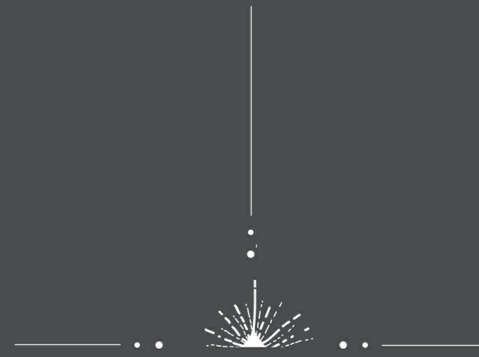




ERIN BEATY

SILENCE
and
SHADOW



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and
SHADOW



ERIN BEATY

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
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For you, Dear Reader. Thanks for coming back.

CHAPTER 1

I know the moment something is wrong.

Simon's hand grips mine with a sudden intensity, but it's not a squeeze for my attention or an expression of affection. It's urgent with an edge of fear.

His movements haven't indicated we need to flee, though, which means I shouldn't react. We're standing off to the side of an open area where several streets intersect, watching a group of children perform a traditional dance, their ribbons on the ends of sticks more or less in sync with the festival music and each other. Not one child is over eight years old, so they must have practiced several weeks for this amount of coordination.

Simon isn't looking at me or the colorful celebration, however. His eyes are narrowed at something across the square.

Trying not to be obvious, I lean into his side, close enough to feel the hum of magick coming from the bloodstones in his pocket. Their focused energy makes my skin numb, so he usually carries them for me. "What is it?"

"That man." Simon replies in a much lower voice, but we're standing in the shadow of a three-story building so I can hear him clearly.

I follow his line of sight over the crowd. With the Solstice festival celebrating the longest and holiest day of the year, outsiders are common as sparrows, which works both to our advantage and disadvantage. We'd arrived on the island of Brinsulli several days ago, then traveled to the capital city of Londunium on foot. The journey to the coast of Gallia from Collis was much faster—traveling at night on horses we then sold to buy passage across the Narrow Sea. It's not likely any word about Simon as a fugitive has reached Brinsulli, let alone Londunium, in those three weeks, especially as he's believed to be dead, but there's always a chance he'll be recognized. His unusual eyes—light blue with a wedge of brown in the left—are impossible

to hide.

“The one in the gray tunic and black cap,” Simon whispers.

I find the man. His blond hair hangs in greasy strings over his forehead, and his sallow skin glistens with a sheen of sweat. Something has him agitated, and he rubs his hands in a washing motion almost compulsively. I have to speak much louder for Simon to hear me, so I stand on my toes to put my mouth closer to his ear as I pretend to watch the dance again. “Has he been staring at you?”

“No. He keeps looking around the crowd. Stopped on you twice.”

That doesn’t make any sense. “How is that a problem?”

“Because he’s searching for a target. Someone easy and worth the effort.” Simon pauses. “Third look. He thinks you have potential, but you’re fine as long as you’re with me.”

“Are you sure?” No one would take Simon for a fighter—he’s as thin as a garden rake and stands in a way that takes up little space. I grimace as I peek at the man again before putting my chin on Simon’s shoulder. “No offense, but he could probably overpower you.”

He doesn’t argue with that. “Yes, but two against one is riskier, especially when we look like a couple who might fight to protect each other. He’ll go for an easier mark, especially with as many as he could find here.”

“So why are you worried?” I ask, tucking my travel bag firmly between us. “There’s probably a half dozen other thieves in the square with the same mindset.”

Simon finally allows himself to glance down at me. “Because he’s not just a pickpocket. He’s got violence on his mind, too. It’s in his eyes, in his movements.”

I don’t have to ask how he can read the man’s intentions. Simon spent six years recording the work of a man determined to understand the motivations of criminals—mostly the violently insane kind—as well as how they chose their victims. In Collis, he used that absorbed knowledge to find the murderer of several women. A murderer who happened to be his cousin.

“Perhaps his last robbery or two drew blood.” Simon turns his gaze back to the crowd as he continues. “Maybe unexpectedly. But he liked the thrill and sense of power it gave him.”

“And now he wants to feel that way again,” I finish. “Theft isn’t what drives him anymore.”

Simon nods once. “He’s wondering what it would be like to actually kill someone. With all the noise and commotion today, he could probably get away with it.”

I study the crowd, which has over a dozen women and older men who would be easy to force into an alley or empty building. One of them was going to become the man’s victim unless we did something. “Well, then.” I pull away and heft my travel bag onto my shoulder. “We should separate so he comes after me rather than someone else.”

“What?” Simon’s blue eyes widen. “Cat, *no*—that’s a terrible idea.”

I expected his objection, and I’m not angry, though I act like it. “You don’t think I can defend myself?”

He refuses to play along, shaking his head. “The two of us can’t take him down. You just pointed out he could probably overpower me, and he undoubtedly has a knife.”

“Then get help.” I use only my eyes to point to another corner of the square where two red-haired men sit on horseback, watching over the festivities. One of the first things we’d done on arriving in Brinsulli was identify those charged with law enforcement, so we knew who to avoid. “There’s two of those reeves over there. The ones with the gold braid on their shoulders.”

Simon hardly spares them a glance. “Why would they listen to me? I’m a stranger.”

“Yes, but protecting people is their job. Pretend you’re worried about my safety. Be persuasive.”

“I wouldn’t have to pretend.” He catches my elbow as I start to walk away, the first signs of anger on his pale face. “I can’t let you do this.”

“Can’t *let* me?” I tear my arm from his hold. “You aren’t actually my husband, Simon. You have no right to tell me what to do.”

“Stop it, Cat,” he snaps. “I know this is for show. We’ll figure out another way to stop him.” Simon reaches for me again.

I dodge his grasp. “There’s no time. He’s watching us now, isn’t he?”

Simon’s eyes flash over my shoulder, and he clenches his jaw so hard a vein bulges from his neck. “Yes. He’s already coming closer.”

“Then hurry. I’ll head toward the river.”

His expression almost breaks my resolve. “Please don’t do this,” he whispers.

I take a step backward. “Keep talking. I’ll listen for you.”

And I whirl around and disappear into the crowd.

★ ★ ★

My silver voidstone bracelet is in my bag, and I dig inside as I storm away, staying in shade of awnings and buildings as much as possible so the sun can't wash away the magick constantly provided by the moonstone around my neck. As soon as my fingers touch the smooth, black stone, I push all my senses but hearing into its bottomless depths. Smell isn't that much of a loss, especially surrounded by sweaty bodies and waste-filled alleys, but reducing touch makes me stumble when my foot hits the street with less force than I anticipate. Enhanced sight will probably come in handy, but I need to focus on what I can hear more, so I only reduce it by about half. I can still see better than everyone around me, but now none of those voided senses can come back until I see the moon, which won't rise for several hours.

I strain to listen for footsteps behind me, but there are many, and I stop for a second to reclose my bag and hoist it back onto my shoulder. The pause allows me to pick out the gait that halts and resumes when I do. His breathing is then easy to connect to the steps. Beneath is a rapid, excited heartbeat. I have him.

The streets ahead are lined with shops and stalls, but the crowds are already thinning out. Beyond, the city docks on the tidal river are nearly empty of workers and sailors. It is a holiday, after all. I've overestimated how long it will be before I'm isolated enough to be at risk, so I slow my pace and pause at a fruit stand. When I turn, I'm careful to keep my expression annoyed, like the argument with Simon is still on my mind rather than the look in his eyes. He was terrified. I try to tell myself that's better, because then his urgency in getting help will be genuine.

In the corner of my vision, the blond man also stops, pretending to admire a display of colorful scarves embroidered with golden suns. He's shorter than me by at least an inch but stockier than I'd realized. My fingers unconsciously itch for my belt, where not long ago I carried a hammer—ostensibly for work at the construction site, but really to smash hands that had a tendency to reach into my skirt as I went by. The master architect always sided with me, even when I actually broke fingers. I don't have a way to defend myself now.

“See anything you like?” The merchant behind the counter startles me out of my thoughts.

I decide another minute is worth parting with a few coins. “How much for the apples?” I ask. It’s too early in the season for most varieties, but he has a few green ones.

The man names a price, and I’m so nervous I can’t make the conversion to know if it’s a fair sum or I’m being robbed. It’s probably too much; my Gallian-style clothes practically shout that I’m a foreigner. Rather than haggle, I rummage into my bag, making a show of reaching to the very bottom to fish out the smaller of my purses. No sense in attracting the attention of any other thieves who might be watching by showing how much I really carry. Then I deliberately offer slightly less than the seller said, thinking to drag the interaction out. “Is this enough?”

Either I miscounted what I hold or he expected me to talk him down, because he accepts the coins and sweeps his other hand over the fruit. “Take your pick.”

I make a show of selecting a plump one with a more golden hue, then rub it on my sleeve until the skin shines before biting into it. The intense flavor brings tears to my eyes as I chew and then swallow. “Tart,” I manage to say around pinched lips.

He chuckles like he was waiting for my reaction. “Sweeter ones won’t be ready for a month.”

“Of course.” I thank him and move on, noting that my shadow also continues. I nibble at the apple’s almost transparent flesh as I walk. The flavor isn’t actually that bad, just strong and unexpected. It was harder to void taste when it wasn’t in active use.

The streets are progressively less populated, but it’s still a rather public area. I need to act like I have a destination, so I stop a passerby to ask the way to the nearest inn. His drunken answer is hardly coherent, but I go in the direction he points since it’s south, toward the river, as I said I’d go.

“Cat, where are you?” Simon’s voice calls from somewhere behind me. No one else around would be able to distinguish it from crowd noise at this distance, but I can. “We’re coming.”

We’re coming. He’s found someone. There’s no way I can answer him, but knowing he’s on his way bolsters my courage.

Now to set a trap.

I stay on the right side of the street and in the shade, glancing down alleys as I pass to get a feel for what they're like here. Not much different from Collis—often narrow enough for me to touch both walls with my arms outstretched. Buildings on either side are rough stone at the base and patchy plaster above with occasional wooden beams. Excellent for climbing up, though it will be more difficult in my long skirt. He won't expect me to try, though.

The man's footsteps are closer, and the brackish smell of the Tamse River is stronger. There will be more people around when I reach the docks, so he won't wait much longer. I strain to hear Simon. The apple is still distractingly tart, but he's saying my name just loud enough.

"Catrin, Catrin, Catrin..."

Then another voice, very close to him. "I see a girl with dark hair ahead. Is it braided, going well down her back?"

"Yes." Simon's answer to whoever is with him is louder, and relieved. "Dark brown skirt and tan jacket."

"That's her, then. There's a man right behind her—"

I'm so focused on listening that I step into the sunlight and miss the heavy footfalls right behind me, sudden and rushed. A meaty hand over my mouth smothers my scream, and I'm yanked backward into an alley between two houses.

Before I can put up much of a struggle, I'm slammed against a wall so hard the back of my head whiplashes into the stone. I swear I can feel my brain hit the inside of my skull and the world spins even as I'm held upright by a hand at my throat.

With one hand gripping my neck, however, my attacker has to back away and reach for his belt with the other. I flail and kick, managing to connect one boot-clad foot with his knee and my forearm knocks the knife out of his hand before he has a good grip on it. He swears and drops me to retrieve his weapon. I fall to my knees, clutching my neck and coughing.

It's darker in here than I would've expected at this time of day, but that's actually to my advantage. My magick was fully restored the instant I was out of the sun, and I can hear again.

"Wait, I've lost her."

"Cat!" Simon shouts in panic. "Where did you go?"

I lurch to my feet, reaching for the wall—my escape—and my fingers find

holds as one foot braces against a stone to lift myself higher until I'm violently yanked back down by my braid. I try to scream as I hit the packed dirt, but nothing comes out, and I croak helplessly as my attacker drags me deeper into the gloom by my thick hair, his retrieved knife at my throat. He pulls me around a corner, out of view from the street, where no one can see us.

Sun and skies, this was a mistake.

CHAPTER 2

At first I hope my attacker will look through my bag or search me for jewelry before anything else, but Simon was right. Violence is what he wants now.

He props me up against the wall and presses his dirty hand against my mouth as he kneels over me. Some strength is returning to my limbs, but with his blade pressing my windpipe I don't resist.

The way he smiles is terrifying. Tears in my eyes are half from pain, half from fear. Why can't I hear Simon anymore?

Light on the man's shoulder tells me why. The sun is shining into this angle of the alley, on my lower legs, which are exposed by the skirt that has lifted to my knees. Even that small amount on my skin is enough to overpower the magick provided by the moonstone on my neck.

"You're prettier than I thought," he whispers. "Spirited, too. Were you going to climb all the way to the roof?"

He's taunting me, not realizing I could have made it out of his reach if I'd had a few more seconds. The knife slides sideways to lift the necklace off my skin. "Is this real silver?"

I try to nod, but the sharp edge is still too close for much motion. Anything to prolong his interest in talking, though.

"It's mine now." He twists the dagger around twice, and I feel the stone moving up as the chain is wrapped around his blade. One yank and the necklace breaks. He can't know what the simple piece of jewelry does for me, but he wants it to remember this later—remember me and the day he took the life of another human being.

The sharp edge is back against my throat, and his breath is in my face. I only have a few heartbeats left.

All I can think about is Simon. I'll never see him again.

A roaring green and brown streak slams into the man from the side, taking the pressure—and the knife—off me. I scramble back from the tangle of limbs that is Simon and the man. The dagger is still in the man's hand as he lands an elbow on Simon's face, knocking him away, but only for an instant. Simon comes back, staying inside the man's arm as it swings the blade. Then suddenly another shape is blocking my view, and all I catch is a huge hand grabbing the man's wrist and twisting until the weapon flies away to land at my feet. I seize the hilt and hold it for dear life.

The second man already has my attacker's arms behind him and an elbow tight around his neck. Simon rests on the dirt in front of him for a few gasps, then scrambles around to me, fear in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," I answer before he sweeps me into a hug and holds me against his chest.

His heart pounds in my ear even without magick, overpowering the sound of my own as he rocks me.

"Promise me you'll never do anything like that again," he whispers.

Being in his arms brings enough relief and calmness for me to manage a choking laugh. "It didn't go like I planned."

He pulls back to look me in the eye. "Promise me."

"Your face is all bruised and scraped," I reply. "You'll have a nasty black eye if we don't do something."

"I'm fine. *Promise me, Cat.*" Simon's hands on the sides of my head tighten and his eyes narrow. The left is already swelling enough that I can't see the brown flaw.

My throbbing head and the knife hilt pressing against my palm remind me how foolish and overconfident my actions were. "I promise."

"Thank the Sun." Simon pulls me close again and presses his lips to my hair, holding me so tightly I can barely breathe, but I don't want to move.

The other man clears his throat. "I could use your help again, stranger."

Simon releases me and squints at the large form outlined in the sunlight from above. "Of course, anything you need." He levers me up as the man steers my attacker back the way we'd come.

I linger to search for my necklace. The fine chain is broken into three pieces, but the moonstone is still attached, and the moment it's in my hand, my unvoided sight and hearing are restored. I can clearly see the huge man's red hair and the golden braid hanging from his left shoulder. He's one of the

reeves I'd pointed out back in the square.

We follow him around the corner and out to the street, where a tan horse waits, snorting anxiously. The reeve directs Simon to remove a pair of restraints from the saddlebag, and I'm not surprised when he can open them without any instructions, then helps lock them on the man's forearms. I'm wondering how they knew which alley we were in until I spy the half-eaten apple on the ground. It's not even had time to brown. Now that the reeve is back, the horse relaxes enough to notice the fruit and lowers his head to take advantage of the unattended snack.

Once my attacker is secure and a chain linked from his cuffs to the reeve's belt, the redheaded man raises his eyebrows at Simon. "You certainly know your way with shackles."

I know why but say nothing. Simon shrugs. "They've never been used on me, if that's what you're asking, sir."

The reeve chuckles and offers his hand. "You can call me Martin. My thanks to you in this. If he is who I think, you've done the city a great favor." The chained man slumps to his knees. I'm not sure how many hits were from Simon, but the man absorbed quite a few in the fight.

Simon shakes Martin's hand as he pulls me closer to his side with the other. "I'm Simon, and this is Catrin." Though he's wanted for murder, his name is common enough on both the island and continent that we decided not to change it. I was only banished from Collis, and informally at that, so I have no need to hide. "Was this someone you've been looking for?"

Martin nods. "He matches a man described by several women robbed in the last few months. The most recent was stabbed and barely survived. We feared the next wouldn't."

Just as Simon had imagined. Not that I doubted him. When the reeve holds out his hand to me, I place the dagger in it rather than shake. "I assume you'll want this."

"Yes, thank you." He tucks the weapon inside his jacket. "I'm guessing by your accents you're both from Gallia?"

Simon's hand tightens on mine. "Yes." He's actually lived most of his life in Mesanus, in Prezia.

"How long have you been in Londunium?"

"Since this morning," I answer.

The reeve blinks. "Not even a day? Have you found lodging?"

Simon's blue eyes flit to me. We'd planned to seek a place to stay with the Selenae community, but they won't be awake until the moon rises in the evening hours. This morning we also learned that he wouldn't be allowed on the grounds of the akademium—the medical school—after sunset, even as a student. “No, not yet.”

Martin hauls my attacker to his feet before mounting the stallion. “Then allow me to arrange an inn for you tonight.”

“That's not necessary...,” Simon begins.

“I'm certain it is.” The reeve yanks the chain close as he nudges the horse around, and the animal tosses his black tail across the shackled man's face in additional insult. “With the festival, you'll have difficulty finding a room. I may also need to take your testimony for the judicare, which will be easier if I know where you are.”

Simon glances to me, and I nod. Finding the Selenae can wait a day, especially if it means preventing this man from hurting anyone else. “Then we'll gladly accept,” Simon tells the reeve. “Thank you.”

“It's the least I can do,” says Martin as he gently kicks the horse forward, tugging the man to stay with him, which he barely does, stumbling over his own feet. “If you and your wife would come with me now.”

We follow without correcting the reeve's assumption. Simon and I are not, in fact, married, but we appear so different that no one ever believed us the few times we tried to claim we were brother and sister wanting one room as we traveled. After the first three nights of innkeepers chuckling and saying, “Sure you are,” then giving us a room with a single bed, we started saying we were newlywed. Then no one looked at us twice, and less attention was better when one of us was a fugitive.

And I honestly wouldn't mind one more night of sharing a bed with him, even if we've never done what married couples do under the covers.

CHAPTER 3

The Festival of the Holy Solstice has the tavern below the inn packed to bursting, as Martin predicted. This particular establishment caters to a higher class of patron, and Simon's and my outfits stand out—not for their style so much as their lack of cleanliness. We haven't washed our clothes in over a week, and the scuffle in the alley didn't help, especially in Simon's case.

When we first arrived, they brought ice—*ice* in summer—for Simon's bruised cheek and a piece of raw meat to put over his eye to reduce the swelling. Bloodstones would help him, too, but I'm not experienced enough in Selenae medicine to know if they could be applied without bandaging his whole face. The tavern owner himself takes our bags upstairs as we wait in the corner of the dining room for Martin to return from the gaol. I make a temporary repair to my necklace with a borrowed pair of tweezers. The shortest piece of chain is ruined, so I only use the longer ones, which makes the necklace short enough I won't be able to remove it by lifting it over my head. The stone rests higher now, but still below my collar.

After a couple hours, we're given generous helpings of the evening meal, compliments of the reeve. Simon immediately digs into the food—tender roasted fowl in a bed of wine-soaked mushrooms with peas in a thick cream and a loaf of sourdough bread. The fancy meal and the way we're attended to tells me Martin either has significant resources for a commoner or the ability to call in hefty favors. Everything is delicious, but I pick at what's on my high-sided plate, eating little. Simon swallows the last spoonful of his second serving and washes it down with ale before noticing my somber mood. He sets the empty mug back on the table. “Is something wrong, Cat? Martin said he's been trying to catch that man for months. I thought you'd be happy.”

“I am happy,” I mumble, poking a fatty bit of meat with my three-pronged

fork.

“You’re not acting like it.” He raises my free hand to his mouth and presses his lips to my palm. “What’s bothering you?”

Though he’s kissed me fairly often in the last month, it’s never been in public, and the romantic gesture startles me into looking at him. Simon almost seems surprised at himself, his light blue eyes darting to the empty mug, like he thinks the brew is responsible for his sudden boldness. I study his bruised face, more colorful with every minute that passes, and gently brush my fingers over his less-injured cheek. His cheerfulness fades. “You’re not worried about me, are you? I’m fine. Better than.”

