to let you do this on your own?”

“We should go now.”

Vanya cuts a path through the courtyard toward us, a heavy chain of ivy following behind. A flick of her finger guides it into the fountain to secure the battered granite remains of the Lost Alchemist. I swallow hard. It’s difficult not to see that as an omen.

“The Carpenter and Sculptor are on their way there.”

“So soon?” Isaac asks. “But there’s still...” He cranes his neck to view the clock tower above. “Over an hour and a half until sunset.”

“It’s best we’re prepared.”

My heart flips over and squeezes, running my blood cold in dizzying pulses. Elora's ever-present heat seems to slap the nerves out of my veins, only for them to regroup and return with reinforcements. I take one last fortifying gulp and hand the whiskey to Isaac.

But I can't move. I fear my knees have frozen in place.

"Hey." His elbow nudges my side. "Can an alley cat do this?"

He takes a swig, and it cracks a smile through the ice, remembering that moment in the University's library. My big brother, there to comfort me when little was at stake, and he's here now when everything is on the line. I still don't know what I did to deserve him in my life, but I'll never give him back.

I use the sword to help me stand, only to stumble once I straighten.

A tremor rolls through the earth, shaking the courtyard. Snow shivers free from between branches and statues.

Deep at first, the rumbling beneath my feet ripples closer and closer to the surface, rattling wood and stone in a wordless threat. Shouts echo through the unnatural gloom from both in and outside Lyndell Hall. The lamps gutter out one by one.

The ground breaks apart with a piercing crack.

It starts at the base of the stairs, snaking through the fountain's core toward the gates. People run to either side, away from the jagged black line that splits the cobbles and cuts through strings of iron and copper. The Lost Alchemist's statue gives way as the rift widens by several feet. Ice splinters inward; the little water remaining beneath drains into the tear.

As suddenly as it started, the shaking stops.

A dense silence blankets the city. There's no sound at all. My ears feel stuffed with cotton, attuned to only my ragged breathing.

So still is the courtyard that the streak of dull white from within the divide captures my eye instantly. Something ascending from the darkness. Spindly and desiccated.

A hand. Composed entirely of bone.

As is the arm that rises into view; the body it hoists out of the hole. Nothing but a patchwork of bones held together by sheer force of Bastian's will.

The enchantment of shock ruptures with a woman's shrill scream.

As those in the courtyard come back to life, the dead rise from below. In

perfect skeletal replicas or flawed monstrosities, with femurs jutting out in place of rib cages or heads tucked against elbows made of spine—it doesn't matter.

The bones laid so carefully in the catacombs beneath us now claw their way up to the surface. *This* is the power the Saints feared Bastian would unlock with his relic.

Above, an electric thread of violet twists through those ominous clouds; the falling snow flashes like purple fireflies. Each pulse vindicates my lingering doubt. This false dusk—it *is* fabricated. Somehow, this is also his doing, and the attack has started too early. We're caught unawares, outside, and away from all our plans.

And the dead are impatient. Hungry for life, for blood, as they reach for those running to get inside. A gurgling cry reaches across the courtyard as the first constable goes down, a rib punctured through his throat.

Watching him writhe on the ground, drowning in his own gore, I don't know what to do. Disfigured bodies of bone continue to rise like ants from their nest, and all I have is a sword. Good for living flesh and muscle, but on skeletons fastened together by magic—is there even a point to trying to harm them?

Saints, I don't know what to do.

A prayer sent to them all, and one answers.

Before realizing it, I leap down the stairs. My feet move of their own accord, my body flush with fiery warmth. Heat surges into my right arm. The Lost Alchemist's sword lifts high and swings back without my consent. But when the blade whistles down, I am of the same mind as the Saint guiding me from within.

The clash of steel against bone feels wrong. There's nothing to cut, nothing to maim, but they still split apart at the empty joints and rattle onto the cobbles.

Wrong, but I revel in the perverted rightness of what Elora and I just did together.

"Get inside!" I shout to a frantic woman shaking off the bones that landed on her. A permitting clerk, I think. Better suited to stamping building permits, yet willing to help board up Lyndell Hall from the hammer at her belt. "Go!"

I don't wait to see if she listens. Although my heart is stuck in my gullet, my terror unfathomable, Elora leads me fearlessly. Like water spilling into an

empty hollow, more heat fills the muscles needed to spin and slash at the next skeleton. The sword slices from shoulder to hip, the spine flopping in two.

Again and again, I turn, the Saint inside an ally rather than a foe. My fear of this fight is still there, but Elora's fire smooths its jagged edges. Fingers of warmth seep into my thoughts, and once more I perceive these tendrils as her way of speaking to me. Instilling me with faith in her, confidence in myself, hope in *us*.

Bones heap around me as we carve toward the fountain, leaving a path to safety for those ill-equipped to defend themselves.

I whirl. Empty eye sockets and groping hands confront me, near enough to smell familiar chemicals and something altogether rotten on its feigned breath. Both of my hands grasp the hilt and raise it above my head.

Bile rises in my throat when I realize I'm too slow. This skeleton is too close, too fast.

Crack!

A hole punches through the polished expanse of skull from the bullet Isaac shot. The skeleton topples, exploding into pieces upon impact.

Panting, I look at my brother and nod my thanks. He reloads his rifle before firing on another skeleton crawling toward him. More armed citizens reach the top of the steps; more shots ring out.

Vicious sprouts of bramble erupt from the earth, snaring bones and ripping them apart—the Withering Healer at work.

But what is dead cannot die again.

Fragments fall to the cobbles, but never rest. Fingers claw along on their own, one crooked digit at a time. Jaws clack together as well-placed blows punch heads off their necks. Legs severed by thorn and root hobble about. The Lost Alchemist and I bring the sword around, splitting a skull in two at the same moment a dislocated arm wrenches a white-haired constable to the ground and stabs her belly.

For every skeleton dismantled, three more rise from the chasm to take its place. I'm a blur of strength and might with Elora guiding Mierlin, but it feels useless. *I feel useless.*

Where is Bastian?

My thoughts are mine alone, driven by a desperate sense of survival. There's no sign of him in the chaos. Only an undulating sea of bones and snow and a cacophony of noise.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do, where I should go. The advantage I relied upon earlier is gone, and I can't think further than a few seconds ahead of me.

Bastian has to show himself at some point. Elora and I are finally out in the open—I doubt he'll pass up the opportunity to play with us. All I can do is stay alive until then.

A sharp tug at my ankle nearly drags me to the cobbles. I whirl with a scream, scrambling to knock off the dismembered hand crawling up my body. When I pry its fingers off, each dislocated knuckle gives an audible pop.

A ragged voice calls from behind me. "Mina!"

Isaac appears at my side. His bullets must have run out; he swings the rifle like a club, decapitating two in a single shower of bones. As he steps over them to face me, they shiver, trying to come back together.

"Why are you still out—"

His shout breaks off when a re-formed skeleton trips between us, Vanya's brambles plunged into its eyes. Elora sharpens my reflexes, and we cut it down as one.

Isaac grabs my arm with red-stained fingers. A long gouge stretches from his forehead down across his eye and almost to his earlobe. Blood drips into his lashes, but he blinks it away. "Why are you out here?" he demands.

"I'm fighting. What else does it look like?"

Behind Isaac, a pile of bones rises tall with alarming speed. Three skeletons' worth, chattering together to form one enormous *thing*. The snow eddies in the rush of air made as its misshapen arm composed of fragments of spine draws back.

I shove Isaac aside and thrust Mierlin into the warped rib cage of the monstrosity. It freezes, vertebrae fingers inches from encircling my head, then all the bones crash around me.

My brother continues as though there was no interruption. "Mina, go find him!"

"But I don't know where he is!" I retort, brushing a rib off my shoulder.

Except I do. My mouth dries up. There's only one place he would go.

Isaac lifts an arm to wipe away blood and sweat and instead smears it darker over the rest of his face. "We've seen enough to know Bastian likes a touch of fatal irony."

Almost unbidden, my head tips to look at the clock tower. Its shattered dial and broken walls. Viewed through the waltz of snow, my tower is as dark as the false night itself. No life stirs within it.

The moment that thought settles in my mind, the large hand of the clock slides into place at the top of the hour, and ravens burst forth. A chaotic, twisting mass of black feathers and glossy beaks. They pelt across the sky as a screeching horde, then dive to scoop bones into their talons, carrying them throughout the city.

“Shit!” Isaac hisses. He waves his rifle to scare off the birds nearest.

And there, beside the iron number five above, a flash of movement.

A white, featureless face. The silhouette of a body I know well.

“I’m waiting, my love.”

Make this stop, I think back.

“No.” Sharp and cloying, Bastian’s refusal brooks no argument. *“I will have this city, and I’ll have you soon.”*

How can you be so sure?

“Because I know you.”

Me, or Elora?

The chaos in the courtyard clacks to a halt. Every skeleton falls apart. Hundreds of marionettes, collapsing at the feet of their master.

“You’ve made it clear you have no intention of ruling at my side, so I offer this one, final time: Join me, or finish this.”