Even with the slight frown, Simon appears happier than I’ve seen in weeks. His melancholy was understandable, given that he’d left everything in his life behind for the second time in less than a year—first after his father’s death in Mesanus, then taking the blame for murders his own cousin had committed in Collis. The only saving grace was that his uncle the provost had consented to pretend he’d died while fleeing justice, and not pursued him.

I shake my head. “It’s not that. I feel ... like I’m underwater. I can barely hear or see.”

Until moonrise there’s no way to recover my voided senses, but shortly after arriving at the tavern I’d also lowered what was left of hearing and sight. All the noise and light in the room had quickly become unbearable due to the headache from the bump on the back of my head. My thick hair had saved me from a worse injury, but it’s still tender. After an hour with a bloodstone tucked into the top of my braid, I’m feeling much better, even if the skin within a handsbreadth tingles and crawls.

I’ve only had awareness of my magick for about a month and control of it for even less time, but I already feel lost without it. My uncle had described the need for it as similar to that of an addict’s craving for *skonia*, the dangerous concoction distilled from moonflowers. The buzzing at the back of my head torments me with power I can’t use. I also can’t ever forget what I am, what I can do, and it makes me feel out of place here, but I’m not sure about where I’m headed, either.

“Do you think the Selenae here will accept me?” I ask Simon. “My mixed blood?”

“Athene said the Selenae allow even us lowly Hadrians to study medicine,” he points out, using their word for magickless people descended from the Old

Empire. Selenae trace their roots to a kingdom even more ancient. “And I think what will matter is what you can do.”

While Selenae had kept their blood pure for generations, my cousin, Athene, had theorized that children with one Selenae parent would still be able to use magick—and might actually be stronger than average. It turned out to be true, at least in my case, but even she was amazed at what we discovered I was capable of.

One thing in particular I can do was thought only to be a legend, and it terrifies me that I might have more power than anyone can teach me to wield. That and what my abilities mean to a culture that’s been slowly losing their magick for centuries. I don’t want to be seen as some kind of savior. I also worry Simon’s knowledge of Selenae magick could put him in danger. My uncle once joked he would have to stay in the Quarter for the rest of his life—which didn’t have to be very long. And I suspect Gregor was partly serious.

This isn’t the time or place to discuss any of that, however. “Have you decided to train as a physician, too?” I ask Simon, accepting the direction he’d pushed the conversation. “Your knowledge of anatomy will put you immediately ahead.”

“Only Selenae attend classes for free,” he reminds me.

“I have plenty—” I begin, but he stops me with a sharp shake of his head.

“No, Cat. I won’t live off your charity.”

“It’s not charity if we’re...” I drift off. We aren’t married, of course. Somehow I’d started to think like we were. Did that mean something?

Simon shakes his head again, much more gently. “Whatever we are, I need to stand on my own two feet.” He smiles reassuringly, but I see a trace of anxiety in his eyes. “I have enough to start, though. I’ll just have to sort something out. Maybe impecunious Hadrians wash dishes or pull weeds to earn tuition.”

“You’ll have a fair amount of free time,” I add. Classes were held when the moon was up, and he could only attend the ones during the day. Nighttime was when lessons involving magick were taught, though to outsiders that was only a rumor. Simon knew the truth—he’d seen magickal healing in action, but it was probably best if they didn’t realize that yet.

He suddenly sits up straight, focusing on something behind me, and I turn around to see Martin the reeve winding between crowded tables toward us,

though he's so large that it's more like everyone is bouncing off him as he goes by. "May I join you folks?" he asks.

Simon scoots over on the bench to make space for him. "Please do. We were hoping to see you soon."

"Sorry I took so long." Martin waves to the owner, then drops down on the seat. The stark contrast in his bearlike build and Simon's rail-thin frame is almost comical. Not that Simon is weak—though I was a little surprised at how ferociously he fought in the alley. "Simon, isn't it? And Catrin?" We both nod. "Thank you again for what you did today."

"No thanks are necessary," Simon assures him. "We saw he intended to harm someone, and we couldn't stand by and let it happen."

I like that he refers to us as equal partners, but it was Simon who read the man's intentions. As for not letting it happen, I know he would've wanted to act, just not as I forced us to. "Will you need more testimony from us for the magistrate?" he asks.

"Judicare," the reeve corrects. "And no, it won't be necessary. The man confessed to everything we suspected him of, including what he planned to do to Catrin here."

Simon leans his forearms on the table. "I thought he might. The compulsion was more than he could handle. As much as the violence excited him, his need for it frightened him."

Martin listens to Simon with an odd expression, but we're interrupted by the owner at his elbow, holding a heavily laden plate of the same meal we'd finished. Before the man can turn away, Martin grabs his arm. "May I also have a bowl to take to Emma?"

After the man leaves, Martin addresses us again. "Our little ones don't eat much more than mush," he explains. "If I bring something home, my wife won't have to worry about making anything for herself." He tucks into his own food with as much enthusiasm as Simon earlier. Based on his size, I suspect he'll eat twice as much by the time he's done. "I know you said this was your first day in Londunium, but how long have the two of you been in Brinsulli?"

"About a week," I answer cautiously. Again, it's doubtful he's heard of Simon, but we can't take that chance. I redirect the subject to Martin, knowing most people are eager to talk about themselves. "Back in Gallia all law enforcement is done by the king's chosen provost and his selected men,

but reeve is an elected position, isn't it?"

He nods. "Brinsulli has royally appointed provosts, too, but they mostly oversee the judgments. Reeves are selected by districts within the city to patrol and maintain order and make arrests in cases of wrongdoing. In turn, we choose the higher-ranking shire reeves from among ourselves. My older brother does that."

If I had to guess, that was the other redheaded man we saw with him. "You look quite young for such an important office," I say, and my question is both flattery and genuine curiosity. "How long have you been a reeve?"

He grins. "I was elected last year, at two and twenty, but spent six months under guidance." Martin dips his head modestly, but I can tell how enormously proud he is. "I'm still not comfortable taking most actions on my own. Today was my first arrest."

"Then we should toast that," I say, raising my drink.

"To Martin the reeve's first arrest!" Simon's voice is louder and more boisterous than I've ever heard. He's a little tipsy, which is amusing, given how reserved and controlled he usually is.

We tap the rims together and sip as one. Martin puts his mug down, grinning. "Thank you for that. No one else would probably care. I also wouldn't have been able to do it without you, which brings up something I want to talk about." Though he must still be hungry, he nudges his laden plate aside and leans one elbow on the table, pivoting to face Simon. "How exactly did you know what he planned to do?"

Simon shrugs tensely and avoids Martin's eyes. "Lots of things. The way he searched the crowd and the types of people who caught his attention told me he wanted someone he could overpower. Then there was how he fidgeted, like he had a kind of energy he could barely control, that needed release." He hesitates, biting his lower lip. "There's also a ... darkness to a person's eyes when they contemplate violence, but also an innocence if they've never fully acted on it. I don't know how to explain it better than that."

Martin taps his thick fingers on the table for a few seconds. "I told you we've been looking for him. What do you think his previous crimes were?"

"Petty thievery at first," Simon answers. "Probably saw something he wanted that was beyond pickpocketing and used a knife to make the victim hand it over, and it worked, so he did it again. Then he started to enjoy the fear he was creating, especially if word of his robberies spread. He'd slash

their clothing a little, leave a visible mark of his power over them.”

His voice drops and his gaze becomes unfocused, and I know he’s climbing into the other man’s mind. “One day he went a little further and wounded his victim—it may have been an accident, or he had to go through with a threat, but he liked that even more. A cut is small and doesn’t have a long effect, however, and he started actually stabbing and slicing. The problem is the thrill of that power only lasts so long. He wanted more. Today, in all the chaos and noise, he was determined to get it. And yet, he was afraid. Part of him wanted to be stopped.”

The reeve hasn’t even glanced at his cooling food throughout Simon’s whole speech. “How did you know that last part?”

“I didn’t, actually,” Simon replies. “Not until he was caught. There was a sort of relief in his posture. He’d wondered himself just how far down this path he would go, where it would end.”

Martin is silent for a long moment. “And you’d never seen him or heard about him before today?”

“No.” Simon’s answer is resigned.

“Because the man said almost exactly everything you did, when questioned. Word for word in places.” The reeve stares at Simon, who refuses to look back at him. “From my perspective, what you did borders on magick.”

I flinch at the word, but Simon chuckles ruefully. “It’s not magick. Just experience.”

The reeve’s blue eyes widen with an eagerness Simon doesn’t see. “You’ve done this before? Pursued a person driven by ill intent?”

“Not like this, before a crime actually happens.”

“But after?”

I reply when Simon doesn’t seem to want to. “He assisted an investigator for several years, recording details of the grisliest types of crimes. They spent a lot of time speaking with the perpetrators, trying to learn why they did such things.”

“And not just why they murdered,” Simon adds quietly. “But why they chose certain victims or mutilated them in various ways. Their reasons always had some sort of logic, even if it was twisted.”

Martin squints at Simon. “You don’t appear very old. How long did you do this?”

“Not quite six years,” he says. “I’ll be twenty in a few months.”

“And how many criminals did you record?”

Simon presses his lips together as he calculates. “More than two hundred,” he finally answers. “Less than three hundred. Not all were murderers.”

Even in his shock, the reeve is quick with his own math. “That’s more than two per month. Where under the Sun did you live?”

Pilgrims from all over the continent go to Mesanus in hopes of a miraculous cure for mental afflictions. Family members often bring a parent or child in search of help and succor, which was how Simon ended up there, caring for his deteriorating father. Altum Ferris’s job was to determine whether the ones who had committed horrible crimes were truly mad and therefore not responsible for their actions. Simon told me the vast majority were perfectly sane and knew quite well that what they did was wrong. Some, like the man today, were frightened by their own compulsions, but many reveled in the wrongness, in hurting people and the power it gave over them. The altum took those judgment opportunities to study perpetrators and their crimes, to better understand what created such monsters. It cost him his own sanity.

None of this we can explain without undue risk. “We came from Lutecia.” I name the capital city of Gallia, four times larger than Londunium. “Where judgments from several regions are made.”

Martin exhales heavily. “Still ... with over two hundred. Small wonder you could identify that man today by his appearance alone, having seen so many like him.”

“It wasn’t his appearance,” Simon corrects. “It was his manner, the way he moved. The look in his eyes. That was what spoke to me.”

“I’m still impressed you could hear it. That’s a rare gift.” Martin pauses. “Have you investigated anything on your own?”

Simon hesitates, as it’s unwise to mention Collis specifically. “Once, but my own prejudices and lack of confidence interfered.”

“Much of which was my fault,” I add. “And the killer was brought to justice.”

Which is to say he died, though Simon officially took the blame.

The reeve scratches his chin thoughtfully. “So what is it that brings you two to Londunium?”

“The akademium,” I answer quickly, relieved to change the subject. “I

intend to become a physician, as does Simon.”

Martin studies me for a moment, his eyes sharp enough to see what no one else has. “You’re Selenae? I hadn’t realized until just now.”

Simon’s eyes are unusual, but so are mine. The distinctive rings around my irises are a trait unique to the People of the Night. In moonlight especially they shine silver—physical evidence of the magick carried in my blood. I don’t line the outside of my eyes with thick kohl as Selenae do, however. Not yet. Between that and not wearing their typical plain black garb, my heritage isn’t obvious unless you look at me directly.

There’s no hostility, but he regards Simon warily, whom no one would mistake for Selenae. “Never seen a couple like you. Is that allowed in Gallia?”

He might be wondering if we ran away to be together. We hadn’t planned to present ourselves as romantically attached until we got a feel for how it would be received by the Selenae—and until we’d figured it out ourselves. “Our situation is unusual,” I say. “But not unprecedented.”

I don’t mention my parents are the only other example I’ve ever heard of.

Martin seems to accept that. “In that case, I can escort you to the akademium tonight if you want, seeing as the moon just rose and they’ll be up, but if you don’t mind me saying, you both look pretty tired.”

“We are,” I admit. It’s becoming more natural for me to keep moon hours, but I’ve been awake and on my feet since dawn. “And our bags have already been taken to a room, thanks to you.”

“I’m glad to be able to offer you some form of thanks,” he says, rising to his feet and picking up his nearly full plate. “And on that note, I’ll leave you for tonight so you can get some rest. I think I’ll take this and Emma’s portion home.” The reeve offers us his free hand to shake in farewell. “I’m sure I’ll see the two of you again.”

I can’t help noticing a strange certainty in his casual statement.

CHAPTER 4

When he's gone, Simon and I look at each other a bit awkwardly, which is silly considering we've slept together every night since leaving Collis. Our arrival in Londunium was meant to be the end of that, especially since we weren't sure how the Selenae would react to our attachment, but it's likely safe to keep up the act for one more night.

Something about the way Simon's hand in the small of my back guides me to the stairs in the corner of the tavern sets my nerves humming, however. He opens the last door on the left for me, and I step inside. A candle already burns in a small open lamp on the side table, and our bags lie on the bed, but I walk straight to the window and open the shutters, finding the almost full moon high in the sky. Magick instantly floods into my body and through my veins.

I close my eyes and soak in the feel of the light, though it's not necessary once I've looked directly at the moon. The sounds and scents of the evening overwhelm me for the first few seconds, and then I slowly adjust, as one does when walking into a bright and loud room after being in dark and quiet.

Simon approaches me from behind, probably trying to be quiet, given how little his footsteps cover the sound of his heartbeat. The heat from his body warms the air between us as he stops short of touching me.

"Merciful Sun, I could stare at you all day. All night." His whisper is so soft I don't feel the air of his breath.

I feel a flush rise on my cheeks as I open my eyes and turn to face him. In my magick-enhanced sight, his battered face is even worse, the bruises pushing blood to the surface of his pale skin. My thoughts are suddenly so jumbled and muddled I can't think.

"Do you want to wash up first?" He tilts his head out of the moonlight and

toward a table near the door with a pitcher of water and a small washbasin.

“Before what?” I ask. “Are we going to be doing something?”

Simon raises his eyebrows. “I meant before me.”

What in the world possessed me to say that? Especially when we’ve both washed travel grime off our faces before bed every night for the past three weeks? It’s a routine. I fumble for a response as I brush past him. “I know, it’s just earlier than we normally go to bed. And the moon always wakes me up.”

That’s not the real reason I’m suddenly wide awake, though.

I busy myself pouring the water and rubbing it on my burning cheeks and neck as Simon begins rooting through his bag for a nightshirt. It doesn’t take long to find—we traveled light, knowing clothing could be bought or made here. I also have no idea what a Selenae medical student wears, though I have a full outfit in the standard dark fabric, plus breeches. Not that I would be doing any climbing as I did on the Sanctum in Collis.

Simon pulls his jacket off, and I focus on the basin before he removes his shirt. I’m not sure why I’m suddenly uncomfortable. It’s not as though I haven’t seen him like that before, or as if men didn’t regularly shed their tops at the Sanctum construction site on hot days. Yet I find myself peeking back at him while I grope for the towel as water drips from my face into the bowl. There’s something different about his mannerism as he pulls the linen down over his lean torso. While he was never hunched or subservient, before tonight his movements always seemed designed to take up as little space as possible, even when no one was near him. Now he stretches his arms out and twists his body with confidence and a sense of purpose, made even more startling when he catches me watching and smiles.

“Looking to feed more than your eyes?” he teases, using the favored phrase of Gallian merchants to hint that a person needs to buy something or move on.

I turn back, covering my embarrassment by scrubbing my cheeks dry. Joking is something new, too. Simon is usually serious as a funeral. “Just thinking we need a laundry day.”

“Is that so?” Simon is suddenly right behind me again, bending his head to bury his nose in the loose, messy hair at the base of my braid as his hands encircle my waist. “I think you smell fine.”

“I meant clothes.”

He lowers his face to my shoulder and breathes deeply. “Definitely. You should take these filthy things off.”

What has gotten into him? I can smell the ale on his breath, but I don’t think he’s had too much. More than he’s used to, maybe, but he’s not drunk.

Whatever it is, I find myself wanting more of it. More of him. I step forward to create some distance as I turn around and press the towel to his chest. “Your turn to wash up while I change.”

Simon gets the hint and keeps his back to me as I quickly reclose the shutters and then undo and step out of my skirt. I set it over the chair by the table, then lay my vest over it. All I’m wearing now is linen undershorts and the long underdress which only goes to my knees, and I glance up to see Simon watching me as he gently pats his battered face dry, leaving pink spots of blood on the fabric.

“You weren’t supposed to turn around until I said so.” My scowl isn’t genuine and can’t force its way into my tone.

His mouth quirks up on the right—maybe to be flirtatious, or maybe because the other side is too painful to move much. “Aren’t we married? Everyone here thinks we are.”

I stand up straighter, intending to affect a dignified posture. What actually happens is my thin dress rises higher, exposing more of my legs, and my chest pushes forward under the collar. Simon’s breath catches in his throat, and I find myself smiling coyly as if I’d done that on purpose. “You always say it only matters what we think.”

He drops the damp towel next to the washbasin and stalks across the room to stop right in front of me. Even with what he wants plainly written on his face, he still says, “And I think I want to kiss you right now.”

It’s a losing battle, but I still fight it. “What makes you think I’ll let you?”

“The way you keep biting your lips.”

Oh damn. I’m doing that right now. I withdraw them from my teeth, but immediately lick them, which is probably even more inviting. Simon slides an arm around my waist and draws me closer, dipping his head to whisper in my ear, “The way you’re holding your breath...”

I exhale reflexively, unsteady and overwhelmed by the light pressure of his body against mine through the thin layers of clothing between us. His heartbeat pulses into me from where his wrist touches my back, turning my insides to water. Sun and skies, I’ve always been attracted to him, and he to

me, but this is something new.

Simon skims his mouth along my jaw to my chin and stops with his lips a fraction of an inch from mine. “If I’m wrong, you should just say so and stop torturing me.”

“*I’m torturing you?*”

He nods, brushing his nose along mine. “And you know it.”

Feelings of power and powerlessness war within me. “Are you ready to die a martyr’s death, then?”

“If I must.”

“I’ll let you live,” I whisper, snaking my arm around his neck and leaning into him fully. “At least for tonight.”

Then, at last, I kiss him.

And he kisses back.

Not in the almost meek, disbelieving-his-good-luck way I’m used to, but as if to say, *Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted this? How much I’ve wanted you?*

I lean back, pulling him toward the bed, and invite him to show me. He pauses his kissing long enough to let me settle onto the mattress, then starts again. When I finally sink into the pillow to catch my breath for a second, he lowers his head, trailing his mouth to my exposed collarbone while one hand moves down from my hip to my thigh to pull me closer. As his lips reach the base of my throat, I can feel my pulse beating wildly in the space between his until they synchronize.

The silver chain around my neck is much shorter from the temporary repair, and the moonstone slides to the side of my neck as he drifts downward to the V of my collar. I can’t keep a clear thought in my head. While we’ve kissed and even let our hands wander some in the darkness before, there was always awareness that we didn’t know each other well enough to do anything more. And until tonight Simon had felt so unsure of himself, that he was dead weight in an unbearably unequal relationship. Like he needed me more than I needed him. But now ...

I slide my fingers through his hair, whispering, “You were always my equal, Simon. Never a burden.”

He abruptly raises his head to look down on me. “*What?*”

I blink like I’m waking from a dream. “You said you were afraid that you had nothing to offer me. But tonight, you finally feel...” I pause, searching

for the right word. “Worthy?”

Simon leans back, creating more distance. “I didn’t say that. I didn’t *say* anything.”

In that moment, we both realize what’s happened. He pushes my hand away from his head, though the source of the problem is a red smear on his cheek. “You shouldn’t listen to my thoughts like that, Cat.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, Simon!” I prop myself up on my elbows as he rotates to sit on the bed, facing away. “There’s so much blood on your face I couldn’t help touching it. You might as well be shouting in my ear.”

“But did you have to answer back?” He’s close to actually shouting now. “Couldn’t you have just let me think you didn’t hear any of that?”

I gape at him. “What? Hiding what I know is suddenly something you *want* me to do?”

I’d withheld incriminating evidence against the master architect from him on the first few murders in Collis, and though Magister Thomas was innocent, that betrayal is still a sore spot. Simon throws his legs over the side of the bed and jumps to his feet, out of my reach as I sit up. The moonstone falls back to hang centered.

“How did you even understand that?” he demands, pacing in front of me. “I couldn’t put it into words. It was only a feeling.”

“I don’t know.” Guilt makes me start to pull my knees in, but then I twist them down and rise up onto them, holding out my hands. “But it doesn’t matter, Simon. You shouldn’t feel that way about yourself. I certainly don’t think of you as anything less because you can’t use magick.”

He turns away and picks up the towel from earlier, dabbing at his face again like that will fix what happened. “Let’s just go to sleep, Cat. I’m tired and my face hurts.”

I take a deep breath but ultimately decide nothing I can say right now will make this better. Instead I slide off the bed and search for my nightclothes in the travel bag on the floor, making no effort to hide from view as I change. Simon doesn’t look, however, only glowers at the faint stains on the towel. When I’ve redressed, he still hasn’t moved or spoken, and I suppress a sigh and crawl into the bed.

I realize now it wasn’t about my magick or his lack of it. Simon’s ability to understand the mind of a killer is extraordinary, but the macabre skill isn’t one which pays, leaving him no ability to make his way in the world. His

misery since leaving Collis hadn't been fear of being followed and caught but because he'd felt useless. No one needed him, not even me.

But today he'd been needed. Today he'd done something good when no one else could have.

Until I gutted his triumph. The blood that was a badge of honor was now the betrayer of his deepest insecurity.

I lie with my back to the room and stare at the wall until Simon blows out the candle and tiptoes to the edge of the bed. He slips under the blanket, trying not to disturb me, likely thinking I'm asleep. Now that it's dark, I wipe a tear from my cheek, but he senses the movement and turns to curl his body around mine.

"I'm sorry, Cat," he murmurs, nuzzling into my hair until he reaches the silver chain at the nape of my neck and presses his lips to my skin. "Forgive me. I'm an ass."

"No, you're not."

"Please." His arms tighten like he wants to pull me closer but is afraid to. "I'm not worth your tears."

For a long moment I'm rigid, trying to decide how to let him know how utterly wrong he is. Then I slowly relax against him, filling all the space between us. "I'm sorry, too."

Simon settles around me, the tension in his muscles slowly easing until we've melted into one shape with one breath, one heartbeat.

How is it possible to feel so close to a person and yet so far?

CHAPTER 5

I have trouble sleeping, not because of what happened with Simon, though that's awkward enough, but because the moon is up until almost three hours past midnight. Even with the shutters closed, its magick hangs in the air, conducting sounds and scents from across the city. The Selenae community is up and singing as they do in Collis, though I wonder if it's the Quarter or the akademium I'm hearing. I finally doze off a couple hours before dawn.

Simon lets me sleep later than he should. Or maybe he doesn't want to get out of the bed any more than I do. Right before leaving our room, Simon takes a moment to kiss me in a way that says he expects it to be the last time for a while. Even with our argument—or perhaps because of it—the idea of separating from him is painful, and I almost float the idea of waiting a few more days before seeking out the Selenae.

But if Simon wants to feel useful, physician training is likely a good way to start, so I say nothing.

We carry our bags downstairs with us to breakfast. To our surprise, Martin the reeve waves at us from a table, where he sits next to an older woman I assume is *not* his wife. He stands as we come over, and his companion also rises from her seat, patting her lips with a napkin as she turns to face us. Her clothes appear all black to everyone in the room, but I can see subtle differences in shade and the crescent moon designs embroidered on her sleeves. She's Selenae. And from the narrowing of her kohl-lined eyes, she's not pleased by what she sees.

Oblivious to the hostility in his companion's gaze, Martin grins. "Good morning! I thought since you intended to apply to the akademium, the least I could do is introduce you to one of its instructors. Haema Hespera, this is the couple I was telling you about—Simon and his wife, Catrin."

Simon tenses next to me, and my empty stomach rolls over with anxiety. The title of haema—or haemon, for a man—indicates she’s more than a teacher, she’s a leader in the medical community. The kind that no one questions. Martin is trying to help us, and we shouldn’t have let him think we’re married, but how were we supposed to know he actually had a Selenae friend, let alone a high-ranking one?

The enmity on Hespera’s face is now explained, however. She nods stiffly.

Martin motions for us to join them as he calls for the server’s attention. We all sit at the same time, the reeve continuing excitedly. “Haema Hespera is one of five members of the Penthæmon. Three of the others are the oldest physicians, and other than the archæmon, she’s the youngest selected for the council.”

Hespera appears to be about thirty. There’s no gray in her dark waves of hair, but the lines around her mouth tell me she spends a great deal of time frowning. She wears the typical moonstone on a silver chain around her neck and a pitch-black voidstone in a bracelet on her left wrist. There’s also a ring set with cloudy white stones that gleam with countless rainbow facets within—memory stones, which can hold thoughts they’re given forever. I have one my uncle gave me with one of his memories of my parents, but they’re rare and precious. To see three on her hand is unsettling. Do they carry some kind of knowledge passed down by other physicians?

I clear my throat. “It’s our honor to meet a haema and council member. What do you teach at the akademium?”

“I’m the coroner,” she says flatly. “I conduct anatomy classes and also consult with shire reeves on deaths of mysterious circumstance.”

Martin’s buoyant mood is suddenly subdued. “That’s how we’ve come to know each other, though my brother, Edward, is actually the shire reeve.”

Hespera stiffens at his words but keeps her sharp focus on me. “Where are you from?”

“Collis,” I answer truthfully without thinking. “It’s in the northeast of Gal—”

“I know where it is.” Her eyes shift to Simon. “And you?”

“Lutecia.”

“Untrue.”

Simon swallows, stealing a glance at Martin, and corrects himself. “Lutecia originally, but I lived most of my life in Prezia.”

The reeve has finally caught on to the haema's cold mood. Before he can say anything, she turns to him, a genuine light of companionship briefly softening her angular features. "Martin, would you please fetch us a fresh pot of tea?"

That's a servant's job, but Martin obeys, understanding that whatever is going on he can have no part in. When he's gone, she glares down at our hands, and I realize Simon has covered mine with his—or maybe I grabbed his in anxiety; I honestly can't remember. "How long have you been married?" Hespera demands.

"Three months," I answer before Simon can, praying he lets me take the lead on these questions.

She purses her lips. "Are you with child?"

"No." Heat rushes to my face. Then, angry at both the personal question and my instant answer, I ask, "Would it have disqualified me from studies if I was?"

Hespera appears baffled by my question. "Of course not. Why in the world would it?" Then she regains control of the conversation. "I was merely trying to assess the reason you dared to marry a Hadrian. That's not allowed, even in Collis, so I'm assuming that's why you left." She studies my eyes, murmuring, "And you haven't been voided."

To be voided is to be permanently cut off from all magick, done by putting bits of voidstone under the skin. I'm told it drives most Selenae into madness or *skonia* addiction. Or both.

"I didn't actually realize I was Selenae until one moon ago." I produce a sealed letter from my bag, written by my cousin, Athene. I know it says almost nothing about Simon, which is why I told Hespera our marriage predated that discovery. "This should explain everything."

Hespera takes the folded paper and cracks the wax circle in half to open the letter, reading without preamble. After several seconds the pages drop, and she looks at me with eyes so wide there's white all around the irises. "You are of mixed parentage."

"Yes, though I never knew my mother or father." A tiny quaver creeps into my voice, and Simon squeezes my fingers in support.

"And yet you have—" Hespera stops, her eyes darting to Simon and then his hand on mine. She doesn't want to speak of magick in front of him.

"She does," Simon says quietly.

Haema Hespera glowers at him for several seconds, then swiftly refolds the letter and stands, her words sharp as the edge of an unpolished voidstone. “You will both come with me now, and you will not speak a single word until we’ve reached the Penthæmon council chambers. Disobey at your personal peril.”

She leaves the table without replacing her chair and heads for the door. Simon and I grab our things and follow in silence, throwing apologetic smiles to Martin, who’s been politely waiting out of earshot, holding a steaming teapot and four empty mugs. From the look on the reeve’s face, he’s realized he hasn’t done us a favor at all.



The previous day’s festivities lasted long into the night, and the streets are mostly deserted though it’s approaching midmorning. Servants and small children seem to be the only ones awake, the latter darting between hiding places in a game not possible on other, more crowded days. Spots of sunshine on the packed dirt outnumber those of shade, and Haema Hespera walks straight through the varying light without flinching. Simon laces his fingers with mine as we follow. Every half minute or so, the coroner sends an acid glare over her shoulder to make sure we haven’t fallen behind.

Many children halt to stare as we pass, and a few even trail us for a block or longer, singing under their breath. The tune is the same as the nursery rhyme sung in Collis, urging Selenæ to return home at night. Hespera doesn’t react to the childish harassment, either because she’s used to it or doing so would reveal that she can hear them.

A twenty-foot-high protective wall wraps around Londunium, except on the south side, where the Tamse River does the job. We head for the northwest corner and one of several gates that has a nominal pair of guards keeping watch over traffic in and out. In times of peace, only the citadel on the far side of the city is truly guarded.

The two men posted ignore Hespera as she passes through, but Simon and I get a curious glance from one before he yawns and the moment of scrutiny has passed. Not far beyond runs a wall half the other’s height encircling what must be the akademium. The limestone is topped with metal shapes to discourage anyone from climbing over, and though I’ve never been here

before, I feel like something is missing.

A few non-Selenae approach the akademium entrance at the same time, carrying heavy tomes and satchels full of bundled parchments. I'm surprised when Haema Hespera acknowledges their respectful greetings, though I notice they stay far out of her way. We continue past the much more attentive watchmen dressed in Selenae black and under the raised iron lattice that hums with magick. Decorative metalwork in the gate and on the wall above resembles moonflowers and leaves, which makes me realize they are what is absent. The outer walls around the Selenae Quarter in Collis had been covered with living vines, but here they are inside, their star-shaped white and violet flowers dotting the sides of long, two-story buildings. Most of the blossoms are curled up at this sunny hour.

What must be medical students scurry in behind us and skirt the edges of a manicured courtyard to their destinations. Just as they avoided Hespera, they give a wide berth to the circular pool of water at the center of the open area. Like a residential Quarter, the akademium has a Moon Pool, which most Sun-revering people consider blasphemous. Apparently not blasphemous enough to choose a different path to becoming a physician, however.

The coroner stays on a gravel path leading to a redbrick building with an ornate facade. As artistic as the design is and as well cared for it appears to be, it and the other structures give me a sense of emptiness and disuse. No other Selenae are around at this Moon hour, but I don't think that's the reason. With blood magick slowly failing over the last generations, the student population is less than half of what it used to be, according to my cousin, Athene—and that's with every eligible Selenae pressed into physician training.

We enter the building and finally halt inside a round antechamber, facing heavy oak doors set with wrought iron designs. The metal both draws in magick and dampens it, and I can hardly hear anything beyond them.

Haema Hespera points to a hard wooden bench against the wall. "Sit and remain silent."

So much for being able to speak when we reached our destination. We do as we're told, dropping our travel bags by our feet as one of the doors opens inward and the head of an older woman leans out.

"The archaemon is most impatient," she says to Hespera. Then she gawks at us. "Is it as the Hadrian said?"

“Worse,” the coroner replies. With Athene’s letter clenched in her fist, she enters the room and shuts the door behind her.

And then we wait.

There’s no way for us to know how long we sit there, though it must be over an hour. Every once in a while, I hear raised voices from the heated conversation within, but not even my senses can distinguish words through the magick-laced doors. The tones are enough, however.

The wide seat has plenty of room, but I rest my head on Simon’s shoulder and press our sides together despite the numbness in my thigh from being close to the bloodstones in his pocket. Handy as they were last night in healing the lump on the back of my head, I had to give them back to his care.

His stomach growls, and mine answers back. I giggle in spite of myself, then sigh, and Simon leans his head sideways to rest on mine.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I had no idea Martin would tell them we were married.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” I assure him quietly. Then, in case someone can hear us, I add, “We didn’t know I was Selenae until it was too late.”

“Mmm.” Simon seems to understand my hint, that our story should be that we were married before I knew about magick.

Both chamber doors suddenly swing open. “I told you to be silent,” Hespera snaps from the archway.

I can’t help rolling my eyes as we sit up straighter. Standing behind the coroner are what must be the four other council members—a man about her age, two women in their sixties, and a man of perhaps eighty years. The eldest is such a frail wisp of a man that I fear a solid breeze could carry him away. All of them are as hostile as Hespera, though the woman we glimpsed earlier also looks intensely curious. She holds Athene’s letter in one hand; the other is tucked tightly against her body.

It’s she who speaks. “Come forth, Katarene of Collis.”

I frown. “It’s Catrin.” Simon’s fingers tighten on mine, knowing how I feel about this.

The woman arches her eyebrows. “Is Katarene not the name your parents gave you at birth?”

It is, but as soon as they were gone, my father’s brother left me with Mother Agnes and the Sisters of Light, who changed it to one that wouldn’t stand out among Gallians. Though I’ve forgiven my uncle, I’d rather honor

those that cared for me than those who gave me up. “That is the name they chose,” I say. “But *Catrin* is the name I was raised with.”

“Yes. One of many matters we need to address.” She gestures for me to come inside.

I don’t budge. “What about Simon?”

“These are not matters he can hear,” is her crisp answer.

“He already knows everything,” I insist, pointing to the parchments in her hand. “And Athene says he may be trusted.”

I also know my cousin referred to me as having the most powerful blood magick she’s ever encountered, and I’m willing to bet the council won’t turn me away without trying to take the measure of my abilities first. My dazzling potential is my protection, but now it’s his, too.

To my surprise, the woman doesn’t argue. “Then he joins us at his own risk,” she says, moving aside for us to enter.

The others turn on their heels and march back into the room, the older man rustling like a pile of dried leaves. Simon and I follow, stretching the stiffness out of our limbs. Inside, a round window in the ceiling lets in muted sunlight, but its purpose is more likely for moonlight. The council members take their seats on throne-like chairs set in a U shape, with the younger man in the center, also placed slightly higher. What was it Martin called him? The archaemon? His dark, wavy hair has gray in it, unlike Hespera’s, though the reeve had said he was younger. He studies us with silver-ringed eyes in a face of stone, but there’s a fearful tilt to the lines in his forehead.

After reclosing the door, the woman with the letter takes her place next to Hespera. She’s not even settled in the chair before the leader begins.

“Katarene of Collis, it is said you are the daughter of Iason, Selenae physician of—”

“Excuse me,” Simon says. “It’s *Catrin*. As she said.”

The man breaks off. From the archaemon’s shocked expression, it’s a fair guess that no one’s dared interrupt him in a long time.

Simon continues, “And before we go any further, I think it would be helpful if the members of this distinguished council introduced themselves. You know who we are and where we are from, but we know nothing other than you have authority and very fancy chairs.”

Something like a snort escapes the woman next to Hespera. The leader scowls, but maybe more because he’s already lost his chance to start with

intimidating us.

He flicks his wrist toward the man and woman on his left. “Council Elders Nestor and Zosima.” Then he gestures to the right. “Elder Maia. They have the most years as practicing physicians. Coroner Hespera you know. Together we are the Penthaemon. You will address them all by the title haemon or haema.” The last sentence is said almost like an afterthought. “And I am Caerus, anointed archaemon of this medical council.”

Simon nods gravely. “And may I beg to know why you were the one chosen to lead this council, Archaemon?”

Caerus draws his eyebrows down. “Not chosen. *Anointed.*”

“His blood magick is the strongest,” I whisper.

Now the brows go up. “And if you knew this, why did you not explain it to your Hadrian?”

“I didn’t know.” I clench my jaw at how they refer to Simon like he’s my pet. “But it makes sense.”

I can also feel it rolling off the archaemon in waves, like he himself is the moon, radiating magick anyone can use. But then he shifts in his chair, and I see it’s inlaid with glowing moonstones and what must be bloodstones. Those are what I’m sensing, not his own magick. It’s almost a relief, because it means I don’t have to add being able to measure another’s magick to my list of mysterious abilities.

“Are we introduced to your satisfaction, Hadrian?” the archaemon asks with exaggerated politeness.

“Yes, thank you,” replies Simon with equal formality. He places a pale hand on his chest. “But I must apologize since you obviously don’t know my name yet. I am Simon of Mesanus, assistant and student of Altum Gustav Ferris, whose reputation is known far and wide in medical circles.”

The reaction to Simon’s statement is not entirely negative. Apparently Altum Ferris’s work is indeed known here—and respected. Zosima leans forward, now as curious as Maia across from her. The squarish shape to her jaw and high forehead makes her mouth and eyes seem proportionally small. “Indeed. And how long were you with him?”

“Approximately six years, Haema,” Simon answers respectfully.

“You are *very* young,” she says with no slight amount of skepticism.

He dips his head slightly, a faint curve lifting his lips. “A fault I hope will be cured in time.”

Zosima actually smiles back, but Caerus is not impressed. “You are irrelevant in the matters we need to discuss, Hadrian,” he says. “Except perhaps in how to dispose of you.”

I don’t like the sound of that. Simon’s boldness evaporates.

Maia waves the pages from Athene at me. “It says in this letter that you are the child of Iason, physician of Collis, and a Hadrian woman named Stella. Were the source of this information not one I trust completely, I would not believe it. As it is, I’m having difficulty.”

I incline my head as Simon did, hoping to show deference. “I personally cannot attest to the truth, as I was an infant when they died, but my moonparent believed I had no magick and placed me in the care of Hadrians.”

“With your mother’s family?”

“No. With the prioress of Solis Abbey and then later the master architect of Collis, whom I worked for.”

Hespera huffs in disgust. “You were raised by the most zealous of sunlovers? That alone gives us cause to reject you.”

“I discovered my abilities by accident.” I hold up my left hand to show the purple bruise on the edge of the nail of my middle finger, a mark that will never heal. “When I cut myself under the light of a full moon.”

“A *full moon*?” gasps Zosima. Under normal circumstances, waking magick in the blood is done on purpose during a crescent phase, when Moon’s light is much weaker, so as not to overwhelm the initiate. She shakes her head in disbelief. “That can cause a seizure.”

“It was definitely a shock” is all I will admit.

Hespera’s constant frown deepens. “None of this makes sense.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense to be true,” says Maia quietly. “The only way to know is to test her. We can start with the simplest question: Does she indeed have blood magick at all?”

The old man, who so far has said nothing, reaches into his dark robes and pulls out a fistful of round stones. How he could stand to have bloodstones that close to him is a mystery. Maybe they’re keeping him alive. Then again, I don’t know how Caerus can tolerate sitting in that chair. It must feel like a thousand bee stings.

Nestor, I recall his name as, comes off his high seat with a crackling of joints and motions for me to come closer, which I do. He extends his knobby,

wrinkled hands, holding a flat, smooth stone in a palm that bears a thin, white scar across the middle. Though I'm not sure exactly what he wants, I remember what my uncle Gregor did the night I was formally introduced to the Selenae world and place my hand over his with the stone between. It must be the right thing to do, because he immediately clasps his empty hand over our joined ones and holds them together tightly.

Images begin marching through my mind, slow and methodical, like this is a speech he's given a thousand times. *Tell me what you see.*

Out loud? I think back.

His thin arms jerk so hard I worry that I've hurt him, and the visions briefly stop, but then they return, as does his silent voice. *Tell everyone what you see.*

Out loud, then. I take a deep breath and recite everything that comes at me, from describing a battle in a rock-studded valley to a sequence of numbers to what sounds like the opening paragraph of a medical text. I repeat like a parrot, as Simon's cousin Juliane recorded facts and events, almost without knowing what she was doing. Like I'm merely the air between speaker and listener.

Until I suddenly say, "The stone is far too weak for all this, she must be—"

The old man's hands release mine like they're red-hot iron, and the stone hits the wooden floorboards a fraction of a second later. I open my eyes—realizing only then that they'd been closed—and find Nestor staring at me, open-mouthed, allowing me to see how few teeth he has left.

I scowl and rub my tingling hand on my skirt. "I wasn't cheating. No one told me anything."

Caerus comes out of his chair to pick up the dropped bloodstone. He turns it over in his fingers, grumbling, "I can't feel the magick in this at all."

"That's what comes from sitting on your throne so much," says Nestor disdainfully. He holds out his hand.

As Caerus drops it in Nestor's palm, I notice the archaemon doesn't wear a moonstone around his neck but in a ring on his left hand. Is that due to personal style or his position on the Penthæmon council?

Nestor tucks the stone with his others and returns to his seat. "I judge her blood magick to be extremely strong. Not to be ignored."

Maia nods in agreement. "Athene says Katarene has shown great potential as a physician despite her mixed blood. That recommendation is enough for

me.”

Hespera shakes her head in disgust. “No. Mixed blood is unpredictable and possibly dangerous. She should be voided.”

My stomach plummets, but Zosima brushes that suggestion aside. “I agree with Haema Maia and propose to admit Katarene to the akademium on the condition that she submits to any other tests of her abilities which we deem necessary.” Then her gleaming eyes narrow in what can only be a warning. “Voiding is always an option in the future.”