Will you come down here? I retort. *Or hide beside your cage like a coward?*

“This ceasefire won’t last long, and neither will my proposal. I’ve waited a thousand years for the strength to claim this city again, but my patience has worn through.” I hear the smile in his voice, a coldness that steals into my lungs and throttles. *“It’s up to you, my love, how our story will end.”*

I look around at the heaps of bones; already they twitch. Threatening to rise at the slightest provocation. Vanya’s magic is a salty haze thrown over the bones. Thorns erupt from between cobbles to ensnare the fragments, but the pieces are small and many, her plants only able to grow in such a way. And the green ropes are withering one by one.

“You are their savior, are you not?”

I nod, answering both him and myself. This is something I have to do on my own.

“*Come home, my love.*”

“Fine,” I whisper aloud. “I’m coming, *dear.*”

Twenty-Five

Every day for almost a year, and countless times before that, I scaled these stairs. Their stones worn smooth by innumerable ancestors, I could traipse them with my eyes closed. I know the way they turn, where the cracks in the walls are, how many steps exist between each landing.

Two hundred and eighty-seven stairs stand between me and the belfry, and never have they seemed so daunting. Because what waits at the top is no longer the home I recognize. There's to be no peace, no warmth nor open arms.

Only the boy I love, and death.

Unexpectedly feverish, I drop Mierlin with a loud clank and tear off my sweater. The blood that stains the torn edges in the black wool leaves bigger marks on the white blouse beneath. I didn't feel the cuts made from bones in the fight, and I don't see them now—they healed like all the rest.

When I pick it up again, the blade feels too heavy. Weighted with my fear and anger and the promise of fate. I let it and Elora be my guides, tipping me forward to bend my knee and coerce my toes onto the first step.

Although I move slow, the upward spiral is dizzying. I feel tipsy, but that's not right. I didn't drink enough whiskey. Still, I must carefully place my foot on each tread before rising to the next. Perhaps I'm foolishly trying to delay the inevitable. Every time my sole lands on a step, my mind gnaws over what will happen once there are no more to climb.

Success or failure.

Life or death.

A broken heart or a still one.

There is no grey. No secret third option I can take. Only one or the other, and either will permanently alter Vaiwyn or me. Such acerbic thoughts make

me falter, so I cast them over my shoulder. Instead, I focus on the faces of those I'm doing this for, a list that holds more substance.

Isaac and Aida. Ma and Father. Emiko. Quinn. Nikole and Hana. Tamzin. Patrik. Elora.

Max.

Me.

Soon enough, 287 stairs fall away beneath me, and I cross the threshold into the belfry.

The cold is a sharp slap. Each breath fills with needles, embroidering my lungs with clumsy hands. Some deviant winter seized my tower, invaded through the gaping hole in the wall. Frost crunches underfoot and every surface glitters in the lamplight that ignites seconds late. Monstrous shadows flicker behind beams, drawing illusions of nightmares in the corners. They play tricks on my mind, compel me to halt in the middle of the room and peer into those spaces to ensure that no beasts of stone or iron lurk there.

Everything is silent but for the click of the clock, the swish of the pendulum above my head. *Where is he?*

Before panic grips me, I take a deep breath and let the reliable sounds ground me. Let their pace sink into my skin, to sing along my bones and melt into my veins. My eyes fall shut as I just ... listen. Breathe in, then out, in time to the noise that lulls me to sleep each night. Exhale my nerves. Inhale a sour scent of blight.

I'm not alone.

My eyes snap open and I jump back, a deluge of heat raising my blade.

The clash of the lancet as it falls onto Mierlin is a deafening knell.

I stagger backward with a shout. My toes dig into the floor, my teeth gritted as both hands white-knuckle the hilt of my sword, pressing my weight against Bastian's. The Lost Alchemist's molten warmth floods my muscles, tempering them with her power.

Slowly, my arms trembling, I force the tip of his small relic away from my throat. Except, small it is not. To my horror, his lancet *grows*. Lengthening in his grip to resemble a wicked knife made of lethal bone.

The balance between us freezes, locks in a tangle of battle.

Then, with an amused note on his tongue, Bastian leans forward. Like the first drops of rain turning into a downpour, his strength outstrips mine. My elbows tuck in tight as he steals back that precious space my sword carved

out.

His body is nearly flush with mine when he emerges from Arbutus's shadow, and the light washes over his face. I gasp. My foot slides, lowering me to one knee beneath him.

The man before me—I hardly recognize the changes wrought in him.

He still looks like Max, but a terrible, half-decayed version of him. Waxen and bloodless skin clings to bone, creating unnatural hollows and protrusions. Eyes too dark and shiny with rot fixate on me. Bitten lips part in a leer, teeth clacking.

Breath sweetly spoiled, he snarls, "Hello, my love." This time, his voice is all Bastian, and I'm grateful for the distinction. It gives my hatred a better target.

Elora and I push up with the blade. The sudden movement catches him off guard, enough for me to ram the pommel first under Bastian's jaw, then in the gut. I claim a few steps back and hold Mierlin out in front of me. The filaments wrapping the blade glimmer as my arms shake.

"I am *not* your love," I spit, widening my stance.

A new voice curls inside my head. Feminine but low, unintelligible. Thin as a whisper and loud as a shout. The Lost Alchemist's heat stokes to an inferno, coating every bone with a near vengeance. Melting and re-forming, remaking us both in the same image. Of one mind, heart, and soul.

Mierlin stops shivering.

Bastian chuckles as he gathers himself, drops into a more defensive position. He twirls the bleached lancet before snatching it in a fist veined with black. "Think what you like, darling, but it changes nothing." He runs his relic down my blade, twists it back up to the tip. Sparks fly from the scratch of notched bone on steel. "*It's your turn to fall.*"

His growl in my head is the only warning before he bursts into action, and then there's no space, no time for me to think of anything but where that lancet goes.

Freed by blood and a fabled glassmith's magic, Bastian's relic is now little longer than my forearm and better compared to a dagger, but Saints, he uses it well. Pale as moonlight, he wields it like an extension of his arm against my blade. A ravenous blur of slashes, thrusts, and bites; it's been so long since such hungry teeth fed.

Bastian and I exchange blows with ferocious speed. Strike after ringing

strike, igniting the dust that hovers in the air.

Elora guides my feet when I move too slow, adds power behind each deflection, and directs my cuts. Sweat sticks my hair to my forehead. Elora's expertise keeps me in this fight, but too often I'm left on the defensive. I squander ground quickly, Mierlin up to block when it begs to attack.

With every blow, it becomes harder and harder to hold on to the list of names I'm fighting for. They're just stark reminders of what I edge closer to losing in each retreated step. Even with Elora alongside my bones, *I am losing*.

When my heel grazes the leg of my worktable, there's no grace in my next maneuver. Only cold-blooded panic.

Eyes wide, I whirl to the side, and trip over a stool. I catch myself on a crate. A loud thud sounds before I turn around.

Then: "Mina!"

Despite the heat urging me away, I rebel against her. That shout sounded like ... I tighten my grip on Mierlin. A flaw fissures through Bastian's violent expression as he wrenches his relic free from the table. There and gone in a blink—a convincing image of fear.

"Max?" I whisper, hardly daring to breathe. The alarm lilting my name sounded like him. Not some thieved version, but *Max*, lacking the icy emptiness that has raided my head over and over. His own voice breaking through a crack.

Reckless hope explodes through me. Was I wrong? Is he still in there?

As Bastian faces me, my gaze roams over him, possessed. Searching for a seam. Hunting as though a loose thread trails behind him, and if I tug, I can unravel the Saint from the boy he took.

I realize how much this moment's distraction costs me when Bastian flips the lancet in his hand and grins broad enough to unhinge his jaw.

He pounces, and Elora cuts through my daze, forcing my body back several hurried steps.

Rage at myself twines with hers. That wasn't Max. How have I still not learned? What I heard and saw—it was just a ruse, a trick. One I fell for like a fish for a shiny lure.

Bastian's slashes push me back, back, back. It's all Elora can do to keep me from stumbling. Through the archway of a fallen beam and into the corner of the tower, where shadows web everything. My shoulder slams

against a sturdy column, and I almost topple. I manage to right myself, but the blunder drops my sword hand.

And leaves room for Bastian to move in.

I cry out from the searing pain. My left hand reaches across to clutch my upper arm. Blood spills over my fingers, stains my white sleeve, but my effort to stanch the wound dies when I heave Mierlin up to parry Bastian's next blow. The gesture makes me wail.

There's something else under the pain, cold and foreign. It spreads like creeping ivy. Healing heat concentrates in my arm, but only the bleeding stops. The gash and this hostile feeling remain to fester.

Bastian holds the lancet up before his gaunt face for inspection, pausing as if to give me a chance to collect myself. Like this isn't a fair fight otherwise. I hate that I'm proving him right.

Suddenly, I notice the tear in his own sleeve, the burgundy linen drenched black with demonic blood. More seeps from his bicep as he lifts the lancet higher to catch the light. The copper tang of my blood clashes with the rancid scent of his. That's a fresh cut, but I don't remember my sword touching him. Nor does he seem aware of the injury that matches mine.

His eyes meet my gaze over his relic, and without breaking it, his tongue darts out to lick the lancet clean. A red bead sits on his shredded lip, and for the briefest moment, his skin turns translucent. Glassy enough to show dead veins, empty sockets, and the outline of teeth. There and gone like the frost melting from the drops of blood that fall.

I lunge with a scream and push him away.

Our fight resumes, more violent than before. I still don't know how to claim the upper hand. Every opportunity to move in for a fatal strike—lost in hesitation.

I dodge free of Bastian's next slash, and in the small pocket of quiet that follows the missed blow, I hear the distant crack of a rifle. My pounding heart skips a beat. If they've renewed shooting outside, the bones, if not all of Vaiwyn, must be reawakening. *Damn it.* There's no time left for uncertainty.

I have to end this.

Bastian flings his arm wide with the lancet. He misses again, leaving his neck exposed. Elora flames through my arm to bring Mierlin down hard, and I let her with both hands on the hilt.

We slash into his feint together, understanding too late that it's another

trick.

He cuts in and around my blade, knocking it off course with his forearm as he dives. Thrown off-balance, my arms hook over his shoulder. He snags my waist, and we crash to the floor, him on top.

Darkness corrupts my vision; we've skidded underneath the broken Vesper Bell. Mierlin tumbles from my grip. I strain to reach it, but Bastian readjusts his position. His knees thump against the floorboards as he straddles my hips.

"Look at us," he sneers, indifferent to my struggling beneath him. There's an added density to his body, as if lead lines Bastian's soul.

He waves the lancet at the rusted bronze swallowing us. The sharp-edged clapper Vaiwyn never reclaimed lies abandoned to the side, the jagged crack down Arbutus's belly still trapping an edge of light. It smells of a storm about to be unleashed.

"To think you made me spend a thousand years in here."

"You deserved it," I snap.

Bastian surges forward and seizes my throat.

The strength in his fingers is iron, but I sense him holding back as his thumbs press into my windpipe. Toying with me, even now. Blood floods my face as only stifled gurgle sounds escape.

"Should I do it here?"

His grip relaxes, letting me breathe again. Air rushes in, and I cough it all up.

I still as the lancet grazes the tender hollow of my throat. Silent tears spill into my hairline. Bastian gently drags the point under my jaw, tracing the necklace he'll cut for me. His voice is deceptively light, as though remarking upon the weather. "I think it a fitting end for us, Elora. Wouldn't you agree? For you to lose your life where you took mine?"

My foot scuffs the floor as I renew my fight to get out from under him. I can't do this. I can't let him win. Not this easily. I owe myself more than that.

He chuckles behind a tight-lipped smile. His relic trails down my neck, and the tip pulls my medallion free of my collar. He scoffs at the smoothed image of the Lost Alchemist.

I scratch the ground, my outstretched arm hunting while I glare at him in disgust.

The boy who never pushed me to more than I could handle or trust, who helped me through the nights when I needed company, and who sheepishly

handed me a box of stars, is gone. All that remains is this vile creature filled with poison and rotting malcontent.

My fingers scrape metal, warm to the touch.

“I’ve decided.” Bastian squints at the chain before he rips it from my neck, the links popping as easily as silk. The lancet returns to my throat, and a sharp pain fills the hollow with wetness. I gasp. “I’ll do it here.”

Heat roars through my hand, nails pulling on individual threads of metal.

He bends to whisper, his breath ice against my ear. “Let’s bring this full circle, shall we?”

More tears fall as he pulls back to delight in the symmetry he’s composing through Elora’s death. Red seethes in my vision. He takes pleasure from this, but he’s not given a single thought to me. All he cares about is the Saint under my skin, but I started here, too. This city has taken so much from me in the name of duty. I always accepted it, was proud of it even, but I refuse to lose *anything* more to it.

One last dig and the hilt of the sword rolls into my palm.

I slam the blade against the side of the Vesper.

Arbutus no longer rings the way it should, vibrating up and out to shake the very bedrock of Vaiwyn. The crack down its belly ruins the acoustics, alters its song into something less rich and full, but its toll is overwhelming all the same.

From deep within the Vesper unfurls a guttural groan of damnation. It shivers through the rusted metal, the floor; shudders inside my bones and soul.

It’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

And Bastian, for all his years spent between the layers of this bell, cannot handle it.

The lancet falls as his hands clap over his ears. His open mouth reveals a black interior rimmed with lines of spittle, but I don’t hear his scream of agony.

As he writhes atop me, unable to escape Arbutus’s peal, I knock him off. Mierlin’s hilt leaves a long gouge in the floorboards as I scramble out from under the bell’s lip, but not before kicking Bastian’s relic into the shadowed corners.

Already the Vesper’s echo is fading as I straighten. My throat still aches from Bastian’s fingers, but I welcome the bitter air in my lungs.

At my feet, Bastian lies entirely at my mercy, unarmed and defenseless, and I recognize my one chance to end this. The sword rises above my head.

“Mina—don’t.”

My arms falter. An alarmed voice identical to what stopped me earlier. *Max’s voice*. I squeeze my eyes tight against the hurt it causes. Even carrying such fear, the sound soothes something feral inside me. Only a few days separate our last moment together and I miss him so much it *burns*.

But nothing has changed.

“Mina, let him—”

“No!” I roar, my voice rupturing. “Go. To. *Hell*.”

It’s the same deception as before. A wicked fiend’s last desperate attempt to manipulate. He thinks he can play me like he does Vaiwyn, tempt my broken heart into letting my guard down, but I don’t believe it.

Still snagged in the throes of the Vesper’s echo, Bastian continues to thrash. His expression flickers between the agony of a monster and that of a boy, and I’m done with this sport of his.

The stubborn creature in my chest screams my grief as I pray for Max’s forgiveness, for him to find peace. I cleave the sword through the air.

Heat wrenches me backward.

“*Elora!*” I shout. Mierlin clangs into the floor, my body bent over it at a lazy angle. I heave on the hilt, but my muscles have become sap, sticky and weak. “What are you doing? He has to—Bastian needs to *die*.”

Elora floods my legs with her flames, tipping me upright and pulling my limbs away from Bastian. Toward the stairs encircling the belfry.

My faith in her is the only thing that keeps me from resisting. It’s not love that drew her back—it can’t be. Love didn’t stop her from killing him the first time. She must know something I don’t. Why else would she waste the precious opportunity I just had?

I release a frustrated shriek. It was hard enough to lift this sword over him once.

The stairs creak as I climb—I take them three at a time. Leap over the wood that has splintered, over the debris that still litters the floor. Landing by landing, turn by turn, I ring the tower.

Once I’m halfway to the highest platform, the railing beneath my palm quivers. My pulse thunders in my ears, the Lost Alchemist pushing heat deeper into my legs.

He's coming.

I feel little relief when I reach the top of the stairs. A searing stitch burns through my ribs, threatening to split my side like overripe fruit. But I can't stop, not yet.

I follow Elora's lead, crossing under the long arbor that controls the hands of the north-facing clock dial to the far edge of the platform.

Where I have nowhere else to go.

"Fuck!" I smack the rail. "Elora, you brought me up here. *Help* me, damn it."

Several solid thuds thunder up the stairs. My chest heaves as I spin, raising Mierlin.

Bastian's disheveled hair appears first, the rest of him sauntering into view. He didn't need to climb; I've seen him travel through strands of darkness. The decision to slowly follow is yet another in a long line of deliberate choices made to unnerve me.

And it works.

Not once does he regard his surroundings. Instead, his gaze locks on me.

"*Clever little mouse.*" His soft laugh in my head is barely audible over the din of the clock tower's vital organs. All clicking and grinding and humming through their orchestra of movements to create a single minute. Under my feet, the platform gently tilts with each swing of the pendulum.

"*You've gone and trapped yourself.*"

Bastian walks to the left; I match him.

He tries again with a quick dodge to the right, and I mimic once more.

Taller than I, he has to duck under the northern arbor, the lancet in his grip catching the lamplight. I scurry backward toward the south, terrified to take my eyes off him. Silently, I beg Elora over and over to guide me as she did before, but my prayers are ignored.

We stalk each other around the platform, playing a tentative game where just one person seems to know the rules. When I near the stairs, I'm tempted to race back down them, but I've yet to catch my breath. Nor would I stand a chance.

As we each mirror the other, my mind races. What am I supposed to do? I have to kill him, but how? This sword, this *relic*, was meant to be the key, but even with Elora's strength and skill behind me, I've only scratched him.

And the Lost Alchemist—Saints *damn* her. Whatever scraps of confidence

I managed to scavenge are gone with her. She ruined our best shot at ending this and now sits idle in my limbs, letting me take the lead when I don't want it.

I shriek when Bastian appears before me, stepping between shadows with his lancet raised. He moves too fast; I never see his fist coming.

Mierlin tumbles from my grip, knocked loose from my fingers, and clangs to the floor. Bastian kicks it to the edge of the platform.

Both of my hands latch on to his wrist as he drives the lancet toward my heart. The tip shakes as two opposing forces dictate where it should go. Black veins strain in his forearms as I push, but he's stronger. Bastian's jaw clenches as he stares into my eyes. A fire burns in the back of his, promising chaos.

The blade grazes skin, nicking my shoulder.

My hands blanch around his, slick with sweat. I lean far enough over that if Bastian's arm encircled my waist, this would be a lovers' embrace, a passionate kiss imminent. As it is, the Lost Alchemist has deserted me, pooling into my feet and locking my body in this tragic charade. I'm left with only my draining strength and wavering will. A parchment-thin shield between living and dying. My watch slips out of my pocket, cracks against the floorboards.