Hespera turns to the archaemon. “May I assume you will take a position counter to mine as usual?”

Caerus glances at the coroner, and I think for a moment he might side with her just to spite her statement—which is an odd dynamic—but Maia interrupts what he might say with another question for me. “Athene claims you can do more than anyone she’s met. Can you give an example of this?”

My cousin didn’t list everything in the letter, saying I would need to judge who was safe to trust with that information, and when, but I have to give them something out of the ordinary. I clear my throat. “I can hear blood without touching it, as long as moonlight shines on both it and me.”

All five take a collective breath, Nestor’s ending in a wheeze. Zosima is the first to recover. “Over what distance?” she demands.

“At least from across a city.” I heard my friend Marguerite at the abbey while I was on the Sanctum tower, and I heard Perrete as her blood was spilled in an alley, both from nearly the same place. I don’t mention, however, that for a few seconds I *was* Perrete that night.

“Impossible,” hisses the coroner.

“Something we will seek to verify,” says Maia calmly. She raises her hand. “I also vote to admit Katarene under Haema Zosima’s conditions.” In response, Nestor, Zosima, and Caerus lift their hands.

Hespera does not.

Maia’s smile is more one of triumph than pleasure as the hands go down. “The motion is carried and she shall stay.”

I step back to Simon’s side, ready to collapse in relief.

“And now we must address the issue of this Hadrian,” Zosima says.

They still won’t use his name, like he’s not a person. “Simon’s silence and discretion can be depended on,” I reply through gritted teeth.

“So you say,” Hespera spits, bitter at having lost the vote. “No Hadrian has

ever been privy to our secrets. What he knows endangers us all.”

“It’s not his fault,” I insist. “He was merely there when my magick manifested. We discovered it and where I came from together.” That’s partially true, but it’s the version that fits with what we’ve said so far. If only Martin hadn’t told Hespera we were married. Then perhaps we could have simply separated.

But separated for how long? My heart feels ripped apart at the thought of doing any of this without him.

Simon stands casually with both hands in the pockets of his trousers. “I’d hoped to study medicine as well, seeing as I already have some knowledge in that area.” He nods to Athene’s letter on the arm of Maia’s chair. “Is there some way I can also earn your trust?”

“No,” says Hespera flatly. “And you wouldn’t be the first Hadrian whose memory we removed.”

A wave of shock rolls through me. They can do that? How? Athene never mentioned such a thing.

“But he’s known for weeks, and he’s known Katarene for much longer,” says Zosima. “That knowledge has crept into too many places by now. We’d have to take everything going back to when he first met her to be sure.”

“Do that, and I won’t submit to any tests,” I say quickly, gambling on how badly the council wants to explore my power.

Hespera’s smile is sour. “Good, then you can be voided and sent on your way.”

“A gap that large in anyone’s mind leaves them vulnerable to filling it with nonsense or even madness,” Maia says, completely ignoring the coroner’s threat. “Our first vow as a physician is to do no harm.”

Hespera grips the armrest with the hand wearing the ring of glittering stones. “That oath cannot be fulfilled if our secrets are revealed.”

“Now, Hespera,” Caerus says soothingly. “I’m sure we can keep a close eye on him while he stays here with Katarene.”

They all insist on calling me by my Selenae name, just as they refuse to use his.

The coroner gapes at the archaemon. “You would give them married quarters and let him wander at will?”

“They’re already known as married by a prominent reeve in the city,” Zosima points out. “Moreover, under the terms of Queen Maude’s Brinsulli-

Selenae Agreement last century, anyone living in our community is subject to our laws and punishments without interference.”

Something about that raises the hair on the back of my neck. If I decide not to study here after all, or let them experiment on me, they’ll have no motivation not to harm either one of us. At this point, however, there’s no other option that lets us both walk out of here with memories and magick intact.

Hespera settles back into her chair, unconvinced, and looks at the woman on her right. Maia has been the friendliest, but I hold my breath until she nods. “If the Hadrian knows what we can do, he also knows nothing can be hidden from us, even his very thoughts, should we wish to examine them.” She taps the letter on the arm of her chair pointedly. “And Athene says it was considered safe for him to leave the Quarter in Collis. We can trust that judgment until we have evidence it is unwise.”

Everyone focuses on Nestor. Now that the shock of our brief encounter is over, he eyes me with an obvious hunger for answers. “Agreed,” he rasps.

The number of those consenting must make Hespera’s objection irrelevant because Caerus doesn’t even ask for her vote. “Very well,” he says. “Do you accept these terms, Hadrian?”

Simon suddenly removes his hand from his pocket and grasps mine.

I don’t think we have a choice.

He has a bloodstone in his palm, and he’s using it to send me his thoughts. I meet his eyes, wishing I could ask a dozen questions, but he can only hear what I say out loud, so I have to wait for more from him, which quickly follows.

When this is over, we can go our separate ways if we want, no one the wiser.

It’s not really that different from our original plan other than expecting him to live outside the akademium grounds. We weren’t committed to each other yet, and deciding we weren’t meant to be was certainly a possibility. There’s a despondency that pierces my heart at the thought, however, and I search his face, trying to determine if it came from me or him. His expression is as blank as the first time I saw him. Whether that’s to shield me from his deeper thoughts or keep our audience from knowing what we’re doing, I’m not sure, but we’ve been silent too long.

I turn to face five pairs of eyes, blinking away tears, as Simon answers. “I

am willing to live under Selenae law and protection.”

That last bit is significant. He also expects whatever privileges their laws provide.

“It’s done, then,” says Zosima, rising to her feet. The others also stand with varying degrees of speed and enthusiasm. “The two of you will follow me. I will make the arrangements for your housing and orientation. We can all get a few hours of sleep before moonrise.”

Moonset was six hours ago; it must be like the middle of the night to them. Though I doubt that’s the reason most of them are grumpy, I’m sure it doesn’t help.

“Are you bonded?” asks Maia abruptly, before anyone can step away.

I glance uneasily at Simon, wondering if this is some sort of test. “Back in Collis, one month before the wedding,” I say.

“That is Gallian tradition. What about by ours?” Maia waves the parchment in her hand. “Athene doesn’t mention it.”

Of course my cousin would say nothing—we’d left with no intention of acting like we were married—or bonded. When I can’t think of a quick enough response, Maia tucks her other arm tighter against her chest and frowns. “If it wasn’t performed in Collis it must be done here. Sun weddings mean nothing.”

We can’t pretend it was done. For one thing I have no idea what the Selenae ceremony involves.

Simon tightens his hand on mine. *It doesn’t mean anything if we don’t believe it does.*

Forced religious vows and marriages aren’t legally binding, which was why my mother’s family had tried to get her to claim she’d wed my father under coercion, but she refused. Rather than accept her choice, they spread lies about her being kidnapped and seduced. The mob that descended on the Selenae Quarter killed more than a dozen, including my parents.

He’s saying we can go through a Selenae bonding ceremony, but in our minds it will be meaningless, and that’s what matters.

Not ideal, but once again, we have no choice. “Of course,” I say, trying to pretend it’s something I actually want. “Whenever you wish it done.”

“The moon will be full enough tonight,” says Maia. She sweeps her long skirt aside and strides past us. “I will make the preparations.”

Simon releases my hand, but not before I catch a fragment of one last

thought.

I wish I wanted to—

CHAPTER 6

Unmarried Selenae students live in standard, individual quarters with a shared washroom between two. Simon and I are given what is basically the size of a pair of rooms with a single, larger bed and a table and chairs for two rather than a desk, as well as a private washroom. Haema Zosima said they wouldn't demand rent from Simon, but unlike me, he'll have to pay for tuition and any meals he eats in the dining hall. If we're frugal, together we have enough funds for perhaps a half year. I already know he won't accept my money, however, which means he'll have to find work, and soon.

We put our few belongings in the wardrobe and work together to dress the bed in sheets borrowed from the hospital until we can get some of our own in town. The linens smell strongly of antiseptic soap, and I wrinkle my nose as I tuck the blanket around the foot end. My feelings are mixed—while I'd wanted the time to figure out what we were, the thought of having Simon at my side through all of this is a comfort. Maybe I'd already decided what I wanted from this relationship, even if he hadn't.

Simon studying to be a physician seemed like the best option before. Now it's the only option. The same with living together. Would he have wanted such an arrangement if we'd had a choice?

Setting up the room takes less than an hour, and then we're avoiding looking at each other. Most of the akademium is currently asleep, even the groundskeepers, and no one will come looking for us until the bonding ceremony, which will take place around midnight. I don't want to think about it, either. "What now?" I ask. "I feel like we have literally nothing to do."

"We could search for the architect's wife," Simon suggests. "I'm sure we wouldn't find her today, but soon enough we'll both be busy—you more than me. We could at least make a start."

Seventeen years ago, Magister Thomas's wife had returned to her family in Londunium, and he'd been so obsessed with the Sanctum's construction that he hadn't even noticed that she was gone for several days. Following her would have cost him his position as Collis's master architect—a rank he'd worked his whole life to achieve, but there were also the circumstances under which he'd left Londunium years earlier. As a passionate, opinionated junior architect, he'd argued with his master until they came to blows. The result was banishment from the city for a decade.

He also confessed to me he couldn't bear to leave the grave of their infant daughter behind in Collis. *We all mourn in our own ways*, he said. *I lost myself in work while Eleanor cried alone. She left me because I effectively abandoned her. Staying was both a punishment and a way to honor little Therese as I did not honor her mother.*

The architect sent a letter with me, now in the drawer of the wardrobe. He doesn't expect his wife to come back or even accept his apology, but he wanted to at least tell her how sorry he was. It's been a long time, though, and there's a significant chance she's not even alive, especially given the waves of plague which hit Londunium over the years.

I consider the idea. "I'm not actually sure where to begin."

"We could try the Sanctum," suggests Simon. "If he worked there, surely someone remembers him and hopefully, her family."

In my travels with the architect, the Sanctum would've been the first place we visited in a new city, to both study and admire the work of his peers. The soaring towers have been calling me from over the rooftops since we arrived yesterday, yet I worry the building will make me unbearably homesick. That, and I'm Selenae now. It's practically heresy, and the two of us are on shaky ground as it is. "Not today," I say. "I'm tired."

"Did you sleep at all?" Simon asks. "You were a little restless last night."

My cheeks warm as I look away. "Sorry if I bothered you. It's difficult to sleep when the moon is so full." Even when I'm not in contact with the moonlight, its magick hangs in the air, and I felt like I was trying to nap on a sunny day in the middle of a bustling market.

"Why don't you try to get some rest now? You'll be up most of tonight, and then you'll be keeping those hours."

I pick at my fingernails. "What about you?"

He shrugs. "I guess I'll figure out what works best for me. For us." Simon

nods to the mattress. “Go ahead. You’ll want to be rested when the Moon is up so you can actually enjoy it.”

All my previous brooding is replaced with new fears. I sit on the edge of the low bed. “I’m not sure I’m ready for this.”

“For physician training?” Simon cocks his head in puzzlement. “Athene seemed to think it would be easy for someone with your abilities.”

“It’s more than that,” I mumble. “For being Selenae. For using my magick so much.” Less than a month ago I had no idea how different their world was or that I was a part of it. I lived comfortably where I had my whole life, surrounded by people who cared about me, and expected to spend several more years, at least, inspecting the Sanctum construction site. Now I had none of that—and a set of skills I didn’t understand. I stare at the wooden floor between our feet. “Never mind them finding out what I can do, *I* have no idea what I’m truly capable of.”

“And that scares you?”

“More than a little.”

Simon kneels down in front of me and covers my clasped hands with one of his. “What about it is so frightening?”

“For a start, Haema Hespera hates me, and I’m not sure that I—that *we* can trust anyone.” He nods in agreement, and I continue. “What if there’s *more* to my magick than I know?”

“Then you’ll handle it.” Simon massages my knuckles with his thumb. “And you can trust me. Always.”

Some of my worry melts into guilt. “I know you didn’t want it this way, Simon, but I’m really glad you’re here. I don’t think I could do this without you.”

My words seem to both warm and frighten him. “I’m certain you could,” he says. “But I’m more than glad to be here with you.”

Maybe the half thought I heard in the council chamber *wasn’t* about this forced arrangement. “Do you really mean that?”

“Absolutely.” Simon rises to his feet and drops a kiss on my forehead. “Now sleep.”

Weariness sweeps over me, and I sigh and scoot back on the mattress to lie down, my shirt pulling tight across my chest as I stretch and making him quickly avert his gaze.

“What will you do this afternoon?” I ask.

Simon turns toward the door as he checks the pouch of coins on his belt. “I think I’ll go out in town for a few supplies. We’ll need candles—or at least I will, and soap.”

“And bedding that doesn’t stink,” I add. “You know most people consider household shopping women’s work.”

“Is that so?” His eyes crinkle in amusement as he glances back over his shoulder. “You know I can cook and mend clothes, too, right?”

“So can I. Mother Agnes and Mistress la Fontaine made sure of it.” I wince with the raw memories and close my eyes against tears. Then I keep them shut because I don’t want to talk anymore.

I’m not actually asleep, but Simon returns to my side and eases my boots off. The afternoon is warm enough that he doesn’t cover me with the blanket, but he kisses my cheek and leaves quietly.

★ ★ ★

Simon and I face each other, standing barefoot in the wide, shallow pool at the center of the akademium courtyard. It’s similar to the one in the Selenae Quarter in Collis—and, I suspect, all their communities. To them it’s like a Holy Sanctum in the heart of a city. The full Moon shines down from directly above and reflects on the surface of the water around us, while the entire student and instructor population, minus those working in the hospital, stands around the edges, here to witness.

It’s a strange sensation, like standing in a puddle of pure magick. The water bends the moonlight around to all sides of my skin, leaving nothing in shadow. Normally, on a night like this, moonstones are placed in the pools to better absorb the soft, celestial light they will then radiate out for use when the moon is gone.

I wiggle my toes against the textured cement, wondering if we should have tried to find better clothes. Though they’re of good quality, the outfits we’re wearing are only slightly cleaner than the ones we arrived in. We already stood out in town as the style of our clothes is so out of step with local trends. Blending in here, among the Selenae’s black and deep blues and violets, is impossible. I do have clothes from my family in Collis, but I didn’t want to wear them tonight, thinking it would emphasize Simon’s being an outsider when I needed to publicly establish my commitment to him. Maybe that

wasn't a good choice, though, given the animosity I can see in every silver pair of eyes and hear in the whispers I hope are too quiet for Simon's ears.

The hum of voices falls silent as Haema Maia speaks, her voice clear as the sky above. "The Night welcomes you."

"And we embrace it in return," the group murmurs, the response automatic for them.

"Tonight we not only welcome a new student in the medical arts to our community, we take this Holy Moon to conduct her first bonding."

My forehead creases in a slight frown—not at the collective gasp around us, that was expected—but at the word *first*.

"Though the circumstances are unusual," Maia continues, "it is important that we begin this for the safety and security of our people."

Again the mention of the beginning of something, making it obvious there will be more to this than I realized. And do they really see Simon as that much of a threat? I could tell he was nervous when this started, but now the armpits of the shirt under his tunic are more than damp.

On the backs of both our right hands, a perfect arc has been inked over the wrists with the opening to the inside, like a half bracelet. It's not as permanent as a tattoo, but at least one other couple watching still has the same marks visible on their skin, though they've faded some. They stand close together, like newlyweds, so I expect these to last for several months.

"Take each other's hands," Maia directs. Simon's are as sweaty as my own as we raise them to press our palms together and clasp fingers. "So you are joined and alone but for each other in this sacred pool, so the two of you are. Whatever is within this circle belongs to both of you and no one else. That includes whatever secrets, words, and events the other does not wish to be shared."

Now this makes more sense. Bonding in Gallian tradition legally recognizes a couple as one, and they can't be compelled to testify against each other, even under oath in a trial. This similarly binds Simon to silence about my magick. It also means we can be punished for each other's actions. That's why Maia was eager to make sure it was done. It's their protection against him spilling Selenae secrets.

And while it may not have been her intention, it also means Simon doesn't have to tell any of them what he knows about my abilities. In fact, he's obligated *not* to.

The haema goes on, talking about circles unbroken. Not a word about why this mixing of blood is permitted, which probably frustrates our audience. Many cast confused glances at the other members of the Penthæmon. Hespera stands rigid and impassive, her arms crossed.

I'm not much shorter than Simon, but I have to tilt my face up to meet his gaze. The Moon crowns his curls in silver light, and his shadowed eyes are more than a little worried. I want to tell him everything will be fine, but anything I say will be overheard, no matter how softly I speak. So I stand there, half listening, fighting the urge to fidget, trying to look like this is a natural and expected event and not something we're being forced into without understanding what's going on.

Then at some signal I miss, it's over. Everyone backs away, and many wander from the pool in small groups and pairs. A few Selenæ pull moonstones out of their pockets or lift necklaces out of their shirts to place in the water. One tall young man begins humming a Moon-praising tune I recognize from hearing in Collis; then his eyes dart to Simon, and he stops.

As it's not the fullest moon, classes that started a few hours ago will resume after this break. I didn't attend those, instead taking a very long, very thorough examination in anatomy to assess what I already know. Simon also took the test—and finished it in half the time.

Haema Maia gestures for us to come toward her, and we continue holding hands as we wade through the calf-deep water to the edge where it's shallow enough to expose the tops of our feet.

"Is that it?" Simon asks for both our benefits.

"Not quite," Maia replies. "The half circles on your hands represent the opening of the bond, but it won't be complete until all phases of the moon shine on it, as your life together will pass through many changes, good and bad. Then we will mark your left hands the same way, so joining your hands creates full circles. You're not technically married in Its sight until the next full moon, but given the circumstances, you may live as though you are."

Simon clears his throat. "If it's not complete, does that mean we can back out in the next month?"

I grip his fingers tighter in alarm as Maia eyes us. "Are you thinking of doing so?" she asks.

"No," he says quickly. "I worry that some people may think that leaves room to come between us."

Like Hespera. The coroner's expression as she watched us and twisted the ring on her finger made me think her stomach hurt.

Haema Maia regards us for a long moment before answering. "Yes, it does. But there are consequences."

"Such as?"

"One of you must leave the city." Hespera joins our conversation, smiling with what I can only define as bitter hope. "It shouldn't be hard to guess which of you that would be."

Haema Maia waves that aside. "Dry your feet, Katarene, and put on your boots. Zosima doesn't want you in a classroom until she's looked over your anatomy examination, but it occurs to me that you know very little about our history and other matters"—she won't say the word *magick* around Simon even if he already knows about it—"and I think we should make an effort to remedy some of that tonight."

My lack of knowledge has made me more self-conscious than anything else, so I nod eagerly. "Will I be able to ask questions?"

"Of course. How else would you learn?"

"May I join you?" Simon asks.

"Absolutely not," the coroner snaps. "And I'll not have a Hadrian wandering the grounds at night, either."

I open my mouth to defend Simon's right to go wherever he wants but stop as he shakes his head slightly, telling me not to fight this now. Then he leans in to kiss my cheek, as a bonded husband might, whispering, "It's all right, I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning."

He scoops up his boots and smiles innocently at Hespera. "I'm sure I understand that you want to escort me to our quarters personally, so I don't get lost."

The haema's nostrils flare, but after what she said, she's trapped into walking with him when it's obvious she'd rather do anything else in the world. Maia smiles wryly at the coroner's annoyance. I think she's beginning to like Simon.

"Follow me, Hadrian." Hespera spins on her heel and stalks off.

Simon tucks his boots under his arm and follows his guide barefoot. The moon is bright enough for even him to see fairly well, but he walks slowly and gingerly next to the gravel path, forcing the haema to stop and wait for him several times.

CHAPTER 7

Haema Maia is the head of surgeries and internal illnesses, and her office is in the hospital. She leads the way across the courtyard in the direction opposite from Simon and Hespera. “What have you learned?” she asks as we walk. “You can’t have been exposed to much in a month.”

Less than she probably imagines, seeing as in that month I spent only a handful of days in the Selenae Quarter. In that time my father’s brother had surrounded me with songs and camaraderie more than mastering the experience of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling with such intensity. My cousin, Athene, a physician, was much more practical in the short time we had, showering me with facts and knowledge in those few hours.

We’ve reached the hospital steps, and Maia opens the double doors for me, using one arm. The other she keeps close to her side, and I realize it’s atrophied and misshapen beyond much use. Inside, I wrinkle my nose at the burning, antiseptic smell a hundredfold stronger than what had soaked into our borrowed bedsheets. The haema gestures for me to take the passage on the right, away from the scents of blood and body fluids and the caustic soap used to clean up both. “Is there anything in particular you’d like to start with?” she asks.