A prick above my heart, sharp and cold. A trickle of wet over my ribs.

I failed.

While the Vesper's thirteenth toll—the unleashing of the malevolence now inside the boy I love—wasn't my doing, *this* is.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I grit my teeth. Not even the Saint wrapped around my bones believes in me.

Maybe I should give in. It might even be easier, joining him. Letting it all burn. Elora gave her life because she knew of no other way, but I—

She gave her life.

The thought strikes like lightning. Bright and blazing and glorious.

Bastian presses the lancet a fraction deeper into my skin, dredging up that awful foreign sensation. Only this time no heat rises to eat it away, to heal it.

Rotten black dries at the hollow of Bastian's throat and bicep, wets his shoulder, and spreads over his heart. My wounded reflection. I flinch, a feeble apprehension connecting my thoughts as a flare of translucency crosses his face. The briefest glimpse of bone beneath.

Then warm brown eyes observe me.

My surprise allows the blade to slip a little deeper. Between blinks, black then brown then black again. I stop breathing. *It's a trick*, I remind myself, *a pitiless trick*.

But the next time those familiar eyes emerge from beneath a flutter of lashes, twin lines knit between his slanted brows, and I *know* it wasn't a trick at all. That I was wrong. Everything in me stutters beneath an ill-placed relief.

Max is still there. *Max is still there*.

"Let him do it—"

Bastian shakes his head with a series of bone cracks, restoring the darkness in full and eclipsing Max's voice. Whatever foothold he took back from beneath Bastian's soul, it's tenuous at best. But what he said, started beneath the Vesper and said in full now, it marries with my own terrifying thoughts. And I trust him.

I understand what to do.

My hands relax, falling to my side.

Bastian's weight slides the blade through flesh and between bone, like tearing a moth's wing. I feel it all as a single blinding spot of agony. My mouth drops open in a ragged gasp, eyes widening. I arch into the pain, into him.

The relic sinks into my heart.

Ice of the cruelest nature leaks into my soul. Leaches deep into muscles, veins, marrow, until I'm numb to everything but the cold.

Bastian releases the lancet, and we stagger apart.

I must hit the platform's railing; my spine bows over it as I struggle to remain upright.

Bastian collapses to the floor. Darkness spreads across his chest, over his dead heart. His mouth lifts and falls, pinches and widens. His expression flashes between wild delight and abject horror. Two souls within one shell—Max's and Bastian's reactions at odds with the other as they stare at me.

My chin drops, as if in a trance. Several inches of bone protrude from where life still flutters behind my ribs. I raise trembling hands, but only have the strength to graze my fatal wound.

Blood. So much blood. It coats my fingertips, smears my palms, dyes the front of my shirt.

All of it ... all mine.

The ground rises to meet me. I land heavily on my side, one arm flung above my head. There's a ringing in my ears. Bells of my own making, striking with the pulse of a slowing heart. Silver winks before my face like an enchantment—my father's watch.

A vibration through the floorboards draws my leaden, hazing eyes up.

Bastian's features continue to flip in a motley of emotion. His movements are as much at war. Max reaches a hand out for me; Bastian wrenches it back. A knee shifts forward, as if to heave his body toward me, then swings around to tuck his leg in behind. His mouth moves, forming words I cannot hear, cannot make out. The dark stain mirroring mine blooms, his rotten blood blotting the floor.

Winter continues to pour from my pierced heart. I curl the watch into my weak grip but barely feel its steady tick. I half expect the nails digging into the wood to frost over, my chest to harden, unable to expand inside a crust of ice.

My thoughts crawl. Sluggish and incoherent.

The pool of blood beneath me drips between the floorboards.

With a feeble and pathetic thud, my heart beats its last.

Twenty-Six

Wake up.”

The voice is a tidal wave through my mind. All weight and violence, unrelenting. A shout to serve as a beacon in the starving dark, capturing my attention with equal measures of fear and curiosity.

“I said: Wake. Up.”

A feminine voice. Haughty yet soft, demanding that I obey.

But with what? Hollowness reigns over my body. Emptiness sits in my bones, and it feels ... fitting. A warm comfort rather than a flaw. There's nothing left to give, and I would wish it no other way. Nothing left of me to listen, to respond.

“You are not yet done, girl. Wake up!”

And I do.

The world is a pastel mirage of stained glass.

I sit up with a broken gasp. Water sloughs off my frame. My hands rake down my chest, only to find it smooth. Unharmed. A long, airy robe drapes my shoulders. Untouched by the wet and woven with threads snapped from the tails of falling stars.

I observe my chest again; press a hesitant palm over my unscathed breast and receive nothing in return.

“Mina. Listen.”

A delicate, glittering light suffuses this barren plane. As I look around, the haze blurs my vision, hiding glimpses of what I suspect are dreams. Stories. Secrets. Fanciful and not real.

Here, in this peculiar in-between—a place, I realize with little emotion, that only death could have ferried me to—I don't know pain. Don't recall spilled blood, grief, or mind-numbing cold.

Except, wait—what is that? I frown. I hear a sort of clacking, faint and distant.

My head swivels, searching with new purpose.

“I have something to show you.”

The floor beneath me is hard, covered in a thin, crystalline layer of water. It stretches as far as I can see into the mist, a sheet of glass laid atop a world I know better. One darker, more dangerous than this.

I drag my fingers through with a splash, and a pane falls into the gloom.

Vaiwyn. Only, it’s not home as I recognize it. I shift to my knees, planting a hand on either side of the window, eyes glued to the slightly distorted image unveiled below.

This is a much younger Vaiwyn. A city still learning to stand. Cleaner and brighter, with crisp edges and textured details that time has not yet worn smooth.

The courtyard of the past that unfolds is both stranger and friend. In the center of the fountain stands not the Lost Alchemist, but a proud unicorn. Forelegs kicked out in stone, its spiraled horn piercing a sky frozen and grey. Its west wing is not yet constructed, but Lyndell Hall and the clock tower looming over the scene are the same.

That clacking rings out again, only this time razor-sharp and as close as the memory fresh in my head. A sword clashing with a lancet of bone.

Flashes of movement on the edge of the window coalesce into two battling figures. If my heart still beat, it would stutter at the sight of the Lost Alchemist slashing her sword down upon an obscured opponent.

In Elora’s truest form, in the aura that wreathes her saintly figure, every piece of her *shines*. Long hair loose down her back is fluid coils of mercury. The strands flow over shoulders glittering in metal scales, perfect disks of gold, silver, and copper. The metal clings to her towering frame as skin—armor grown from within. Through the natural creases of her body leaks molten flame, the heat of which I remember like a warm kiss.

The Lost Alchemist shouts. Her words don’t reach me in this replay of the past, lost to centuries eroded. She draws her sword arm back, and I notice the golden tears she weeps.

A quick sidestep, a feint to the left, then she plunges Mierlin up into the gut of her faceless foe.

Before she can wrench it free, Elora doubles over with a silent cry. Her

gauntleted hand slips off the hilt as her victim staggers. He buffs into focus, and I gasp.

Bastian's unholiness exposed is ghastly. Bone upon bone, lashed together with charred threads of sinew and shriveled nets of vein, masquerading as a body. Blood like ink drips from between cracked ribs, spilling around Mierlin, stabbed through a withered heart.

Elora crashes to her knees. In a shuddering transformation that seems to split her apart, she returns to what must be her mortal form. A pale and freckled young woman with auburn hair, she resembles the statues I've seen throughout the Vaiwyn of my time. One shaking hand clasps her stomach. I don't understand why liquid gold coats her fingers until she lifts them away to reveal a spluttering wound. Bastian never touched her. It's her sword buried in his torso, yet this injury mirrors the fatal blow she dealt him. I graze my chest with gentle fingers.

Her other hand reaches for Bastian as he, too, slumps to the ground. Not for help, but to hold him. To comfort him.

In a stilted movement, Bastian draws Mierlin from his heart, which crumbles to dust. The blade and his lancet both drop against the cobbles as he shifts to his own mortal appearance. A man just as young, with blond hair and the itchy beginnings of a beard; a square face, drained of color and so kind it strikes me as cruel.

He keels over once their fingers interlock, dragging her down with him. Black and gold smear the backs of their hands as they both lay dying.

Elora whispers more to him I can't hear. She strokes his cheek, and although she willingly killed him for his villainy, the love in her eyes is *alive*. A love that Bastian must return. Tears run through the streak of gold she left on his face as he stares at her.

His chest lifts once more, then stills.

What follows next in this memory comes in disjointed fragments. A puzzle put together with pieces missing.

Here, in this in-between, Elora breathes in my ear as I watch below the end of her and Bastian a thousand years ago.

"We were two sides of the same coin, Bastian and I." The haughty tone that woke me is sanded down. Her sadness burdens my shoulders, water soaking into the hem of my robe at last.

The Lost Alchemist of before spreads her hand over Bastian's wound,

smoothing the folds of his blood-stained shirt. She gasps for air. Death has one claw hooked under her chin, luring her step by tottering step into its domain.

“His broken soul was my own. My broken heart, his.”