“Perhaps magickal stones,” I suggest. “I know of moonstone, bloodstone, voidstone, and memory stone, but I barely understand how they work.”

She chuckles. “Well, to be honest, even the most learned among us don’t understand everything, either, so I wouldn’t worry that much.”

It wasn’t until I was actually saying my goodbyes in Collis that I learned about memory stones, which makes me wonder about other possible types. “Are they the only ones?”

The haema nods. “Most stones have properties that respond to magick, that is, to light. The four you named are the most useful.”

“What about gems? Are they magickal?”

“Yes and no.” At the end of the passage, Maia unlocks a wooden door with iron edges. “Most gems immediately scatter light back out with the same intensity, especially if they’re polished and cut with facets.” She smiles ironically as she ushers me inside. “Hadrians love diamonds and the like, but their purity makes them almost useless to us. At best, they redirect magick, like a mirror, or focus it, but one wrong angle and gemstones break light into useless fragments.”

I glance around the room. One entire wall is floor to ceiling with books. A shelf in the middle holds rolled-up parchments that probably contain anatomical drawings—my cousin kept hers in a drawer. Ample light is provided by several glowing moonstones on candlesticks. If Simon had been allowed to come, this place would have been pitch-dark to him. “Does that mean moonstones are impure?”

“At the smallest levels, yes.” Maia makes zigzag motions with her hand as she sits behind a desk cluttered with more books and parchments. “Light that gets in must find its way out of a maze of tiny imperfections. Eventually all of it escapes.”

That’s why moonstones must be refilled by exposure to moonlight, but it takes time. Water bends that light, enabling it to shine into more of a stone’s surface at once, and putting one in the pool speeds up the process. I move a stack of notes to the side of the least burdened chair and perch on the edge to face the haema. “So full moonstones act as small moons, radiating what they’ve absorbed.”

“But remember our blessed Moon doesn’t actually shine, only reflects,” Maia clarifies. “And the imperfections on Its face are what soften the sunlight to a level we can use.”

Like a fogged mirror. The small corrections don’t annoy me. Growing up in the convent, I learned from Mother Agnes who impressed on us that getting such basic details right in solosophy was as necessary as it was in setting the foundation of a Holy Sanctum—and Magister Thomas backed that up when I lived with him. “Then how do bloodstones work if they don’t use light?” I ask.

“That is one of our mysteries. You’ve heard of *maegnetis*?”

“Only that it means the ability to hold magick.”

“Not quite, because then moonstones would fit that definition. *Maegnetis* holds magick within a tight radius but never relinquishes it. We can use that magick, but only by being within that sphere.”

Haema Maia continues, her atrophied hand joining the other in smaller motions to describe or punctuate her words. “And what bloodstones tell us is that magick may come from light, but it is *not* light. It is something invisible. Perhaps it can shed light as objects radiate warmth, perhaps it rides light like a leaf floats on a river; we don’t know. There is a limit to how much *maegnetis* a bloodstone has, too, which is related to the amount of iron it contains.”

I absorb this for several seconds. “What about pure iron?”

“It only conducts magick unless it’s treated with bloodstones to induce *maegnetis*. Then it can hold so much it burns us. Like the sun, it’s too powerful in pure form, so we use iron alloys in our metalwork. Silver conducts better but doesn’t have *maegnetis*, which is why it’s used in jewelry.” Maia pats the chain around her neck.

Mine is similar, though shorter now, and the bracelet set with a voidstone on my left forearm is also made of silver. Selenae wear them to push excess magick inside, as I did yesterday. I’ve practiced enough to be competent, but it’s not something I enjoy doing.

“You know where those come from, yes?” Maia points to the black stone on my wrist that seems to absorb all light.

“Deep within the earth,” I answer. “Where there’s no light at all.” Though voidstones naturally break with sharp edges, mine has been smoothed so there’s no chance of it accidentally cutting my skin, because then it will take *all* my magick. Completely.

Maia sits forward, noticing the violet line extending at an angle up my arm, and pulls my hand toward her for a closer look. “What happened here?”

I explain that I slashed my forearm with a voidstone accidentally while using it as a cutting tool, but don’t give more details than that. Exposing the wound to moonlight restored the magick to my blood, but it healed with the same violet color as the first cut on my finger. Even using bloodstones couldn’t make it fade to white like other scars.

“So you know what it feels like to be voided?” she asks, releasing my wrist.

“Yes, I do.” The shiver is impossible to suppress. “Do you?”

Maia nods. “It’s part of physician training. You may be allowed to skip it.”

“What about these?” I pull a small leather pouch from my tunic pocket and upend it to drop a thumbnail-size stone into my palm. Unlike a moonstone, it doesn’t shed light enough to see by, yet it glows. Light within fragments into rainbow colors, but only inside the stone—not outside like a diamond might.

Maia leans forward to see. “Ah, memory stone. A high quality one at that. Is it yours?”

“Given to me by my uncle in Collis.” There’s a great deal I could say about Gregor, who was my father’s twin brother, and not all of it is good. As I roll the shimmering oval across my fingers, the vague image of two people dances across my mind. “It’s a vision of my parents.”

“May I share this memory?” Maia asks solemnly, not extending her hand until I consent.

I drop it into her palm and wait as she closes her eyes and curls her fingers around it. A faint smile tilts her lips. “You have your mother’s nose, but the stubborn chin of your father.” She reopens her eyes and offers the stone back. “Thank you for sharing this. They look very happy.”

“I suppose they were, in the short time they had together.” I never asked Gregor when the memory was from, but it had to have been in the early days of expecting me. My mother never set foot in the Selenae Quarter until the day my father married her—and I was born barely eight months later. I imagine their bonding was very similar to Simon’s and mine, except they meant it. The thought tightens my throat, and I have to clear it before I can continue. “Obviously these stones are used to preserve and share memories, but how do they work?”

“The simplest explanation is that unlike a diamond or similar, there’s no regular geometric pattern to the internal facets, and the memory is trapped, reflecting within, forever.”

I frown, holding the stone between my thumb and forefinger and peering into its depths. “But if it’s trapped inside, how can I see it?”

She shrugs. “One of many things we don’t quite understand, but the predominate theory is that you’re merely peering into a window. Like moonstones, they aren’t particularly strong and are prone to fragmenting, so treat it with great care.”

“I will.” With the other hand I spread the mouth of the pouch open but

don't put the stone back yet. "My uncle said he put this memory inside so he wouldn't forget his brother's face, but I'm surprised he used it to contain only one. Can I add my own to it or do multiple memories or sources not mix well?"

Maia frowns in disapproval. "Apparently he didn't explain why they're so rarely used. While the stones preserve memories, they do it at the expense of taking them."

"Meaning...?"

The haema nods to the gleaming stone. "That particular memory no longer resides in your uncle's head at all. He cannot see it without the stone, nor can he recall what he saw afterward. You and I can, but barely, like recalling a secondhand story."

My mouth falls open. Apparently, Gregor's gift was even greater than I realized. "If that's what happens, why would anyone use a memory stone at all?"

"Because memories in here become foggy and corrupted over time." Maia taps her temple with a forefinger. "A blow to the head can sometimes cause them to vanish entirely. But a memory stone holds it perfectly, like a painting that will never fade. That preservation is sometimes worth the loss, especially for those we can't make more memories with, which makes them a common funeral gift. And the other memories remain in the mind, imperfect as they will become."

I drop the stone inside the pouch and tuck it back in my tunic. Their other purpose now seems obvious. "Are they ever used to make a person forget something?"

Maia shifts uncomfortably in her seat before answering. "In the rare cases where Hadrians have become aware of our magick, they have been used to ... undo the damage."

That's what Hespera spoke of doing. I suddenly feel like I want to vomit. "Would you do that to Simon?"

"No," Maia says firmly. "He's known too much for too long. Removing such a large memory is dangerous if not impossible. Doing so could very easily destroy his mind."

"Haema Hespera doesn't seem to think that would be objectionable."

"That doesn't matter. No one else in the Pentaemon agreed to it, and such an action requires a majority that includes the archaemon. Your Hadrian is

quite safe.”

I can only hope Haema Maia’s confidence is justified.

CHAPTER 8

After our discussion of stones, Haema Maia launches into a long historical account of the Selenic Empire that goes an hour beyond moonset. Unfortunately, it means I miss the meal ready for other students after classes. I could go into town for what is breakfast time among non-magickal people, but my weariness from being up all night has me thinking to skip eating and go to bed. Though I feel a natural pull to be awake whenever the moon is up, I've lived by Sun's hours too long, and I'm not sure I could sleep, either. Hopefully I'll adjust in the next few weeks, but once I do, Simon and I won't have many hours in common. I don't want to think about how that will affect us.

He's waiting for me, though, sitting in the shade of an oak tree to escape the already stifling heat of the day. As soon as he sees me leave the academic building, he hops to his feet, holding a cloth bundle. By the time we come together, he's unwrapped it to show me it contains bread, cheese, and some fruit.

"Haema Zosima said you were still with Maia, and I thought you might be hungry," he says.

"You must have read my thoughts!" I'm shoving bread in my mouth before I've even finished my sentence.

Simon smiles, but there's a hint of concern. "Long night?"

I swallow a mouthful. "Nothing to be worried about, but yes, very long." The sun is too bright, and I move into the shade he was in earlier to sit. "Did you eat?"

"Yes." Simon drops next to me. "They didn't want me taking that from the dining hall, but I told them it was for you, and they relented. I think it will be accounted as mine, though."

“I’ll pay you back,” I say as I chew.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. “They seemed a bit shorthanded, so I may ask if I can work in the kitchens to pay for tuition. Not that they’ll be eager to let me do anything to help me stay.”

I snort. “I’m sure they won’t be able to pass up a chance to order you around.”

The cooks and groundskeepers are all Selenae—spouses, parents, or siblings of students who can’t study medicine because they lack blood magick themselves. I think it strange they restrict their own from learning while letting non-magickal outsiders attend daytime classes. Perhaps they don’t wish to create two distinct levels of skill within Selenae physicians.

I’m down to the fruit, which I thought at first was an apple but turns out to be a ripe plum, exactly what I needed after the dry bread and cheese. “What are your plans today?” I ask before taking a large bite.

Simon indicates the red building across the wide courtyard. “I noticed many non-Selenae come to study when there’s no classes for them. I saw some headed to the library while I was waiting for you. Maybe I’ll introduce myself to a few people and browse the shelves.”

Juice drips down my chin, and I wipe it away. “Sounds like a good idea, but you don’t seem terribly enthused.”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, focusing on the ground. His fingers pluck at blades of grass. “I guess it doesn’t feel like doing anything.” Simon peeks up at me. “And I miss you.”

My face warms. Does he mean he misses sleeping next to me? “You can attend class for a few hours tomorrow morning,” I remind him. “We’ll be together then.”

“True. And I’m looking forward to it.”

Simon stands as I finish the plum and toss the remains toward a squirrel that’s been watching us. It immediately scampers forward and seizes it, tearing the last bits of fleshy fruit from the wrinkled surface with its teeth before bounding away with the pit firmly in its mouth. “Do you want to go somewhere?” I ask, then quickly clarify what sounded like a proposition. “I mean, into the city and to the shops. Or we could just walk.”

He hesitates, but I catch a flash of eagerness in his pale eyes. “I figured you’d want to sleep after being up all night.”

“I am tired,” I admit. “But I miss you, too.”

“Maybe a short walk?” he says hopefully, offering me help up.

“I’d like that.” I raise my hand, which is sticky with plum juice. “But I need to wash this off first.”

We head to a fountain near the main entrance, and I rinse my fingers, then cup water to my mouth to drink and also clean my chin. I stand straight, wiping my face on my sleeve. “You’ve seen more of the city than I have, where should we go?”

Simon is squinting toward the gate. “Is that Martin over there?”

I follow his gaze to the large redheaded man pulling a two-wheeled handcart past the guards. Once inside, he sticks to a gravel path in the shadows of the high wall. I can’t tell what’s in the wagon, but I have no trouble recognizing the reeve. “It is. What do you think he’s doing here?”

“Let’s find out.”

When we’re halfway to him, Martin notices us and stops, setting the shaft down and waving. He seems reluctant to leave whatever he has, so we continue walking to him.

“Simon! Catrin!” Martin shakes both our hands, relief in his voice. “I hoped I would see you. I thought for sure I’d gotten the two of you in trouble, but it appears you’ve found a place here?”

I wave my hand in dismissal once he releases it. “Just a misunderstanding. It’s all clear now. Surely you didn’t come here to check on us, though?”

Martin’s countenance falls. “No, I’m brought here by other circumstances to see Hespera.”

Simon frowns. “Haema Hespera? Why?”

But I already know. In the shade, my senses aren’t washed away by sunlight, and the faint scent of decay emanating from the cart has reached me. “Because she’s the coroner,” I answer before Martin does, gesturing to the canvas lump. “There’s a body in there.”

He nods gravely. “I never got a chance to tell you *why* I know Hespera as well as I do, but this is it.”

Simon eyes the cart. “The reeves bring all murders to her?”

“Only certain ones,” Martin replies.

Before he can elaborate, Hespera appears a short distance from us, standing in a wide doorway leading into what looks like a basement. She sees the cart and sighs. “Another one?”

“Yes,” Martin affirms, turning to face her. “This one is a little different,

though.”

“Really?” The coroner’s interest is piqued. “How so?”

“It’s rather difficult to describe.”

Hespera moves to open the second of the double doors. “Bring it in, then.”

Martin lifts the shaft of the cart so it can be wheeled forward, but he doesn’t move yet. “May Simon come to the examination? And Catrin?”

The coroner raises her eyebrows. “They’ve been at the akademium two days and you want their help with an autopsy?”

“I do.” He glances at us. “Assuming they want to.” There’s a hopeful light in his eyes.

Hespera shrugs. “If they wish, though I won’t tolerate Catrin sleeping through her classes tonight.” Then she turns and walks into the dark tunnel that slopes downward at a shallow angle.

“Please come,” Martin says as he follows her into the gloom.

Both Simon and I are too intrigued to say no. “What’s this about?” I ask as we enter the cool passage.

Martin talks over his shoulder to us, plainly familiar enough with this walk, even in the dark, to not watch where he’s going. “The two of you did say you had experience with a repeating killer.”

“This—” Simon stubs his toe and catches himself. “This happens a lot?”

“Every few days, at times. Bodies left to rot in the woods. Violent ends, all of them.”

“And they’re not robbery victims or ... fights?” I ask.

“My brother thinks they are.” Martin looks ahead again as Hespera opens a door at the end of the corridor, sending soft light in our direction. “As does everyone else.”

“But you don’t agree?” says Simon.

“No, this is something more. I just don’t know what.”

We reach the door and Simon helps the reeve angle the cart inside. “How many have you investigated?”

“I didn’t have authority to get involved until I was a reeve, but I knew of them. This makes forty-three in the last four years.”

Hell Beyond. “The same perpetrator?” I ask.

“I think so. Hespera thinks maybe. Everyone else...” He shrugs helplessly. “Can’t imagine one person could do all this.”

“I can,” Simon says quietly. “I’ve seen it.”

Martin nods. "That's why I want your help."

★ ★ ★

Simon and Martin stretch the body out on a long table in Haema Hespera's workroom. The chamber is shaped like a half circle, with several tiers of chairs and simple desktops going all the way to the top, which is level with the second story of the building. Without its audience, the room feels like a ghostly theater. Windows near the ceiling let in light, though even with the sun almost halfway to noon, the illumination they allow is minimal, and I suspect they're more to let air circulate. When corpses are available at the right time (and for the right price), this space is used for instructional autopsies.

The victim is a man, perhaps forty-five years old, not much older than Magister Thomas, though thankfully he looks nothing like my old employer. He wears a loincloth of sorts around his personal area, for which I'm grateful. I don't want to be caught staring at the garment, but its design is odd, like something a slave or laborer from the old Hadrian Empire a thousand years ago would wear.

It's also half soaked with blood, now dry.

What killed the man isn't immediately clear, but he's covered with deep puncture wounds, like nails were driven into his flesh over and over, some tearing out chunks of skin and tissue. Such injuries don't bleed much, and even with the large number, I don't think there were enough to have caused his death.

Haema Hespera pulls on a pair of thin gloves and prods the graying flesh of the shoulder with her forefinger. "This one is pretty fresh, only a few days old." She tries to bend an elbow, but it barely moves. "Less than three."

Then the coroner glances up at me. "Do not touch the body, Catrin," she says sharply, though I'd made no attempt to do so.

"Yes, Haema," I reply obediently, hoping to get on her good side.

Simon is absorbed in his study of the wounds. "There's a pattern to some of these."

"Really?" says Martin. "I couldn't see one."

"Look here." Simon points to two punctures close together. "And here and here." Each he indicates is a pair.

“I still don’t see it.”

Simon reaches for a bottle of ink on a side table. “May I?” he asks Hespera.

She consents, her expression skeptical but curious. Apparently, she doesn’t see what he means, either.

“It’s not so much a pattern as a repetition.” He uses a small paintbrush to circle each pair, five in all. Then he starts marking the ones next to them with an X. When he’s done, he steps back and looks over the body again for a few seconds before making single lines through a third set. Though they aren’t next to the others, the wounds are definitely spaced and angled all the same. I have no idea how he saw that, but once he marks them, it’s obvious. Simon could probably find several more, but his point is made.

“This man was struck multiple times with a spiked object,” Simon says as he places the brush in a rinse bottle. “Actually, several different ones, possibly indicating more than one person doing it.”

Hespera is impressed. “Well done, Simon. I don’t think even I would’ve seen that.”

He dips his head in acknowledgment. I’m amazed the coroner could put aside her obvious dislike enough to compliment him. Martin can hardly hold back a grin of triumph—this is a grisly task, and it deserves solemnness—but he makes an effort.

“What killed this man, though?” I ask. “None of these wounds appear to have bled that much.”

“I have an immediate theory,” answers Hespera, reaching for a hook-shaped knife. “While the sheer number would add up to significant blood loss, you can see some of them caused more bleeding than others, notably these.” She points to a couple on the torso between ribs. Blood dripped out of them at several angles, at least while he was still alive.

With businesslike efficiency, the coroner drags the curved blade through the waxy skin in an arc under the rib cage and pulls the flesh down at the bottom to lift the ribs with her other hand. The sight, sound, and smell of her actions brings my recent meal to the top of my throat, and I have to turn away to keep from vomiting.

“Catrin,” Hespera says. “Look inside and tell me what you see.”

That’s just mean. But when I turn to obey, I realize her command probably had more to do with the dim light and my ability to see better than Simon or Martin. Forcing bile back down to my stomach, I bend over to peer into the

cavity. While the drawings in last night's knowledge-of-anatomy assessment with Zosima were amazingly well rendered, they're nothing compared to the real thing.

"It's ... very open. Mostly space."

The coroner nods like she expected that. "Where are the lungs?"

"High," I answer. "Shriveled up, near the top."

Hespera releases her hold, but the stiff body moves little. "I believe the wounds let air and blood inside the rib cage, either through the punctures in the skin or by breaking a bone that then pierced the lung, or both." Her glove has traces of blood on it as she slowly brings her hand into a fist in demonstration. "That causes the lung to deflate like a bladder."

"Meaning he couldn't properly breathe," I say.

"Yes. He eventually suffocated."

Martin frowns. "How long would that take? Ten minutes?"

Hespera shakes her head. "Hours. Perhaps more than a day. He would have been in agony the whole time, trying to breathe but never able to get enough air to do anything but stay alive and conscious. Like drowning as slowly as possible."

"Well, at least that's consistent," the reeve mutters.

"How so?" asks Simon.

"A long, slow, suffering death," Martin replies. "That's one thing that makes me think these murders are connected. The victims have been stabbed or else slashed with swords or spears or shot with arrows. And they all lasted hours."

"People often live for days with knife wounds," I point out.

"Yes, but because they escaped whoever did it. These men show evidence of being tied up and left to die slowly. Whoever did that to them wanted them to linger."

Hespera lifts the man's arm, but it will only go slightly higher than the body. She indicates scrapes and bruises. "Tied at the wrists, and seeing as so many wounds are on his chest, they were likely behind his back."

"Same with the feet, but the bonds were cut before he died," adds Simon from that end. "But this man would've been in no shape to run, at least very far or fast."

I point to fainter marks across the corpse's middle and shoulders. "What are those, then?"

“That’s also been common on the bodies,” says Martin. “I think it’s from being bound upright against a tree while the torture wounds were inflicted. All of them have been dumped in isolated areas, though, so I can’t be certain.”

Hespera motions to the reeve, and he lifts the corpse at an angle so she can see its back. “Bits of tree bark are embedded in the skin. Your theory is still solid. Though, obviously this one could not have been damaged on all sides unless the tying to a tree came after.”

Martin lowers the body back down onto the table, muttering, “I don’t know how you can see that in this light.”

The room has dimmed even more as the shade of a tree has begun blocking what little light gets in. Hespera glances at the high-set window. “You don’t have to stay for this, Martin. Catrin and Simon can assist me.”

“May I go with him?” Simon asks. “Surely Catrin will be more helpful, having studied with Haema Maia last night.”

He says that knowing full well he scored perfectly on the anatomy exam. Even as poorly as he’ll be able to see, I’m surprised he wants to leave.

The coroner frowns. “I thought you wanted to be involved in this investigation.”

“I do, Haema,” Simon replies, all politeness. “But I’d like to learn more about the murders Martin believes are connected to this one. I think I can determine if they are truly the work of a single killer.”

She stares at him for a long moment, though her expression gives no clue as to her thoughts. Finally, the haema shrugs and turns to her tray full of sinister-looking knives, saws, and even a hammer. “What you do is of no concern to me, Hadrian, especially outside of your allowed lessons.”

Martin nods eagerly. “I’d be grateful for his opinion.”

Simon bows his head. “Thank you, Haema Hespera, for allowing me to participate in this.”

Her lips twist with annoyance, like she wants to criticize him and can’t, but her words are for Martin. “I’ll have a full report ready for you by the afternoon, assuming Catrin’s handwriting is legible.”

I suddenly realize that, unlike everyone else at the akademium, Hespera uses my Hadrian name.

Simon surprises me by leaning in for a quick kiss on the cheek, but then he whispers, “I’ll share everything I learn.”

As soon as both men are gone, I face the coroner. “Why don’t you call me by my Selenae name like the others?”

Hespera arches an eyebrow. “Because I don’t consider you Selenae.”

I should’ve known she’d make it an opportunity to remind me I don’t belong here.

She points to the corner cabinet. “Writing materials are in there. Get enough for forty-five pages.”

“*Forty-five?*” I gasp.

“We’ll need at least three copies of everything.”

“Yes, but that’s still fifteen for each.”

She gestures to the body on the table. “And we’ll be lucky to categorize everything that was done to this man in twelve, plus there are sections of the report the Hadrians will not receive.”

If she thinks I won’t tell Simon those parts, she’s wrong. I walk to the cabinet. “Will this count as a special class, or as your tests for me?”

“Both. And we will find out just how strong your blood magick is.”

I turn back with my arms full of paper. “He’s been dead for over a day. Isn’t that too long to hear any thoughts in his blood?”

“First of all, that’s not the only thing blood magick is good for.” She waits for me to pick a quill and ink bottle off the shelf and shut the cabinet. “And secondly, you obviously have much more to learn about what you do know.”

CHAPTER 9

My eyes are aching with weariness, and I can hardly focus on either the pages of notes I've taken or the human body meticulously pried apart and inventoried as I watched. The coroner refused to let me reduce any of my senses with a voidstone, saying anything we see, smell, hear, or touch during the autopsy could be relevant—the last being ironic because she also hasn't let me lay a finger on the corpse. She claimed it's because she doesn't want any body fluids on the pages I'm handling, but I suspect there's more to it. I didn't tell her I voided my sense of taste, since she didn't mention that one as being useful, and the sourness in my mouth was distracting. I've thrown up twice, but after five hours, I'm barely affected by the squelches and plops made by the organs as Hespera replaces them in the man's abdomen.

"My initial thought was correct," she dictates as she roughly sews a flap of skin over the jumble of insides. "He died of slow suffocation. And we know this because?" The coroner peers expectantly at me.

It takes a moment for me to realize I'm being quizzed. I desperately want to peek back at what I've written, but it would take me time to find it, and she's waiting for an answer.

Closing my eyes, I try to recall what we've seen, starting with the obvious. "Dark and shriveled lungs, bloodshot eyes and ruptured veins around the irises, blue lips..." Keeping my eyes shut is dangerous as I'm ready to doze off, and I shake myself awake to continue. "Blackened fingertips and toes, with the nose and ears beginning to show the same."

"What else?"

I'm at a complete loss.

After a minute of silence, Hespera sighs and answers her own question. "Bloody rupture spots on internal organs—"

“The large number of which indicate it took a long time for him to die,” I finish. “As do the dark fingers and toes.”

She nods as she finishes the last stitch. “The body will withdraw support from the extremities first in an effort to preserve the core. You will see something similar with frost burn.” The coroner pauses in tying the knot. “How long has he been dead?”

“Between two and three days, which is why he’s so stiff,” I reply. She’d said it earlier, but I already knew that from working with Simon in Collis. I continue, hoping to impress my teacher: “The rope across his chest and stomach were removed shortly after, otherwise the marks would be deeper and more distinct, meaning he wasn’t just left to die.” I stifle a yawn. “The killer was watching, waiting.”

Hespera startles enough to stop with her gloves half off. “What makes you say that?”

The last part had been instinct rather than thought. I shrug. “Well, if he was tortured and then left to die, why was he found lying in the bottom of a ravine and not tied to the tree?”

“Obviously, the killer came back and moved the body, as with the others. All were found in similar secluded areas. This one was lucky to have been discovered relatively soon.”

“Yes,” I counter. “But that’s disposal, which is about hiding the body or leaving it to be found—or not found—as the killer wishes.” The discussion wakes me a bit, and I sit up straighter on the stool. “You said they were tossed in low, less visible places, but there was no effort to cover them. They’re of no more use; they’re garbage. That means what happens *before* that is the important part, at least to the killer.”

Hespera finishes pulling her gloves off and sets them aside. “Explain what *is* important to him, then.”

What a killer does to his victims are his messages to the world, Simon had told me. Disturbing as they might be, they are the key to understanding *why* he does what he does.

“Torture, certainly,” I answer. “You and Martin described the victims as being left to linger, but if the rope holding the man to the tree was removed right after he died, then the killer was nearby, waiting.”

The coroner crosses her arms. “Perhaps he estimated when the man would die and returned.”

“But that makes little sense,” I argue. “If the killer left the area once he knew they would die, why would he come back? No.” I shake my head. “Watching them had to be the point.”

Hespera purses her lips thoughtfully. “I see what you’re saying, but then why bother moving the body if he’s gotten what he needs and now it’s useless as you said?”

“The same reason you put his organs back inside, but with little regard to where they originally were,” I say. “You’re cleaning up the mess you made. Perhaps he has a tidy nature.”

“Interesting comparison,” the coroner says dryly.

I lower my eyes. “No offense intended, Haema.”

“None taken.” She’s quiet for several seconds. “Where did you learn to deduce such things?”

“From Simon,” I answer simply. “I helped him investigate a series of murders in Collis.”

Hespera pivots to slide a cabinet of glass vials and bottles open. “And I suppose that’s why Martin asked him for his help. Now it makes sense.” She pulls out a jar full of shimmering white grains and holds it up to the light of the moonstones. “Did your cousin, Athene, ever introduce you to this?”

I shake my head. She’d mostly shown me bloodstones, though I knew there were far more tools in the Selenae healing arsenal.

“It’s a kind of salt, but not for eating.” Hespera replaces the jar on the shelf and pulls out another with smooth, white sticks about the size of her little finger. I would assume they were pieces of chalk but for the way they glitter in my sight. “We compress it into this form for many of our uses.” She recloses the door and returns to the table. “We call it lunar caustic, though interestingly it was not Selenae who named it so. Can you guess what it’s made with?”

Lunar as in having to do with the moon, and caustic as in burning. I knew the latter from working with the architect, as such substances can be used to etch glass or stone. “Ground moonstones?”

The coroner shakes her head. “It’s silver, the most conductive metal known. However, in this form, it does not allow magick to flow through.”

“How is it useful, then?” I ask, craning my neck to see. My curiosity has pushed my earlier exhaustion aside, and I slide off the stool for a closer look.

She holds the jar out to me, and I take it. “The salt dissolved in water can

be used to wash open wounds, and it is better than common salts as silver has disinfection properties. In this compressed form, it will also cauterize a wound.”

“The stick is for more urgent treatment,” I conclude, studying the pieces through the wavy effects of the glass. “To also help stop bleeding.”

“Correct, though we also use it on smaller wounds.” Hespera picks up a small, sharp knife but leaves her gloves off. Until now, she hasn’t touched the body with her bare hands. “When you listen to blood, the thought is carried to you by the iron in it. Because of iron’s holding and linking properties, you can use bloodstones to listen to blood without actually touching it.”

That was what Simon and I had done in the Penthæmon chamber the other day, and I had done with my friend Marguerite while she was unconscious. It only worked one way for them, however. Without blood magick, they couldn’t hear me unless I actually spoke. Silver was apparently better at conducting magick, though it required direct contact. “I’m guessing the salt will be used, but you said it doesn’t work in this form.”

“Until it’s dissolved,” Hespera says. “Then the silver is freed.”

Athene had told me a person’s dying thought lingered in the blood as long as it was liquid, about a full day. Though it was much thicker and pooled in areas, the blood in the corpse on the table could still flow. “You can listen to blood for much longer,” I whisper.

The coroner nods. “In some cases, if the silver is concentrated and the reader sensitive enough, dried blood can be restored by precisely balanced salt water.”

“Not pure water?” I ask.

“No, pure water actually dissolves blood, which is why we use it for washing between patients in the hospital.”

I had experienced that, as well, rinsing blood from a braid of hair. The dead woman’s thoughts had spiraled out in scarlet threads, strong at first, then fading like wisps of smoke. I suddenly realize why I haven’t been allowed to touch the body. “And this is to be my test?”

“Yes.”

With her free hand, Hespera lifts a section of the corpse’s rib cage off like a lid, made possible by precise blows to the bones with a special hammer and chisel several hours earlier, and exposing the heart and shriveled left lung. My stomach turns over, and I’m glad it’s empty. “Will you be able to hear it,

too?”

She’s skeptical at the assumption that my magick will be strong enough, but given what I know I can do in moonlit conditions, I’m certain it is. “Of course I will,” she says. “There is only one member of the Penthæmon stronger than me.”

Caerus, obviously. Their relative youth on the council is explained by their abilities. I force myself to watch as she cuts into the muscle of the heart with her knife and expertly collects a thimble-size cup of dark, sludgy blood by pressing on the largest vessels. After all, I am to be a physician, too. I will have to face—if not perform—such actions in the future. The coroner sets the tiny container out of the way and recloses the open chest. Her fingers are streaked with almost black blood, and I wonder if she can hear it already.

Because I can. The light of the moonstones around us shines enough that whispers are reaching me, begging for air. For death to come.

Hespera indicates the jar I hold, and I twist the cork out with a loud squeak, then shake one shimmering stick onto my hand. After wiping the small blade on her apron, she takes the piece I offer and cuts a bit off the end, dropping it into the tiny cup. It doesn’t sink right away, and she pokes it down under the surface with the point of the knife before swirling it around. “This will take a little time, since it’s so thickened.”

While we wait, I put the rest of the stick back in the wide-mouthed bottle and replace the cork before asking the question that’s been in my mind for the last few minutes. “Who did the current archaemon replace? You?”

“No, Haemon Nestor, though I had been preparing to assume it.” Hespera begins putting all her autopsy instruments into a basin of water for cleaning. “The chair was mine to claim when I was not much older than you and my blood magick was established as stronger than his, but I felt I was too young and asked for more time to practice medicine. Less than two years later, Caerus’s magick came forth as more powerful than anyone had realized, and he did not hesitate to take the position.” The coroner narrates without any traces of bitterness I might expect from having her expectations dashed. When she faces me again, she folds her arms across her chest with her bloody fingers held out away from her clothes. Once more, I wonder if she can hear it whisper. “Tell me how you discovered your magick,” she says.

“I already did.” I hold up my marked finger. “I cut myself under the light of the full moon.”

“Yes, but surely you didn’t understand what you were experiencing at the time.”

I focus on the purple circle that spreads out from the corner of my nail to avoid looking at her. “No, I didn’t. It wasn’t until I was speaking with Simon a few days later that I realized how it was specifically the moonlight that had done it. The whole night was shocking because I found the body of a murdered woman. I actually thought it was lightning that lit up the alley, enabling me to see her in the darkness.”

Everything I’ve said is true, but it also wasn’t everything. For a moment that night I had *been* Perrete, inside her mind during her last moments. Hespera watches me, unblinking, like a silver-eyed owl who knows I’m not being entirely honest. “And you told Simon about it?”

I drop my hand. “Not at first. I experimented to make sure I wasn’t going mad.”

Her thin lips quirk in a suppressed smile. “Moon’s light will do that to Hadrians.”

I choose not to reply to that. She pulls her face back into its earlier stern expression. “But when you did, he accepted it? Accepted you?”

“He’d already accepted me,” I say. “What I could do didn’t change who I was.”

The coroner grunts in a way that could mean just about anything, and her eyes drift to a small shelf over the washbasin, where her ring of memory stones rests. I didn’t realize she’d removed it. Whose memories does the ring contain?

“That should be enough,” Hespera says abruptly. She reaches for the cup and dips her already bloody finger in, closing her eyes. For several seconds she is still, not breathing. Then she yanks her finger out, inhaling deeply several times before plunging her hands into the washbasin. The coroner scrubs at her fingers, digging under the nail to get all traces of blood out. “That was unpleasant, to say the least,” she mutters, shaking the water from her hands. “Your turn.”

I eye the tiny container. “Like you did, with one finger?”

“That’s probably not enough.” She dries her hands on a clean towel. “Best to pour it into your palm, then clasp your other over it to maximize your contact.”

If just the tip of a finger was enough for such a reaction from her, I shudder

to think what her directions will do to me, but I doubt protesting will help. My hands tremble as I pick up the cup, the whispers within growing louder.

I can't breathe ... where is death ... I can't, I can't breathe ...

The metal of the thimble cup is an alloy of iron, which may be the main reason I can hear. I tip the slimy contents into my left palm, barely registering the small chunk of lunar caustic within before the autopsy room spins out of existence.

★ ★ ★

I'm shirtless, pressed against the rough bark of a pine tree—I can smell the sap—and a rope across my shoulders holds me upright. It's probably the only reason I'm conscious. My head pounds and my hands tingle with a thousand needles like they've fallen asleep. No breath gives me enough air to feel like I'm not drowning. I make an effort to raise my arms, but they don't respond. Thick, rough fingers turn my chin to make me face the other direction. The pain of the motion is enough for me to moan, but the sound is feeble as a newborn lamb and ends with a gurgling.

Then, a male voice. That's it. I'm nearly finished. It's beautiful.

I want to die, I whisper, blood bubbling on my lips and from one nostril. Let me die.

Not yet. I need to see your eyes. Open them.

No.

My captor sighs, and I hear him move around behind me. The rope across my chest tightens, taking even more of my breath. My eyes bulge open in response, but then my head dips down again. All I can see are the dead leaves on the forest floor, my legs stretched out in front of me. The shadows cast by my feet are long in the golden light; it's sunset—the third I've seen from here. Just as I notice my toes are purple like gangrene is starting, my vision clouds with red, then black, then white.

Oh blessed Light take me now—

★ ★ ★

My hand is suddenly cold and wet. Pressure scrubs away the last scraps of thought as the autopsy room swims back into focus. I'm over the washbasin,

and Hespera has one arm around my waist while the other plunges my hand into the water.

“Breathe, Catrin. *Breathe.*”

I gasp, pulling in a lungful of air. It burns like fire, but I want more. I take another deep breath. Then another and another. I can’t get enough, and my surroundings begin to spin again until a damp towel is slapped over my face.

“Too much,” Hespera mutters in my ear. “Slower.” She holds me upright, and I’m too weak to resist as she lifts and lowers the cloth covering my nose and mouth to make me inhale and exhale only as much and as often as she wants. The elements of the world gradually drop back into place, like rain dripping from the sky. Hespera slowly eases her support, making sure I can stand on my own before fully releasing me.

“What was that?” I whisper hoarsely.

“You tell me.” The coroner folds the towel and sets it on the edge of the basin. “I’ve never seen anyone react to blood that way.”

I lower myself onto the high stool I used during the autopsy. “I was there. Where he was in his last moments. He couldn’t breathe. Everything hurt.” My head throbs, and I close my eyes to rub my temple. “The killer was there, too.”

“Did you see him?”

“No. But I heard him. I was in the woods, tied to a tree.”

The coroner snorts, and I open my eyes. “You don’t believe me?”

She crosses her arms. “Well, you’ve said nothing but what we already knew about his death. What was the victim thinking?”

“He wanted to die. The killer said something about being almost finished and needing to see his eyes.”

“Hmm. I didn’t get anything like that.”

“You think I’m making it up?” Indignation stirs in my chest.

“I didn’t say that.” Hespera drops her arms and reaches toward the shelf for her ring. She continues to twist it once it’s on her finger, like it’s a comfort. “I’m not sure you could have feigned what happened, but it’s difficult for me to believe if none of it matches what I heard.”

I sigh and rub my forehead. The tiny blood cup is on the floor, having rolled under the autopsy table. The pain behind my eyes has receded to a dull ache, allowing me to think more clearly. “There was something—someone he was thinking about. A woman. He cared about her, but it wasn’t romantic.”

The coroner's eyes spark with interest, though her mouth keeps its skeptical angle. "Did she have a name?"

It takes me a few seconds to dig it out of layers of remembered agony. "Philippa." I look up at Hespera. "Is that what you heard?"

"Yes."

For a dozen heartbeats, neither of us speaks. Then I ask, "What now?"

"I don't know." Hespera bends down to pick up the cup. "But if you value your life, you will tell no one about this until I determine what happened and what it means."

The archaemon might know better than her, seeing as he's more powerful. "Even Haemon Caerus?"

"Especially Caerus."

CHAPTER 10

The smell of decay lingers on my clothes, but I fling myself on the bed without undressing. It's long past noon, meaning I have maybe seven hours before my first class begins. Somewhere in that time I'll also have to eat and change into a clean outfit.

I'm too tired to move, though. Maybe I should void my senses so I can sleep more soundly. I can't take off the shortened moonstone necklace without bending part of the chain open.

Simon opens the door, trying to be quiet, but it's no use. He tiptoes to the table and pulls out a scrap of parchment, probably to write a note for me. "Not asleep," I manage to mumble.

The mattress slopes down as Simon sits on the edge, and warm fingers brush wild spirals of hair from my forehead. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," he says softly.

I roll onto my back and wrinkle my nose at the scent trapped in my hair. I'll need to bathe, too, before tonight. Any Selenae will be able to smell me if I don't. "Did you see the report?"

"Yes, the coroner was very thorough, but I expected that. Martin and I found someone who knew the man and brought him to identify the body. He's taking his friend away now for burial. They'll have enough time to do it properly at dusk, though I'm not sure it matters."

Simon either means because the man has been dead for two sunsets already or because he doesn't believe the soul needs to follow the Sun over the horizon to its resting place in the Beyond. I peek at Simon through heavy eyelids. The light coming from one side of the room illuminates his curls individually and makes his nose cast a long shadow across his face. "What was his name?" I ask.

“Hugh Bolton. He was a tailor. Disappeared between Londunium and the village of Stepny, where he was visiting his sister.”

I rub my eyes against the brightness. “What now?”

“I was going to leave you a note explaining that Martin and I are going out to where the body was found.”

At that, I force my eyes open and push up to my elbows. “Just give me a minute and I’ll be ready.”

“Sky on fire, Cat.” Simon gently presses my shoulder to keep me from sitting up completely. “It was obvious which of those reports had been the last you copied—I counted at least four places you must have nodded off. I doubt you could walk in a straight line.”

“I’m fine,” I protest. “I want to help.”

He sighs. “I know you do, and I want your help, truly, but we won’t be back before sunset. Please stay and get some rest, for my sake.”

I slump back into the pillows, my eyelids shuttering. “For your sake, fine. I will.” I’m sure he can hear the relief under my grumpy compliance.

There’s a smile in Simon’s tone as he thanks me. He starts to rise from the bed, but I catch his arm, my eyes still closed. “Wait. I saw where he died.”

“You did?” Simon’s full weight returns. “I didn’t think you could read blood that was more than a day old.”

“Neither did I, but that’s another story.” My hand starts to drop from his wrist, but he catches and holds it, rubbing his thumb along the back. I’m not so asleep that his touch doesn’t send a warm tingle up my arm. “But he was tied to a pine tree on the slope of a hill, sitting on a flat rock with a crack running through it. Shaped like a Y.”