Bastian’s body shudders. His back bows off the ground. Something starless pours from his mouth, frothing at the edges and twisting as smoke.

It pools inside Elora’s waiting hand. A grim desperation sparks in her dull eyes as she gazes at the black soul cradled in both palms. Death will need to wait a little longer.

“I didn’t understand why we were thus tangled until it was too late.”

She staggers to her feet. Her body barely stays together as she traverses through shadow. Elegant tendrils of gold seep from her skin, only to dive back inside like a clenched fist. Threads of *her* soul, unraveling.

“Our hatred and love for each other were so intertwined, so fundamental to our existence...”

A bell in a tower, newly hammered and polished bronze.

That same bell, coarse and rusted, the inscriptions on the side fused into spiky shapes. The one true Vesper, blessed by empty hands.

“... that it meshed our power.”

A tremor ripples through the city. Glass splinters and stone cracks; birds are knocked from flight and clouds are torn apart. In the Alosse Mountains, the waterfall saddled between two peaks ceases its cascade for one long moment.

“Our relics became extensions of those emotions, every action a mirror so that we suffered and triumphed as one.”

And all the while, a young woman named Ava Strauss, with wide eyes like mine, watches from the doorway. When fingers dripping gold beckon her closer, an instruction on weary lips, she creeps into the belfry out of curiosity, not understanding the legacy she is about to begin.

“So knotted, we couldn’t be separated.”

Elora crawls across the courtyard, fingers sinking into the inky blood that runs between the cobbles. Her soul no longer has a tether. Gilded scraps shed from her body in earnest.

Beside Bastian’s corpse, her sword glows. Softly at first, but deepening to a blinding glare as the filaments down its length thaw and harden and thaw again.

A soul for a bell, and a soul for a blade.

“Not even in death.”

The Lost Alchemist collapses, arm outstretched toward Bastian’s limp hand. Her last breath leaves as a single spark. Vaiwyn weeps. The city she helped build, from little more than a string of magic and a collapsed skeleton, cries for its lost Saint. Every embellishment and trimming, each frame and bracket—molten tears of metal run down buildings and fill the cracks.

“I should have let him go.” Elora’s sigh rustles my hair. *“We should have both died that day, and I’ll never forgive myself for loving him so senselessly. He wasn’t always like that, and I was foolish enough to believe I could somehow save him from his downfall.”*

I wrench my gaze away from the despairing scene below.

“But my mistake only caused more death.”

A tall figure, gauzed by the glittering haze, stands behind me. Despite her features swimming in and out of focus, I know who she is. It’s difficult not to recognize what’s been nestled inside my heart these last days.

“In trapping our souls,” she says, helping me rise, *“I believed my love and I could be reunited. One day, we could come back together. A half-life for us both, hoping he might change, and we could continue building Vaiwyn as the others have.”*

A gentle splash, and the water lapping at our feet shimmers outward. Elora is the epicenter of the ripple. I realize what dropped when another disturbs the surface. We stand in a sea of tears.

“But he never changed. The corruption he wrought—it was too deep within him.”

When I finally find my voice, it’s shredded but calm. “I died, didn’t I. That’s why I’m here.”

She hesitates, as though sorry to tell me. “Yes.”

I nod. “M-Max too?”

“Yes.” This time the word is heavier, filled with her grief over who died alongside Max.

I knew both answers already, of course, but I think I needed to hear it out loud. My own sorrow is bruised and battered, but my chest feels lighter for it, this proof that Vaiwyn is safe once again. That Max is free of that demon’s manipulation.

My hand moves to grab my watch but slips across the robe instead. I

swallow and arrange my features into something resembling passive. “What happens now?”

“Bastian struck the killing blow to end our story, but yours may live on. A choice lies before you. To stay in this realm and move on, or go back.”

“Go back?” I raise my eyebrows. “But ... how? I died, just as you did, and I didn’t tuck my soul away for safekeeping.”

Although I cannot see it, I sense her smile. *“Vaiwyn is not yet finished with you, Mina.”*

I can go back.

The thought never crossed my mind that death wasn’t an end. My joy, lifted aloft like a raven on the wind, deflates. But what am I returning to? My mother dying of the Pox; the Strauss family’s purpose as Bell Keepers no longer needed; my family itself hardly held together without Father. And Max.

“What about Max? Will he...” My tongue feels too thick.

“His fate belongs to you.”

“That’s not an answer,” I retort.

“No, but it’s all I can offer. Bastian will be gone from his heart, same as I will be from yours, and it will end how it should have started. There will be no more bells, no more Pox. But only you can decide what happens to his empty body.”

I scoff, uninterested in riddles. Especially when applied to something so paramount.

“Vaiwyn rewards sacrifice, Mina Strauss. Mark my words, this city meant you for more, just as it did the other Saints and me. The choice is yours.”

A choice. Finally, Vaiwyn lets me decide my life, and I feel so stuck.

Silence stews between us. Two paths lie ahead of me. One of complete and utter change I’m not sure I’ll be able to navigate, and another of such unknowing that it terrifies me to look at it head-on.

But only one holds a glimmer of hope. An incandescent spark, rife with promise and potential. One holds *home*, even if it is broken and missing pieces.

I laugh softly. Why am I even mulling this over? It’s obvious which I need to choose.

Perhaps it’s written plain across my face, or Elora can sense such mental turmoil—she reaches out and places a warm hand on my shoulder. *“Are you*

ready?”



The cold is back, fierce and unrelenting with its sharp bite. Remorseless teeth eating into every inch of me.

Instinctively, I know that only a few seconds have passed since my frozen heart ceased beating; the pool of blood beneath me still spreads. My eyelids are heavy with a desire to sleep, and I’m too weak to put up a fight.

A final nudge of warmth from Elora slips down my throat. Her will navigates clogged veins to my left hand and grants one last drop of life.

I turn my father’s watch over in my palm.

An ember catches, and flames tear through me.

It starts in my fingers and toes, vaporizing the icicles within as it races toward my heart. My vision blurs, as if obscured by the steam that must be fleeing my body. I long to gasp, to shout for it to stop, but I have no air. I’m an empty shell burning from the inside out.

A harrowing ache remains in the wake of this brutal heat as it gathers in my heart.

I finally unearth a curdling shriek as the lancet slides out of my chest.

The silver watch throbs so violently in my hand I barely hold on to it. A second pulse that threatens to shift the world off its foundation.

Bastian’s relic clatters to the ground.

As suddenly as it began, the pain vanishes. The dust settles.

My bones are limp, my body empty of everything vital. Or rather, it was.

Through dense lashes, I watch the reaching edges of my spilled blood encounter an unseen barrier, then recoil. Drops roll back up between the floorboards and retreat in shrinking rivulets toward the hole in my chest. A faint golden mist pours in the opposite direction, bathing the belfry in its radiance as my body knits together.

My thoughts sharpen; my vision crystallizes. The ringing in my ears dwindles to a low tinniness.

Sound floods back, and it’s then I remember that I’m not alone on this platform—and something is also happening to Max.

Max writhes on the ground where he fell, hands curled into stiff claws and

feet kicking. Choked screams catch deep inside his charred maw. His body blinks. Max's pallid skin fades to translucent, then solidifies. Over and over, faster and faster, granting glimpses of the darkness at his core.

His spine arches so suddenly I fear it'll snap. The blackness within drags, winding between ribs before filling his throat and spewing forth. Thick, stringy coils of an infernal parasite. It clings to Max's lips and gums between his teeth, unwilling to leave but not strong enough to burrow back inside.

The gold that pours out of me wraps around Bastian's darkness. Elora reels him in, ensnaring his soul with her own and dimming her glow to a muddied copper.

When the last wisp escapes his shuddering body, the gold and black vanishing together, Max collapses, utterly still.

And life explodes through me.

My eyes snap wide. I flip onto my back, throat burning as I struggle to control the air surging into my lungs. It tastes so sweet, so crisp.

Too much goes on all at once. I want to throw up, to scream, to sing, yell, cry. Anything and everything. My heart races like a frightened hare, and I choke out a short laugh at the wondrous feeling. I force my grip on the watch to relax, to let it tip again, the mechanical pulse beating in perfect time to my own.

With difficulty, I roll to the side, an elbow insufficient to prop me up.

Sticky against the floor, the black blood leaches to red as it, too, recedes inside Max. The echoes of my wounds close on his chest once the last drop returns.

His profile is still drawn and haggard, but the lines of his face are so familiarly *mine* that a longing ache stirs. Memories I threw away for fear of tainting them resurface. Of tentative kisses stolen in shadowed alcoves, notes exchanged as our paths crossed, precious moments of nestling on a couch, pressed into his warmth as though it was crafted just for me—

He's not breathing.

Why isn't he breathing?

"No." I flop onto my stomach, rise to all fours, and buckle. My teeth clack as my chin cracks against the ground, but I don't feel it. How can I, when it's *nothing* compared to the torment that rips through me. "No no no—"

My legs won't carry me, so I crawl on my belly, refusing to grasp the facts before me. Max is still in there. He's still there. Not in that devilish black that

left him. Sweet, dear Max did not give up. I know it. I *know* it.

I grab his outflung hand first, balking at the cold settled within his skin. My fingers weave through his and I heave him closer.