“A crack shaped like a Y,” Simon confirms, since my slurring words are probably difficult to understand. “Anything else you can recall?”

I hate the memory, but I force myself to relive it. “There were wood chips by his feet.”

“Wood chips?”

“Yes,” I mumble. “Like from chopping down a tree.”

Simon brushes his fingers gently along my arm, keeping me awake, but in a nice way. “Did you see the weapon used to beat him with?”

“No. It was hard to see anything, really,” I mumble. “He could barely stay conscious.” My nostrils burn with a memory that isn’t mine. “I think the killer kept waking him up with smelling salts.”

Simon's hand stops its caress. "The killer was there?"

I nod. "The rope holding the man to the tree was removed shortly after death, which also makes me think the killer was nearby the whole time."

"Watching, waiting for him to die...", Simon murmurs. "That takes a certain mindset."

"I never saw the killer, though. Didn't really even hear him that well, though I knew what he said—" A yawn forces me to stop. "Sorry."

Simon squeezes my hand in reassurance. "Don't be sorry. Because of you, we might be able to find where the man was tortured and killed, not just where he was found."

"So I was helpful?"

He tucks my arm under the blanket, and his lips graze my forehead. "Very. Now get some sleep like you promised."

At least that's what I think he says. I don't even hear him leave.

★ ★ ★

It's dark when I wake. For a moment I panic, thinking I'm late for what will be my first official class; then I hear the dining hall bell and realize I have probably two more hours until midnight, when the moon will be high enough for lessons to commence. I toss the bedclothes aside and throw open the wardrobe I share with Simon. We have so little that the huge cabinet might as well be empty. I still haven't washed my travel clothes, which means my only clean outfit is the one my cousin, Athene, provided before I left Collis. Its black fabric is embellished with deep violet embroidery of moonflowers non-magickal people wouldn't even be able to see, but to Selenae they stand out.

While I'm sure it fits, I've not worn it yet. Doing so felt like a step I wasn't ready to take, declaring I was Selenae and therefore turning my back on the rest of the world. Here at the akademium, however, *not* wearing them would separate me from the other Selenae students. But it will also be one more way to emphasize how I am different from Simon.

Of course, he would probably say I'm being silly. Clothes are clothes, and these are clean. Forcing my apprehension aside, I take the skirt and overjacket down from the peg and put them on after wiping myself all over with a cloth soaked in rosewater Simon bought yesterday. Then I unbraid my messy hair and re-plait it before any more tangles can set in, wishing I had

Simon's loose curls rather than tight spirals that constantly escape and catch on anything they touch.

The bell rings again, and I hurry out the door and down the dormitory passage, hoping I haven't missed the food completely. Mealtime is officially over when I reach the dining hall, but the kitchen workers are taking their own meal before they begin to clean up. They don't mind if I load a plate and sit in a corner, seeing as the more I eat, the less they have to put away. I hear them whispering about me as I shove a piece of thick bread dipped in porridge into my mouth. It feels odd to eat breakfast foods at night.

I finish as quickly as I can and hurry outside. It's fully dark, and Simon isn't back yet that I know of. I'm worried the gate won't be opened to let him on the akademium grounds, so I head in that direction, hoping to have a word with whoever is guarding it. Not that I'll have that much influence. It's a comfort to think that if Simon is blocked from entering, Martin would undoubtedly find him a place to stay until morning.

The main, wide-arching gateway faces southeast, and tonight it frames the rising moon, barely visible between peaks of roofs and thin lines of clouds across its widest point. I don't have much time before classes begin. To my relief, I actually hear Simon's and Martin's voices as I get closer. They're standing outside the lowered grid of iron that hums with magick. Neither looks at me as I approach the hinged door within the lattice used for night entrance and exit.

Simon startles when I call his name. "Blazing skies, Cat, I didn't even hear you coming."

Odd, since the crunching gravel under my feet was almost deafening to me. The iron must somehow block most sound from traveling outside the wall. On my right, the watchman eyes me warily.

"Can I let Simon inside?" I ask. "He's my ... husband." The word feels awkward.

The man shakes his head. "Only a council member can authorize a Hadrian on the grounds. The other watch went to fetch Haema Hespera."

Simon shrugs. "I figured she would be most likely to let me in."

Apparently, he doesn't know she's starting the evening with a lecture to the entire Selenae student body on gangrene and decomposition. She won't be pleased to be pulled away from preparation and possibly made late by this trivial matter. There's nothing to do but wait for her, however. I stand arm's

length from the barrier, close enough for them to hear me, but it's like brushing against a fox's tail, the magick tickling my nose with an itch I can't scratch. "Did you find anything?"

Martin nods. "We found where the man was bound and tortured." His blue eyes glance sideways at Simon. "Not sure how he knew where to search, given it was more than a hundred paces from where the body was dumped."

"Luck, mostly," answers Simon, holding my gaze. He places one hand on the iron frame between us, and I take a deep breath and step closer to do the same.

I looked for a pine tree next to a flat rock. It was just as you said, though most signs he'd been there had faded.

I nod slightly to let Simon know I can hear his thoughts clearly. "I'm glad you were lucky," I say, sneaking a peek at the guard. The man stands a distance from the gate that must be more comfortable to bear.

He can't hear us unless he's closer. At least he acts like he can't.

If he's standing watch like this rather than attending class, the guard must not have blood magick, meaning he can't listen to blood, even with an object with as much *maagnetis* as the iron lattice has. It's not a problem for me, seeing as I could hear Simon and Martin from halfway across the courtyard. Something to note.

"I think he's the ugly oaf married to the girl who lives across the hall from us," I say in a low voice, keeping my eyes on the guard. The man I'm referring to isn't actually unattractive, but he'd definitely be more handsome without the scowl he's wearing. He doesn't react to my words, though, so I think Simon is correct.

Martin comes closer when Simon beckons. As soon as I think he can hear, I whisper, "So do you think this murder is related to the others previous?"

Simon nods. "I'm not certain yet, but I think so." Without speaking, he tells me he's quite certain they're the work of one man. Out loud, he says, "Martin has asked for my continued help in the investigation."

"I'll see that he's paid for his time," the reeve adds. "I've learned a great deal from him just today."

The excitement I feel coming from Simon has nothing to do with the prospect of earning money, though. He feels useful, needed. And he wants to correct what he sees as his mistakes in the investigation in Collis. I wish he could realize those were more my fault than his. I was the one who talked

him out of his original suspicions about Lambert.

I'll want your help, Cat, Simon thinks. *I couldn't have found what I did today without your vision.* To Martin he says, "As long as I can tell Catrin everything about the investigation. I value her insight."

"Of course, as long as she's discreet," Martin agrees, then grins. "I suppose that's a silly concern when it comes to a Selenae, seeing as the medical school has been here for six hundred years and no one knows what goes on inside after sundown."

I raise my eyebrows. "What do people say we do?"

Simon's knuckles tighten on the iron bar. *I've told him nothing.*

Martin shrugs. "There are rumors about the classes held at night, that they involve magick."

"And what do you believe?"

"I'm not sure what to think," he answers slowly. "But I've seen Selenae work miracles when it comes to healing. If magick is being used for that, it can't be all bad."

I look up at him through the lattice. "You realize what seems like magick is often something you simply don't understand, right? Putting dough in the oven and taking out bread is magick to a child but not to a baker."

Martin meets my gaze without flinching. "I know. But I'll use anything I can to stop this killer, even things I don't understand."

His meaning is clear: If I can help in a supernatural way, he'll take that assistance—no questions asked, no explanations needed.

Someone is coming.

I've already heard the footsteps, and I turn, expecting to find Haema Hespera but instead see Caerus. Removing my hand from the gate, I bow respectfully while flexing my numb fingers in the folds of my long skirt. "Good evening, Archaemon."

"Good evening, Schola Katarene. Why are you here and not at Hespera's lecture?"

Clouded hell, I must have missed the bell sounding the beginning of class. The haema will be furious. "I was trying to get Simon back inside, but the guard said we had to wait for a member of the council's permission."

Caerus fixes us with a silver stare as he circles one finger over the large, dark stone in the ring on his left hand, reminding me of Hespera's habit. "And why was he not already on the grounds at sunset?"

“He was assisting me with a reeve matter, Archaemon,” Martin puts in. “I’m investigating the murder of a man Haema Hespera performed an autopsy on this morning. Simon has been most helpful, and it’s my fault for keeping him out so late.”

“I see.” Caerus sighs. “Hespera asked me to enforce our rules to teach our resident Hadrian a lesson about timeliness and deny his return tonight, but I’m inclined to disagree, especially given the circumstances of his tardiness.” He smiles a little. “One of the few advantages to being archaemon is that no one can overrule my decisions.”

With that, he signals to the waiting guard, and the man rushes forward to obey, unhooking a key from the ring on his belt and unlocking the person-size gate. Simon steps inside, thanking both of them. Now that I know he’s taken care of, I’m eager to get to the coroner’s lecture. The grounds are lit with moonstones set in walls and along paths, but he won’t be able to see by them. “Can you find your way back to our room?”

Caerus shakes his head. “I’ve made an exception for Simon, my dear, but I’m afraid his wandering without an escort is something I cannot allow.”

“Yes, of course,” I say quickly, not wanting to give him a chance to regret his leniency. “I apologize, Archaemon. I’ll take him.” Martin is still observing us, and suddenly I’m worried at how powerless Simon looks to the reeve with these ridiculous rules.

The archaemon glances at Martin. “I suppose I should volunteer to escort him, seeing as even greater tardiness on your part will also uncover my defiance of Hespera’s wishes. She might take it out on you.” He tilts his head toward the academic building. “Go on, you might even make it before she starts.”

I barely have time to breathe my thanks to him and Martin before I rush away, praising the skies for Caerus’s reason and understanding.

CHAPTER 11

Simon strides into the classroom shortly after dawn. The moon will set in a couple hours, enough time for one more lecture, but the empty tables have already been claimed by non-Selenaean physician candidates who came in from Londunium as soon as the gates opened. There's an unspoken rule that the two kinds of students don't mix, but Simon comes straight to where I sit and sets a stack of pages next to me.

"Good morning," he says. Faces on both sides of the room gape as he drags his chair closer to sit on my right. "How was your night?"

"Long," I answer. While I wasn't late for Haema Hespera's first lecture, I was the last to arrive, and she picked me to be her assistant. That meant handling a stomach-churning assortment of preserved samples of rotting tissues and organs and writing long, unfamiliar words in chalk on a floor-to-ceiling slate for the whole room to copy. I peek at Simon's parchments and see they're sketches and notes about the murder—at least ten pages in addition to fifteen from the autopsy. "Great skies, did you sleep at all?"

"A little." He pushes the pile toward me. "Do you want to see?"

I glance around the room. Selenaean students are pretending to ignore us though I can tell they're all listening, while the newcomers openly stare at our collaboration. "I guess we have a few minutes," I say, pulling the stack to rest at an angle on the edge of the table.

On top is a drawing of the area I saw in my vision, rendered from above, as by a bird in the trees. The rock with its crack is exactly as I remembered. I trace my finger along the familiar line before pointing to an odd shape outlined near the pine tree. "What is that?"

Simon leans closer to see. His upper arm gently presses against mine, and I unconsciously lean into it. I've missed touching him in the last couple days,

even in the small ways like this. “That was the stump of a tree recently cut down,” he says. “Must have been right before the murder. It was the source of the wood chips you saw.”

“Do you think it’s relevant?” I ask.

“Not that I can imagine. We came across several like it. The forest technically belongs to the king, but Martin says woodcutters can get a license to chop down trees.” Simon rests his hand on the back of my chair, almost putting his arm around me. “There are restrictions as to how many and what kind of trees can be cut. The stump might have been a convenient place to sit and watch his victim from, though.”

I nod in agreement and go to the next page. This one is the ravine where the man was found, with the same high perspective. Simon has marked where he thinks the body was tossed from based on how it landed. “Bruising on the body after death tells me he was carried and then thrown down there, not dragged.”

“More evidence that the killer is a man,” I murmur. “Few women would be strong enough to have done that.”

Simon’s eyes dart to those nearest us. “You did hear a man, though, right?” he asks in a low voice.

“Yes, but you can’t use that as proof with Martin,” I point out.

He sighs and leans back but keeps his hand on my chair. “This is going to be interesting, finding a balance between what I can tell him we know, and how sure of it we are. I could explain finding the place with the cracked rock by luck, but I doubt I would’ve seen the faded signs if I hadn’t known exactly where to look.”

“But Martin did say he would accept information without questioning where it came from.” I keep my voice as soft as I think he’ll be able to hear, even if half the room is listening.

“That doesn’t mean I’m willing to risk him learning things he shouldn’t,” Simon almost scolds. “Plus he’ll have to explain to his own superiors why or how he knows what he does. Legal procedures are different here than in Gallia.”

“How so?”

“For one thing, you can’t be arrested or held in the gaol without solid cause. Not just on the word of someone powerful. Nor does being powerful exempt one from following the law.” He smiles a little ruefully. “At least in

theory. In practice, I doubt the system is quite as evenhanded as Martin claims, but at least it tries.”

My brow creases as I pull something from memory. “Is that from the Grand Charter that the Brinsulli king was forced to sign a few years ago?”

Simon nods. “Supposedly it holds even the monarch to the law. But what it means in this case is no one can be detained or locked away without a proper warrant, issued by a judicare, which is like a low-level provost. And those are elected by the people, like the reeves. Many were reeves before, ones that earned the people’s trust.”

“Sounds like you’ve learned a lot,” I say.

He chuckles. “It all started when I asked Martin why they hadn’t rounded up a dozen suspicious people and interrogated them. Not that I thought it was a good idea, it’s just what I’m used to seeing happen. He rambled for close to an hour about the intricacies of their system, which they’re quite proud of. It does make it more difficult to apprehend those committing crimes, but the positive is fewer innocent people are arrested and convicted.” Simon pauses. “Martin’s brother is up for judicare in a couple months, by the way.”

At the front of the classroom, Haema Hespera glances up from preparing her notes for this lecture, her expression quickly dropping into disapproval, no doubt at how close Simon and I are sitting. She clears her throat, and Simon rotates in his seat to face the front of the room, still keeping his lanky arm draped over the back of my chair. He keeps his eyes on her as he angles his head toward mine and whispers, “I’m thinking of dropping out of medical studies.”

“What?” I don’t see the coroner’s reaction because I’m turning sharply to face Simon. “You haven’t even started.”

He nods without looking back. “I think this investigation will take up too much time, especially as I study the details of all the cases over the next few days.” Then he shrugs. “I can always come back to studying here afterward if I want. If I divide my attention between them now, though, I’ll do a poor job at both.”

“What about me?”

“You’re supposed to gain as much medical knowledge as possible to assist us.”

It feels like a blow. “I thought you wanted a partner, not an assistant.”

Simon turns to me, his eyes earnest. “Partners assist each other using their

strengths. I promise whenever you are the expert in a situation, I'll follow your lead."

"Well, then that's better." I look back to the front of the room to find Hespera staring silver daggers in our direction.

"Simon of Gallia," she says. "Is there something you wish to say before I begin our class?"

"I guess this starts now," he mutters before standing and raising his voice. "Yes, Haema." Simon bows slightly from the waist. "I would request permission to be excused."

Her mouth bends up on one side. "Why? What can possibly be more important than learning to heal?"

"My assistance has been requested by a reeve in investigating a series of murders," he answers.

"And you have expertise in these matters? You've done such a thing before?"

I don't know why she's asking questions she already knows the answers to, except to embarrass him. Everyone stares at Simon as he straightens his shoulders and raises his chin. "I do, Haema. I've been involved in several criminal inquiries and headed one."

A noticeable amount of hostility that had been directed at Simon becomes intrigue. In the case of the non-Selenae students, curiosity becomes respect. Hespera's lips drop into her default frown. "Then do not waste your time here, Hadrian."

My face burns to the tips of my ears as Simon retrieves his pages. "I'll see you later," he whispers, then leaves.

Through the lesson, I'm fuming on his behalf, so much that I approach the coroner when all the other students have filed out the door into the bright morning. She speaks before I do, still focused on collecting her notes. "I see Caerus decided to let Simon in last night."

"Was that necessary?" I demand, ignoring the haema's bitterness at her wishes being overruled. "Dismissing Simon publicly?"

Hespera glances up, eyebrows raised. "I think I did him a favor, letting everyone know the reason he's withdrawing."

How magnanimous of you. I have to bite my tongue to hold back the sarcastic reply.

"Simon should be aware, though," she continues, going back to her tidying,

“he will be watched closely. For all the caution he espouses, there is much at stake. For both of you.”

“Thank you for the warning.” I cross my arms. “Maybe when this is over, the Penthæmon will accept that he can be trusted.”

The coroner folds a stiff oilcloth around her pages and ties its attached strings. “If so, you should be grateful for this opportunity.” She picks up the bundle and turns away. “Just remember that your studies and obligations here are more important than assisting his investigation. Simon will lose the privilege of our protection if you’re expelled.”

I grind my teeth as she leaves. The haema takes every opportunity to let me know how close to the edge we are. Thank the Sun that Caerus’s magick is stronger than hers or we certainly would have been pushed over it already.

CHAPTER 12

Simon is waiting in the sunny courtyard. The eager expression he wears turns into something softer when he sees me.

“Haema Maia granted us an empty classroom to work in,” he says as we meet in the distance midway between us. “Much preferable to putting up sketches and maps in our room or somewhere in Martin’s home.”

I don’t think I could sleep with those pictures on our walls. “He won’t be able to work on any of it outside daylight hours, though.”

“Which are quite long at the moment,” Simon points out. “But in any case, Martin knows most of the details by heart.” He’s almost bouncing from one foot to the other. “Do you want to see what I’ve done so far now or do you need to rest?”

I’m tired, but no more than I would be after a full day of work and an evening free of obligations. “I can stay awake for several more hours,” I assure him. “There’s nothing I need to do until midnight, though I would like to eat soon.”

“Why don’t I show you the room, and then I’ll take you into town for breakfast,” Simon suggests. “Afterward we can meet with Hugh’s family and find out more about him. Martin wanted you along.”

“Sounds good,” I agree, and we head in the direction of the gray stone building on the north side of the grounds. “Was the man married? Did he have children?”

Simon shakes his head. “Most of his family lived in a village a half day’s journey from the city. It was on his way to see them that he disappeared.”

We enter a set of double doors and go down a long corridor to the last room, and the whole way I’m wondering who Philippa is or was. She was obviously important if Hugh’s last thoughts were about her. His sister,

maybe?

The space Simon chose—or was given—is out of the way and has only sparse natural light coming in through windows partially covered with moonflower vines. I can see perfectly well, of course.

One whole side of the room is blank, yellowing plaster. Simon stands in front of it, spreading his arms. “I want to repaint this and then draw a map of the royal forest going out north of the river. The city itself isn’t relevant, but we’ll mark about where the victims lived. I doubt there’s a pattern, though, as every man has disappeared while traveling into or through the woods.”

“What would they do in the forest besides cut down trees?” I ask. “Hunt?”

Simon turns back with a shrug. “That’s forbidden on the king’s land, but many do it anyway. It’s been hard for Martin to get some of the families to admit why the men were in the forest. He told me one of the most common ways for poachers to sneak game out is to hide it in the branches of trees being carried back to the city.”

I move to one of several tables covered with forty-three stacks of parchment, some much thicker than others. A few have a single page. I pick one up. It has no name, only a number, date, and location, as well as an approximation of when a victim died and his possible appearance when alive. Approximate because all that was found of many were bones and some hair. *Likely cause of death: wounds from sword.* I point to the description of cuts in several bones. “How could Hespera narrow down the weapon with so little to go on?”

“That’s based on the only pattern they’ve managed to find over four years.” Simon holds up another sheet with a name on it. “This man died about the same time as that one but was discovered within a week of his death, so there was far more to observe. Though they weren’t all found in order, earlier victims came in clusters of three or more within a month, with nearly identical wounds from swords, spears, and arrows. They account for about half of the total. Then there are several killed in pairs. The most recent victims have been single.”

I frown thoughtfully. Several around the same time with similar wounds ... “That makes me think something didn’t go quite as he wanted those first few times, and he had to do them again to get it right.” Something similar had happened with one of Lambert’s victims. I set the page down and reach for a pile describing one of three different victims pierced with arrows. “Maybe

they died faster or slower than he wanted.”

Simon nods. “My thoughts also. Whatever the killer wants from these deaths, he’s become more skilled in creating it over the years.”