“Max? *Max*.” I half sprawl across his body as my touch grazes his face, outlining his cheekbones and brushing hair off his forehead. His expression is the softest I’ve ever seen it. My hand drops lower, resting over the spot in his chest where I should feel the life of him.

Nothing. Nothing but a hollow cavity.

Tears flow fast and free down my cheeks, but my cries are as silent as his heart.

“Saints damn you, Maximillian,” I croak. “Wake up.”

I push myself up, fists curling into his shirt, and press my lips to his. Hard and begging and without answer. My tears drop onto his face as I pull away to gently kiss his nose.

I resigned myself to losing him in the shadows of the bell below, but up here I was given hope he would live. He should be okay. He wasn’t supposed to die.

My hand smooths the wrinkles my fingers made as I lay my head beneath his chin. Saints, he even smells like he should again. Ink and dust and evergreen.

It didn’t take him. It *didn’t*. Elora said it was up to me. That his fate was my decision. Well, this is me deciding. If this city lets me have one thing, I choose him. This heavy and raw grief cannot be for him. I reject it. All of it. I don’t want it, just him. This boy, the first with patience enough to let my heart open to another.

I *need* him back.

“Please come back to me.” I tuck myself closer to his side, cradling my watch between us.

I don’t know how long I lay there into the night, trapped by the clicking of the clock. Fervently hoping, wishing, praying.

Then, beneath my hand, a heartbeat.

Twenty-Seven

History will remember Max and me.

They will record our names and the feats we accomplished. Immortalize us in paper, marble, and paint. With each retelling, they'll embellish the specifics to make him a little taller, me a little bolder, the city more vengeful.

Painstaking details will re-create what happened when the dead sundered. When stone stilled, and iron froze, and those menacing clouds gave way to a perfect starry night. They'll depict how Vaiwyn celebrated. Hesitant at first, like deer caught in a meadow, but soon every door and window wrenched open of its own accord. How citizens flooded the streets in raucous revel and with ardent prayers I hear even now beyond these walls.

Historians and storytellers alike will know of all that elation and merriment, but their tales will lack substance. Loud and brash with death and sword fights, but missing the hushed, integral moments that were never meant for their eyes or ears.

No books will speak of the hours Max and I spent alone at the top of my belfry, basking in our newly rekindled lives. How until the dawn spilled over the mountaintops, we traded warm touches and captive experiences; savored how Max bore witness to an arrogant demon's dismissal of a magical connection he never understood, ensuring his downfall.

Nor will a painting capture the moment I descended through Lyndell Hall—one hand clasped in Max's, the other dragging a sword—to be greeted on the stairs by Isaac. My big brother, the gash across his face still weeping blood as he scooped me into his arms.

The dejected expression Isaac wears now is very different from that, and it makes me forget there's any joy to be had in Vaiwyn today.

Yes, history *will* remember us, but not like this. There's no glory to be

found in places such as infirmaries, or in the deep misery that accompanies them.

Arnica and willow bark—the strong winter-and-evergreen scents of such plants pack a dizzying punch when Isaac shoulders open the heavy doors to the infirmary’s southern wing. Reduced to poultices and tonics, the bitter blends of herbs signify a masking of pain, but only heighten that in my heart as Max and I follow inside.

Despite being one of several visiting groups, my family is not difficult to find. Their frames hold a particular spice of wretchedness. From the way Aida deflates against Nikole’s side and clutches Hana’s little hand; how Emiko, perched on the end of the bed, stares into the middle distance while stroking Tolly—all as empty as the shadows.

They are one wrong thought away from falling apart, and I’m right there beside them. My fingers clutch Max tighter.

The old terrier curled atop the blanket lifts his head, alerting the others to our approach. Aida’s gaze instantly pins Max with blatant distrust, and he falters, dropping behind me. I understand her reaction, but I won’t allow it. My grip shifts to the crook of his arm. I pull him closer to my side, doing what I should have done all those months ago. He’s as important to me as everyone else here and I won’t hide him anymore. He nudges me, offering a sheepish yet grateful expression.

But, weak and brittle, my answering smile collapses once turned on my family, unable to stand beneath the weight of why we all gather around this bed. Not even the deep, steadying breaths I took with every step here were enough to ease the clench of my chest as I look down.

All that separates my mother from the final note of her death sentence is a fingertip. A thumb, healthy and pink and out of place among the blackened stone that has devoured her body.

Flat atop the sheets, her eyes closed and stiff with an eternal pain, Imogen Strauss is beyond poultices and tonics.

I release Max and press a hand to the Talused pleats of her skirts, only to wrench back with a hiss. The stone is wickedly cold. I didn’t expect that. My burned fingers burrow inside my coat pocket and clutch my watch as a talisman. The memory of one parent against the physical presence of the other.

It hasn’t even been a year since I stood here for Father, but I never saw him

like *this*. A literal husk.

Saints, was it only two nights ago that Mother and I finally opened our grief to each other? After an age of heartache and animosity, I had the promise of a better relationship, of a parent who loved me not only for my successes but for my failures and flaws, too. Now it doesn't matter. With Father, I at least got to say a semblance of goodbye, but with Mother—I thought I had time. I wanted more time.

More time.

My nail drags along the crease in my watch as soothing hands stroke my back. Suspicions have drifted through the recesses of my mind for a while, but it wasn't until I sat alone with Max in the morning's quiet that they melded into something legible. A tiny, grounded spark of an idea, and even then, I did little more than acknowledge it and lock it in a cage for later.

The thrum of the watch's turning gears against my skin now is as good as a key. There's nothing to lose for any of us standing here, staring at the sculpted matriarch of our family. It's all the encouragement I need.

"Move over," I say to Isaac, not waiting for him to listen.

Fighting against the merciless cold, I seize Mother's stone hand. Her flaking flesh refuses to mold to mine. The silver watch glitters as I hold it between two fingers. Its ticking accelerates, matches the beat of my heart as I take another deep breath and turn it over.

Warmth spills between my bones. Not the fire that belonged to Elora, but a heat that is distinctly *Mina*. One reminiscent of dying summer evenings, the sun's heated touch caressing my face once more before it sinks behind the mountains. The comforting scents of oil, crushed pine, and copper overtake the infirmary's ill air. I feel so—

"What are you *doing*?"

The bed rams into my thighs as Aida dives across, shoving me away from Mother.

A pitcher falls off the bedside table. It smashes against the tiled floor and sprays water over my shoes. My watch lands on the sheets.

"Aida!" I exclaim as Isaac steadies me. Blood drains from my face, my eyes wide. I don't know what she saw, but her grieving expression mixes unpleasantly with fear.

Max steps forward, raising his hands in a gesture meant to placate. "She didn't mean—"

“You get away,” she snarls, jabbing an accusatory finger in his direction. “It’s because of *you* that my mother is like this in the first place!”

“That’s enough.” None too gently, I direct Max behind me. Although a bed still separates us, the way Aida’s arms cage Mother’s body is a mama bear over her cub. She’ll stop at nothing to protect it from a perceived threat, even if she’s mistaken a scarecrow for a hunter. “It wasn’t his fault, and you know it.”

“I don’t care. That *thing* was inside *him*, and it did *this*!”

I drink down my rising anger. She hasn’t heard the story like Isaac did, doesn’t know what happened beyond the most obvious. Her reaction is painfully valid without it. I think Max understands that, too, but the defeat that comes over him, tries to shrink him into less, raises my own hackles. After everything we just went through, it’s a thorn too sharp to lodge in him. Maybe I should have anticipated this. She’ll need time to accept him after everything that passed, I recognize that. But she’ll be seeing a lot more of Max in the future—and I’ll make sure she gets over it.

Softer, I say, “Will you let me explain?”

“She’s gone, Mina,” my sister snaps.

Emiko accepts the baby from Nikole, who heaves her wife off Mother’s body and restrains her in an embrace.

“Maybe we should go for a walk,” she whispers, caressing Aida’s hair. “Get some fresh air.”

Aida’s gaze still pins me with daggers of fury, diluted by the tears spilling down her cheeks. “She’s *gone*, and you can’t even let her die in peace. Just because she treated you like shit doesn’t mean you can fuck around with her Saints-damned *corpse*.”

I recoil, bumping into Max as a wave of cold washes over me from Aida’s derisive tone. “I would never—”

“Wait, Aida—*wait*.” Isaac stares at Mother’s hand, noticing the pale, soft flesh that now tips each finger. Something seems to click for him; the dullness in his eyes brightens.

He reaches for my watch, startling Tolly as the dog tries to sniff it, and stills when he collects only air. Frowning, he tries again, but he may as well scratch at a hallucination. His nails dig into the starched sheets and nothing else. “What the hell?”

“I’ve got it.” I nudge him aside and pick up the watch. To Aida, I say, “It

might not look like it, but I think I can help.”

“She’s *gone*.” The repeated statement is barely coherent through the thickness in her throat.

“I know, but I—here.” I turn Isaac toward me.

When examined up close, the cut across Isaac’s handsome face is a horrid, puckered thing. Someone tended to it earlier while he waited for me to leave my tower. Black sutures now tug both sides of the wound together, but it’s not an improvement. Stretching through his eyebrow and over the top of his cheek to his earlobe, it’ll be a nasty, twisted scar once it heals.

I swallow hard. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” His lack of hesitation, his faith in me, is the last bolt through my spine required to steel myself.

Something buried deep beneath folds of instinct tells me I don’t need to touch him. However, for the sake of demonstration, I drag a light finger over the stitched line. I start from his forehead and slowly move down. My watch tips in my palm, and the warmth rekindles, that comforting smell emanating between us.

One by one, the sutures unravel, the thread pulling from his flesh and fluttering to the ground. The cut closes like a shirt buttoned in the wake of my finger, leaving behind a seamless, flushed line across his skin. I pull the wound not forward to healing, but instead coax it back. Back in time, before it even existed. Just like all mine have been doing for days.

Uncertainty clouds my brother’s expression as he lifts a hand to his face. The entire process took only ten seconds, and I find myself unwilling to let this heat go now that I’ve claimed it. I know what it is, this warmth.

My attention drops to the broken pitcher at my feet. Staring at the pieces, I tip my watch the other way.

The tinkle of porcelain skidding together sounds almost like laughter. Water retreats through the sealing cracks with a faint sloshing, my shoes dry once more. Then, in utter defiance of gravity, the pitcher lifts back onto the table in perfect condition, right down to the chip on its spout.

When I release the heat, the first thing I register is the shifted silence. Only Hana is undisturbed, too busy straining against Emiko’s arms to tug Tolly’s tail. No one else appears to have moved. Instead, they’re figurines of shock, brows chiseled with deep lines, eyes wide and mouths gaping.

“Let me help her,” I plead.

Aida's nod is so small, but the hope glittering in her eyes is as loud as a scream.

"Saints, what really happened last night, Mina?" Isaac asks, his hushed voice full of awe.

Hefting the watch in my hand, I admit I don't know. There's little more to add to what I divulged in Tamzin's office before. Bastian spoke of incentives, but I doubt even he knew what that entailed. Elora might have, though.

Vaiwyn is not yet finished with you, Mina.

I'm still not sure what she meant by that. All I know is I died with a Saint's soul inside of me, and I came back alone. Altered. Recrafted in my old image and stuffed with the same thoughts and wants and worries, but as something altogether different. As I retake Mother's hand, I can't explain this surge of pure life within me. How the watch in my palm now counts memory, not hours; measures pain and joy instead of the minutes.

It starts slow. Although wrought with heat, I feel like I'm watching a lacework of frost creep across a window. The darkened stone peels back in rivulets, giving way to warm, healthy skin and a cotton sleeve. A chorus of crackles uncovers her wrist. It traces her elbow, curves around her shoulder.

Once it exposes her heart, all signs of stalling vanish.

The cracks grow louder, more insistent as thin streams of time swallow the Talus. Softness spills down her right leg like a spring thaw, then jumps to the other. The stone winds back inside the slash where it first originated until that, too, is gone.

I don't relinquish my grip when Mother's chest lifts. Nor do I let go as her eyes flutter. She doesn't open them, but her hand tightens around mine.

Nikole's shoulder fails to muffle Aida's racking sobs. Isaac hugs me from behind with one arm, the other reaching for Mother's shoulder. He clutches us both as if to convince himself we're real. Max's pride—that I sense like a curl of smoke in my heart.

Mother's eyes flicker open, thin against the bright light, and find me among the noise. There is so much unsaid within those grey depths that mine fill with tears. She squeezes my hand again, and I understand.

We have a lot of damage to repair, the two of us, with our relationship. Words to unsay, feelings to untangle, and ghosts to face, yet I think we can do it. There's doubt and uncertainty, but there is also hope.

One day at a time, and we have enough of those now.



The discord of a hundred croaking ravens welcomes me into the belfry. After vanishing into the night with bones in their talons, I'm grateful the birds have returned to where they belong, even if they have left several splats of white across the floor.

I falter when I realize the ravens aren't the only ones waiting in my tower.

My heels against the floorboards announce my approach, but when I draw level with Vanya, her only acknowledgment is a raised eyebrow. She stands in her mortal form, hair pulled back by her scarf as she faces the gaping hole in the wall.

I follow her lead, letting the relative quiet of the belfry fill the space between us. Together we look out over the snow-cruled roofs of the city below and savor the stillness.

Now that the corruption has been rooted out, Vaiwyn can clean the poison from its blood. Expel it drop by festering drop. Its recovery won't happen overnight, though. Vaiwyn will also need time. To have such malice infect its heart and twist it to the whims of madness is no paper cut, but already it's healing.

Standing here, I hear between the clack of the clock the gentle scratch of growing masonry. I lay a hand against the stone and feel that beautiful, steady rhythm coursing beneath. It beats alongside my own heart. Strong and undeterred.

When the silence has held sway long enough, I pull out my watch, open my mouth to speak ... and hesitate.

I don't know why. Perhaps because once I say this, there will be no taking it back. To give voice to my now-proven theory will mean I can't avoid what I've become. Or—Saints, the thought didn't even cross my mind until now—maybe I'm afraid she'll refute those suspicions, tell me I'm not something more.

The bells chime the quarter hour, and without looking, I know they did so at the exact moment the longer hand on my watch reached the nine.

I lick my lips. "This is my relic, isn't it?"

"That is a safe assumption, yes."

Hearing her rasping voice out loud after so many interactions where she spoke directly inside my head seems almost unnatural. Still, her answer doesn't hurt like I feared. Instead, my shoulders slump with comfort.

Vanya turns to look me up and down. From anyone else, the gesture would be snide, but her gaze is curious. "I heard what you did today. You did what I could not."

A swell of pride fills my chest, but I smother my smile.

After Mother, it felt wrong to just ... stop. Not when I know firsthand what it means to lose someone to the Talus Pox, how the grief sits as a heavy monster, no matter how much time passes. And in a wing filled with so many others trapped by stone, I couldn't hoard the heat within me.

One hundred and twenty-two sculpted figures, all returned to normal. And I would do it again a thousand times over.

"I suppose, given what you've done," Vanya continues, waving a hand at our broken surroundings, "what you sacrificed in the end—it's a worthy power for the city to grant its newest Saint. Vaiwyn's very own Keeper."

Vaiwyn is not yet finished with you, Mina.

I understand Elora's words to me now. I'm a peg hammered into the right hole at last. To be a Bell Keeper was what I was born to be, but *this* is what I live to be.

I force my eyes to meet Vanya's. It's becoming difficult to focus on one part when I sense *all* of her. The divine power of poison and seeds roiling beneath her false skin, the rich, golden ichor glowing through her veins, the way her very being seems to push at the seams—I feel all of it.

"We call to one another," Vanya reminds me, noticing my distraction. "This is what was missing from Elora in you, and Bastian. It takes some getting used to."

"Is this how it happened for you? When you ... ascended?"

"Somewhat. After I administered my poison to the would-be king, my ascension was gradual. Little changes every morning. Moths in my tea and cobwebs strung about my bed. But eventually I had my next mortal body to disguise myself in." She turns back to the view of Vaiwyn. "Once word spreads of what happened to you, Mina, of what you can do, you'll have no peace until this body dies and you're reborn in another to hide. Enjoy the moments like this when you can."

It strikes me how much of a shield this unassuming appearance is for her.

A simple herbalist is her strongest armor. When she and the other Saints revealed themselves to Vaiwyn's citizens, it was only as their towering, eldritch selves. This smaller, mortal frame remains anonymous.

Vanya misinterprets my silence, for she adds, "You won't go through your change alone. I'll be there when clock wheels start falling out of your ears."

A loud laugh bursts forth, startling several of the roosting ravens. "I'd rather not have that happen. Although I wouldn't say no to some bronze antlers."

"Look." Vanya lifts my hand between calloused fingers. "It's already starting."

At first, I don't realize what she's talking about. My palm looks no different. Then she brings her other hand up as if to cup a flame, and I see it. A faint radiance soaks my skin, as though stars are awaking in my blood.

My mouth feels dry. For such a change to appear within me, and so soon—it terrifies me. But underneath, there's a wonderful giddiness that soothes the fear.

Vanya's right: There will be no hiding once the rest of the city hears of their new Saint. And for now, that suits me fine; I don't think I want to suppress what I can freely give.

I turn back to the great gap in the wall and set my hand flat against the stone. Vaiwyn is healing, but I can give it a nudge.

My watch turns, the heat wells up, and the air absorbs notes of oil, pine, and copper.

The scratching grows louder as I push the masonry forward in time. Beneath my touch, Vaiwyn offers no resistance. Its pulse rises to meet mine and threads us together, letting me guide it. Heavy granite ripples into place, filling the hole like greedy lichen. Fine powder spits from between each brick as mortar seals them.

It takes a moment to mend the wall, and I see no reason to stop there.

Still joined with the stone and city, I close my eyes and spread my divine magic through my tower, drawing individual pieces of it ahead or back. I hear the tinkle of glass as the southern clockface repairs, the screech of iron as the walkway above wrenches upright. Dust coats my tongue, tasting of cedar and oak, as the broken beams beneath frightened ravens snap into place.

The clock above ticks with a little more conviction. Each second is marked as more significant than the last.

I open my eyes as I let go of the wall and walk toward the one thing that started it all.

The Vesper Bell is no longer icy or sticky, but the coarse patina of rust scrapes my palm. Trapped within the fatal crack down its belly, the light flares brighter. Maybe it senses what's coming. I turn my watch, and the fracture groans shut. The vicious clapper skids over the floor and fits inside Arbutus's throat, its shape softening. Molten bronze pours down the Vesper's sides. Fresh metal, erasing the rusted texture, the divine inscriptions, and leaving behind etchings of history and legend.

When I step back, a new Vesper hangs before me, ready to sing.

As the dust settles, Vanya moves from where she stood, watching my power unfold. "Have you thought of what you'll do now?" she asks.

I drag a finger down the warm side of the bell, tracing a pattern of dahlias, and mull over her question. The truth is, I don't have to think about it.

Vaiwyn and its Vespers no longer need the Strausses. Our family legacy tumbled down with a thirteenth toll, but beneath the mountain of brick and timber, it unveiled a foundation of steel.

My family was never defined by our roles as Bell Keepers, but by how we contributed to this city we all call home. Whether or not we realized it, each of us carved out a space where we would be valued. A lawyer, a librarian, a deacon, a banker, and one day, a Speaker. But the best part is we don't even have to keep those. We'll pick ourselves up and be okay to finally do whatever we want. Including me.

Especially me.

"I'm going to carry on in my father's footsteps," I say. "The bell might not need me, but Vaiwyn does. I'll continue working with Tamzin like before and step into the Speaker role when I'm ready." It may seem anticlimactic, coming back to the beginning in such a way, but it's a path I feel confident in following. A way to still be close to the one person I wish was here.

Vanya nods. "I think that's a good idea." She touches my shoulder in a fleeting grip and heads for the door, but pauses at the threshold. "A word to the wise. I suggest you consider a name for yourself before it's chosen for you. They're already praying to the Bladed Keeper."

As her footsteps diminish, and mine rise up the stairs of the belfry, I test out the name in my mouth. The sound of it, the taste—I don't like it. The Lost Alchemist's sword hangs once more in the Council Chambers where it

belongs, but I don't want Elora's myth adding flavor to my own. She deserves to be remembered by herself, as do I.

I am fond of the *Keeper*, but that's only half a name. The Ticking Keeper seems a bit on the nose, and I suspect Ma would have a fit if I went as the Spiteful Keeper, even though I know Isaac would get a kick out of it. Maybe I'll be like the Glassmith and change my name a dozen times before settling.

The best part: I have all the time in the world to figure it out.

I climb slowly to the platform at the top. Returning to a site of such violence and heartbreak should be hard to face, but this is a spot with its own fabled history now. The place where a girl and a boy died, where fledgling Saints were born.

My toe nudges something pale and slender. Instinctively, I stomp down to stop it from rolling, and frown when I realize what I found. I sense no power inside Bastian's relic, which has returned to its smaller size. No vestiges of him or his malice, cold and harmless.

"I wondered where you'd gone to," I murmur.

Still turning the lancet over in my hand, I clamber onto the ledge behind the northern clock dial, my head almost level with the iron number three. The weak autumn sun sparkles over the frozen city. Ice has started to form in thin layers along the River Riga, dividing and flattening the light dancing on its surface.

"Hey."

I turn at Max's voice, surprised to see him at the top of the stairs. Surprised, but not disappointed. He's the Max I've always known. Handsome and kind, with a sharp profile honed by maturity, not hatred. Eyes sparkling with love and happiness.

"Hey," I reply.

On a whim, I toss him the lancet. Max catches it in one hand, and his revulsion quickly melts to soft intrigue. I smile as he lifts it higher in the light. A thin filament of copper now twines around Bastian's empty relic, just like the ivory thread of bone I noticed decorating Elora's blade when I returned it to the Chambers. The divine and the infernal, melded together once more, this time to nullify the power fed into each object.

Max steps up beside me and slips his warm, strong hand into mine. "What are you thinking?"

"Just about what I'm going to pack for visiting your family." I tilt my head

to the side. “What does one even need for the beach? Such a foreign concept.”

He laughs softly, and it’s one of my favorite sounds. “Good thing you have me to help.”

I lift his hand, stepping beneath so I stand in front of him, his arm wrapped around me. Max first rests his chin atop my head, then slides it down to the crook of my neck. I smile from the touch of his lips against the freckles there.

Star-crossed and fated. That is the love I let myself take the chance on all those months ago. I can’t say the journey to this point is worth reliving, but I’m glad we’re here together, when everything is right in the world once more.

Overhead, the small hand of the clock shivers into place at the top of the hour. Behind me, a set of gears releases; levers drop in violent clatters to pull the ropes of a single bell.

Arbutus rings out below. Its new voice is melodic and deep. It sings not to shake the bones of the earth awake and disturb its monsters, but to call the heavens’ light down and bathe us in its grace.

As its note reverberates across the city, Max’s voice sounds in my head. “*You and me, Mina. My love.*”

I heave a contented sigh. “*Forever.*”

Acknowledgments

The fact that I'm finally writing this after dreaming about it for *years* does not feel real. That said, it does feel *right* that the first time I get to do this is for this gothic fever dream of a book. The idea for *Bells* hit me like a lightning strike in a cathedral clock tower in Prague in 2019, and little did I know then how much it would change my life. This is my pandemic book, and it gave me something to be hopeful about during a very strange time. I know it won't be for everyone (nothing ever is), but the words between these pages truly are a sliver of my heart offered up on a plate, and I'm so proud to share it with you.

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And finally, to you, dear Reader. Thank you for giving me a chance and picking up this book. While I hope this isn't the last time we meet, I'm grateful that we did.



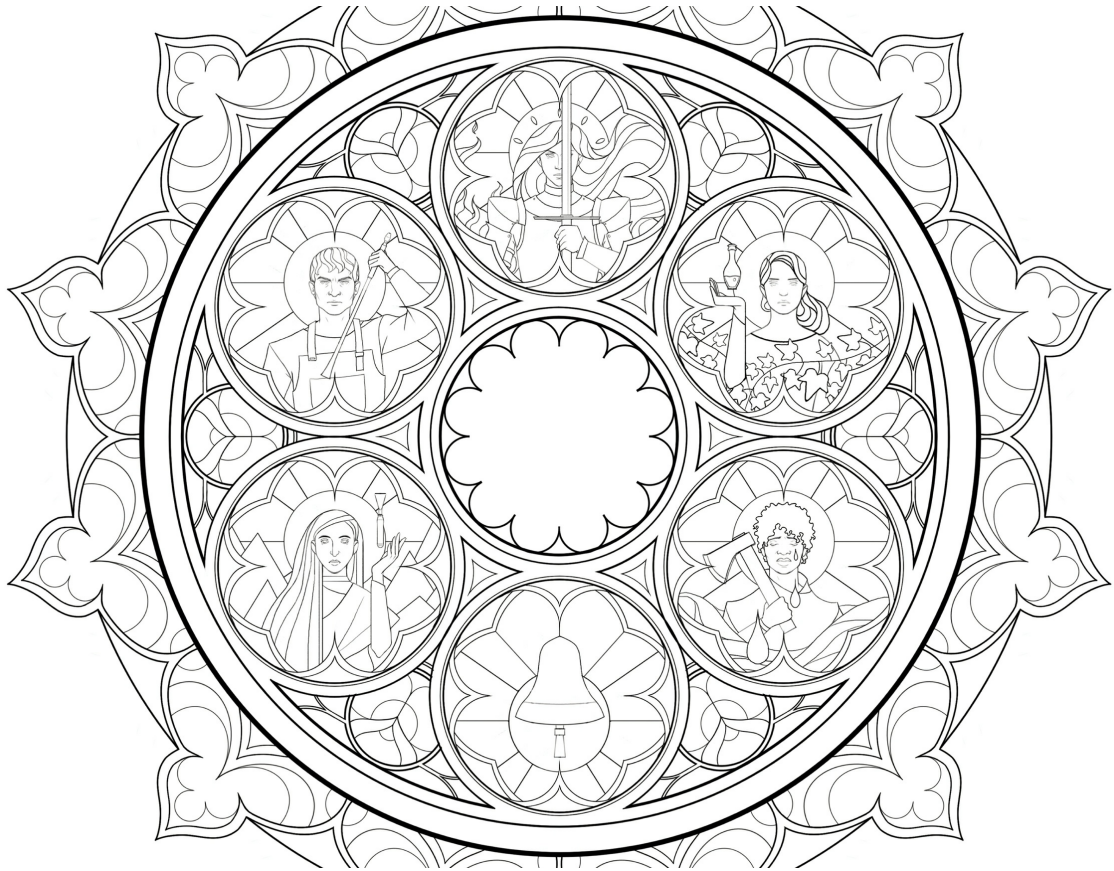
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Elle Tesch has lived just east of Vancouver, British Columbia, her entire life. Surrounded by forests and mountains, it was inevitable that she would daydream about what might lurk in those trees. She twists places she loves and writes what she knows best: hungry monsters, casually cruel villains, and ace-spec girls in the stories they deserve. When not writing, Elle can be found reading whatever she can get her hands on, wrestling with her current cross-stitch project, or rewatching *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) for the seventy-second time. *What Wakes the Bells* is her debut novel.

Visit her online at **elletesch.com**, or sign up for email updates [here](#).



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