“But what he *needs* never changes.” That was something Simon had emphasized in Collis—what the killer was seeking remained constant at the core, though the way he went about finding it might evolve. “What is it he wants so badly?”

“That’s what we need to figure out. That and whether he’s actually achieving it.”

A shudder ripples through me as his voice echoes in my mind: *I’m nearly finished. It’s beautiful.*

“I think he is,” I murmur, walking down the long table to the pages about Hugh Bolton. “The killer said something about being almost done. He wanted the victim to open his eyes.”

Simon comes up beside me and puts his hand on the small of my back. “Something the killer was showing him?”

“No, I think he wanted to look *into* them.” I’m glad for Simon’s calming touch as I remember Hugh’s last minutes. “Why would he do that?”

“What would you see in a dying man’s eyes?” Simon asks quietly.

I get the sense he already knows, but he wants me to walk the path myself—not just to reinforce his own conclusion, but also so I can do it alone later. “Pain,” I answer. “Or more likely the actual moment of death, like watching a candle burn out.”

Simon sweeps his hand to indicate the forty-two other victims. “That could explain all these early similar attempts. It took hours or even days for these men to die; maybe the killer left the area or fell asleep while waiting and missed that moment.”

“But he’s gotten better at predicting or controlling it,” I say.

“Yes.”

I shake my head. “So why change the way he kills? If that moment is what’s so important, wouldn’t he stick to a method he’s mastered?”

“Good question.” Simon pivots to lean against the table, facing me. “Maybe he’s trying to find the ‘best’ way and then will settle on one.”

“A favorite recipe for death.”

Simon inhales sharply, his eyes drifting down and to my left. Something new has occurred to him, and I wait until he works it out. “If that’s the

case...” He pauses, then begins again. “If that’s the case, then he might be recording all these. A killer with a compulsive need like this usually keeps something from the victims so he can relive their murders as often as he wants.”

Until the memory isn’t enough and he has to kill again, or, as was the case with Lambert, the next one replaced it. Simon’s cousin took a braid of hair from each woman he killed but left it behind whenever he took a new one. Out with the old and in with the new.

“Martin didn’t know to look for something missing from the victims,” Simon continues. “So we can’t be sure of what, if anything, is being taken, but writing down what happened could fill that need.”

“What if he can’t read or write?” I ask.

Simon grips the edge of the table as he stares at nothing. “He could be drawing them ... but none of his work is sloppy. Someone that methodical is likely educated.”

“So an intelligent killer.”

He focuses on me. “Most are. You’d be surprised at how smart they can be. That’s how they get away with it for so long.”

“Perhaps that’s his weakness, then,” I suggest.

“How so?”

“Intelligent people are often highly logical.” Here I’m thinking of the master architect and his apprentice Remi. “That makes them predictable, once you uncover their thought process.”

“You’re quite intelligent.” Simon smiles crookedly. “But I wouldn’t exactly call you predictable.”

I narrow my eyes at him, though I know he’s teasing. “Magister Thomas used to say my mind was more artistic than calculating. I could tell when something was off or unbalanced, even if I couldn’t prove it mathematically.”

“Do you think that has to do with your Selenae senses?” he asks. “Like they were always under the surface?”

“Maybe. I never thought about it.” Now that I have, that’s an interesting idea.

“Well, it’s not as if you’ve had that long to consider it.” Simon stands up straight and steps up to me, his forehead creased with concern. “I didn’t hurt your feelings when I said you were unpredictable, did I? I meant it in a good way.”

I realize I'm frowning, but I can trace the source back to mentioning the architect. The thought of him opens a hollow that rapidly becomes larger. "I know, I just miss Magister Thomas. And..."

And Remi. And Mistress la Fontaine. And my home and the Sanctum and Marguerite and Mother Agnes. The last stabs me through the heart with an ache I don't think will ever heal. I never got to say goodbye to the prioress, and my last words to her were harsh and unforgiving. By the time I understood she'd hidden my origin to protect me from being voided, thereby making it possible for my family to take me back, she was gone. I'd hardly seen her in the year before her death, yet I feel adrift knowing she's no longer in this world.

Simon gathers me in his arms as the tears start to fall, and I bury my face in his collarbone as a wave of homesickness and regret swallows me. "I'm sorry," he murmurs. "I'm a poor substitute for everyone you've left behind."

"It's not your fault," I manage between sobs into his shirt.

One hand goes up my back to hold my head as he says, "I can still be sorry."

It takes a full minute for me to pull myself back together. I sniff into his shoulder. "What about you?"

"Me?"

I lean back to look up at him. "Do you ever miss Mesanus or your father?"

"Sort of." He shrugs with the opposite shoulder. "Like a bird might long for the cage it escaped. Even if it was miserable, it was familiar."

"And Collis?"

Simon hesitates. "I miss Juliane, but I worry that what I really miss was how much she needed me." He traces the fine hairs at the back of my neck with warm fingers until he reaches my ear. "Maybe that's why I'm so attracted to you. You don't need me."

I choke out a laugh. "You say as I blubber all over your shirt."

"Which actually proves my point. I'm helpless to make anything better."

"But I *do* need you," I insist.

"No, you don't," he says quietly. "If I wasn't here, you'd still be a student, doubtlessly making friends and exploring your magick. If anything, I'm in your way."

He's right on some level. I circle my arms around his waist and lean into him. "But I *want* you here. Isn't that good enough?"

Simon smiles a little as he bends his neck to kiss the tip of my nose. “Being wanted isn’t something I’m used to, but it’s growing on me.”

★ ★ ★

Martin finds us as soon as we exit the akademium gate. Though the reeve hadn’t planned on eating, he readily agrees to the detour, saying it would be more polite to visit Hugh Bolton’s home a little later in the morning.

He takes us to a tavern different from the one we stayed at the first night, though the owner recognizes him with the same cheerfulness and generosity. When Simon pulls out his coin purse, the man waves the payment away, saying any friend of Martin’s is a friend of his. The few other patrons in the tavern at this hour scowl at the reeve, however.

“How is it you can count on free food wherever you go?” Simon asks as a server brings a tray with three bowls of porridge and a plate of sausages swimming in grease. “Does everyone in town owe you a favor?”

Martin chuckles. “In a way. Before I was elected reeve, I earned money evicting troublemakers from taverns and tracking down those who left without paying their bill.”

“Which made you well known when it came time for that election,” I say dryly. It also might explain the glares from across the room.

He grins shamelessly. “I’ll admit such plans were on my mind when I took those jobs. The free food wasn’t, but I’ll take it, especially if it makes things easier for Emma. She doesn’t like cooking in her current condition. Strong smells make her queasy.”

He must mean pregnancy sickness. “You’re very considerate of her.”

Martin glances sideways at Simon. “I’m sure your husband will be the same when the opportunity arises.”

Simon tries to hide his flush by leaning into the steaming bowl in front of him. “Cat agrees with me that all the murders you’ve encountered are probably the work of one man.”

We actually hadn’t discussed that, but I know last night he had acted a little unsure, worried about coming across as an unproved know-it-all.

“You have no idea how good that is to hear,” Martin says. “No one else wants to believe it, except maybe Hespera. Every time I bring it up at a reeve gathering, they refuse to listen.”

The server returns with bread and butter and a pot of tea. Simon waits until she leaves before resuming the conversation. “Tell us about what you’re up against in terms of local law. Why does no one else believe it’s a single killer?”

“Mostly the number of victims, but also because he’s been torturing and killing for sport, rather than out of revenge or during a robbery. It’s difficult to imagine one person enjoying such a thing over and over.”

Not for Simon, I’m sure, but he says nothing. “It’s probably hard to accept that someone who does that walks the streets like everyone else,” I say. “And is perhaps someone they’ve already spoken to.”

“That’s another objection.” Martin dips his spoon into his bowl. “They can’t believe anyone from Brinsulli could do such a thing, let alone someone from Londunium.”

“Is that a warning?” Simon asks. “Being as I’m not from here?”

The reeve shrugs. “It might be. I hate to say it, but foreigners catch the blame for many things. Selenae, too, so you may be doubly at risk.”

I suddenly realize the eyes glowering at our table are for *me*, not Martin. There’s no kohl around my eyes, but my black outfit tells everyone in the room that I’m Selenae. I may be the first one anyone has seen voluntarily mingle with one of their own people. As for Simon, it’s probably not known that he’s living in our community and therefore somewhat outside Brinsulli law, but once they learn, people will stare at him, too.

“All right.” Simon sets his spoon down, his food almost untouched. “City magistrates don’t want people frightened because that can potentially threaten the local economy, and admitting such things are happening under their authority makes them appear incompetent, which is very bad for elected positions. Plus they don’t want to believe it’s one of the city’s own—and they may be correct about that, I don’t know yet. Then there’s the sheer number of victims.”

Martin swallows his mouthful. “You’ve pretty much grasped it.”

Simon taps his fingers on the table. I can feel it rippling through the wood, vibrations altering as the waves pass through thicker knots and across gaps in the planks. It reminds me of my first lesson in magickal medicine last night, on using similar echoes along a patient’s bones to tell if something is broken. “I’ll want to speak to as many of the victims’ families as we can,” he says. “I need to know if there’s anything that ties them together, so we can

understand why they were chosen.”

“So we can predict who else he may target?” Martin asks.

“That’s part of it.” Simon hesitates. “It’s also about seeing the world through the killer’s eyes, getting into his mind, and thinking as he does.”

The reeve looks startled. “And you can use this to uncover the killer? You could recognize him?”

“Not exactly,” Simon admits. “I’ve found it useful in eliminating those under suspicion more than anything else.” It was why he never truly suspected his cousin Oudin, who seemed the most obvious perpetrator to everyone else.

“But what if you met this man, face-to-face?” Martin presses. “Had a conversation with him. Do you think you would know him then?”

I can tell Simon is thinking about Lambert, whom he saw every day and didn’t recognize for what he was. But he *did* suspect him, and I was the one who talked him out of it. Lambert’s interest in me had made him competition of sorts, making Simon doubt his own instincts, worried he wanted to see more than was there. Here in Londunium, though, there are no preconceived notions—everyone is a stranger.

After a long moment, Simon answers carefully. “Maybe I could recognize him if I talked to him. I would certainly try, but it’s not something you should count on.”

Martin seems satisfied with that, but I know Simon is worried. It would take a deep understanding of the killer’s mind to do that, and descending to those depths is exactly what drove his mentor into madness. The reeve turns to me. “So tell me about the process of becoming a physician. I’ve always been curious but haven’t known anyone who went through it.”

The question surprises me. “You know Haema Hespera.”

“Well, yes, but we’ve always had more important matters to discuss whenever our paths crossed.” I know he means dead bodies. He shrugs sheepishly. “And you’ve met the coroner. She’s all business, especially with ... what is it they call us?”

“Hadrians.” I’ve only ever heard it used as a slur and the word leaves a bad taste in my mouth. “Or do you mean sunlovers?” That was my uncle’s favorite derogatory term.

“Hadrians,” Martin affirms, not appearing insulted. “Which is funny in my case, since I’m so obviously not.”

I furrow my brow in confusion, and he points to his flame-colored hair. “Is that not a normal shade here?” I ask. “I’ve seen a fair number like you since crossing the Narrow Channel.”

He chuckles. “I suppose we’re much rarer on the continent. But it tells everyone I’m descended from either Woeds or Eireanders.”

The mention of the island to the west gets Simon’s attention. “Do Eireranders have red hair?”

“Not all of them, but chances are if you have it, you came from there or north of the Wall.”

“Interesting.” At my questioning look, Simon explains. “The Holy Martyr Dimah who fled to Mesanus is depicted in statues as having red hair, but I’d always assumed that was to emphasize her bloody death, as often she’s holding her severed head in her hands. Apparently it might actually be a true representation.”

I nod in understanding before asking, “What northern wall are you talking about?”

“The one built by the Hadrian Empire across a narrow part of Brinsulli, dividing the island,” Martin explains. “They couldn’t conquer us Woeds, so they had to do something to keep us out.”

From history lessons with Mother Agnes, I knew the empire never reached Eirerand, but I’d thought it covered all Brinsulli. I eye Martin’s broad shoulders and huge biceps. “Are all Woeds as big as you?”

He grins. “Could be, but I don’t know, never been there. My family came to Londunium after losing a local power squabble a few generations ago. How about you?” That question is for Simon, as my origin is obvious. “I’d guess you were Doitch rather than Gallian.”

“My mother was Gallian, but my father was Doitch.” Simon’s tone tells the reeve he’d rather not discuss either of them. His mother had left his father in Mesanus when she couldn’t deal with the madness that had taken over her husband’s mind, but Simon refused to go with her and stayed to care for him. After his father’s death, Simon approached distant relatives in Collis rather than search for his mother. Instead of helping him find employment, however, they made Simon take care of Juliane, who suffered the same delusions he’d watched his father spiral into for ten years.

Fortunately, Martin doesn’t press, returning to his original question for me. “How long will it take to become a physician?”

“Three years,” I answer. “Assuming I advance as I should. In a few months I’ll have shifts assisting in the hospital.”

“What made you decide to study medicine?”

Because blood magick has become so rare, any Selenae with it *must* train to become a physician now. I can’t tell Martin that, however. I avoid his eyes though my answer is factually true. “My best friend was saved by Selenae medicine. I helped some and found I had good instincts.”

Martin studies me. “Is that when you learned you were also Selenae?”

“Yes.”

There’s an awkward silence when I don’t elaborate. Martin clears his throat. “What did you do before that?”

“I was ... an inspector, mostly, at the building site of the city’s Sanctum. And I helped Simon in his investigation.”

The reeve sits back, pivoting to include Simon again. “He told me about some of that.” Martin’s blue eyes move back and forth between us. “I got the impression it also had something to do with you leaving Collis.”

Simon’s backbone stiffens, and his eyes widen, focused on me. He shakes his head almost imperceptibly, as if to tell me he’s said nothing on that matter.

Martin doesn’t miss it. “It wasn’t anything you said. Just my instincts. Am I right?”

“We made powerful enemies during the investigation,” I reply carefully. “Nobility who didn’t appreciate being accused of murder.”

Simon nods. “When the dust settled, it was clear we were no longer welcome in Gallia, let alone in the city. That hostility extended to our families and anyone who sheltered us.”

“So you came here.” Martin folds his hands and rests his bearded chin on them. “Now a few things make sense.” He pauses. “You aren’t really married, are you?”

I look back with some alarm. “Why do you think that?”

“A few inconsistencies about when and where you met. Some of your mannerisms.” He smiles wryly. “I also know how people act when they’ve been sleeping together—or not.” Martin lowers his arms to the table and leans closer. “But your secret is safe with me. As angry as Hespera was when she found out about you two, I suspect it would be worse if she learned the truth now.”

“You have no idea how much worse,” Simon mutters.

“Thank you, Martin,” I say. “For your discretion. About everything.”

That’s a hint that *all* our past should be private.

“Of course.” He taps his fingers on the table, and I get the feeling there’s something else he wants to say, but instead he asks if we’re done eating.

“I am.” Simon pushes his half-full bowl away.

“Me, too.” I rise from the bench, dropping my napkin on the table. “Where are we going now?”

“To talk to Hugh Bolton’s niece. She was closest to him, and she’s about your age, so I think she’ll be more comfortable if you’re with us.”

“What’s her name?”

But I already know.

“Philippa.”

CHAPTER 13

Hugh Bolton's dress shop is in the fabric district, which sits near the river next to the wool market. It's outside Martin's usual territory as a reeve, but people seem to know him as well as in his own neighborhood. We walk the packed dirt streets, choking on dust stirred by wagons, horses, stray dogs, and hundreds of feet. Bad as it is, Martin says the rainy seasons are worse, with mud often ankle deep.

"You might soon see what I mean, though," he says, pointing at the sky. Clouds that had been barely present when we met him for breakfast are rapidly taking over, their thickness promising rain in a few hours.

The shrouded sun keeps my senses from being washed out, but with the magick provided by the moonstone around my neck, I still have to shade my eyes against the daylight. If I'm going to start wearing Selenae clothes, I might as well also apply the kohl that cuts down the glare by absorbing the light we're so sensitive to. While my outfit already makes me stand out, I think the lack of a black outline around my eyes actually ends up drawing more attention to me than the clothing alone would.

I spot the tailor's shop from among many on the block by the mourning banner draped across the doorway. The image of a setting sun is set on a black background, announcing the household has recently experienced a death. In a bit of irony, the home across the street has a sunrise hanging from its shutters—on white to distinguish it from the other. One birth, one death.

As we approach, several passersby drop coins in small, locked boxes hanging next to the doors. At least two people cross the street to contribute to both. "People here are very generous," I observe.

"They can be, when times are good." Martin points to the sunset design carved into the wood of the box outside the tailor's. "The Sanctum provides

these and the banners, so people know the situation is genuine and not someone playing on the sympathy of strangers.”

Like many shop doors, the tailor’s is divided into two, so the top can remain open during business hours for more light and air. Martin opens the lower half, triggering a tinkling bell on the frame. I blink the purple spots from my vision as we step inside, grateful for the full shade. Simon and Martin are, too, given how hot it is even with the approaching rain. Bolts of colorful fabric in a variety of textures and weights are stacked vertically along the back wall on shelves. In one corner hangs a finished dress in shades of green and yellow. I’ve never been much for fancy clothes, but this one draws me immediately to it. Something about the pattern of colors is comforting, and it takes me a few seconds to determine what about it is soothing—it’s the proportions. There’s a balance to it much like one sees in great Sanctums with their columns and arches, though the resemblance is purely mathematical. Something an architect—or someone who lived with one for several years, like me—would notice.

“Those shades would not suit you,” says a voice from behind me. I turn to find a young woman standing in the doorway to a back room. She wears a layered apron with several dozen pins around the top edge, and her honey-colored hair is tied in a low knot, mostly covered with a black mourning kerchief. Blue-gray eyes fringed with blond lashes take in my black outfit. “Though I see you are probably not the kind who would buy from me anyway.”

My curiosity is piqued. “That depends. What color do you think would suit me?”

“May I?” The young woman gestures to my arm, and I nod. She lifts my wrist to chest level, then slides my sleeve up to my elbow to study my forearm from all angles—rotating it to study the golden-brown skin on the top and the greenish veins visible in the paler underside. Then she peers at my face. “May I?” she asks again, lowering my hand and indicating my hair.

I consent, and she gently pulls a dark curl free from behind my temple—one that was probably already half-escaped. She bounces it a little and stretches it into better light before releasing it to spring back to my ear.

“Red,” she says decidedly. “Bright and trending toward orange. And gold cord and lace trim, never silver or white. Not many in Londunium can wear those colors well.” She glances pointedly at my pale companions. “But those

hues would complement your skin tone and contrast nicely with your hair while bringing out the golden glints within.”

I’ve never worn a red dress, but suddenly I want to.

Before I can say anything, the young woman’s attention is caught by my collar, and she reaches for it, so fascinated she doesn’t ask this time to touch me. “This is exquisite work,” she breathes, tracing a forefinger along the moonflower vines subtly embroidered and built with different fabrics. “I’ve never seen Selenae clothes up close. Are they all like this?”

“Yes.” I don’t tell her the designs are quite visible to us in moonlight.

“And I never knew.” She reaches into one of her pockets for a pencil. “Pardon me, but I need to draw something before I forget.”

Simon and Martin have stayed by the door, content to let the two of us interact. Amused by her mannerisms, I wait as she hunts for a sheet of parchment already half covered with drawings, and sketches out whatever inspiration has gripped her. She seems familiar, but I know I’ve never met her before. Something about the angles of her jaw and the way her brow wrinkles in concentration, however, oblivious to the three of us watching her. This could only be Philippa.

“There.” She stands straight and looks at all of us again. “What can I do for you?” She blinks at Martin—either startled by his size or the fact that he’s a reeve. Then her face falls. “This is about Uncle Hugh, isn’t it?”

As if in answer, another coin clinks into the box outside. She sighs. “If you would latch the door closed all the way, we can talk in the kitchen without interruption.”

★ ★ ★

“How long had you been apprenticing with your uncle, before he died?” I ask as Philippa places a steaming pot of tea on the table.

“Officially? Five years. But I’ve lived with him since I was eight. I turned seventeen two months ago.” Philippa sits opposite me. Simon and Martin are on a bench off to the side, silent after the initial introductions, continuing to let me do all the talking, at least for now. “I came with him when he moved to the city to open the shop. It was supposed to be temporary, but when my mother tried to take me back to the village, I threw a fit.”

“And your father?”

She pours tea into four lightweight cups. “I never knew him. Uncle Hugh was as close to a father as I had.” There’s no sign of emotion until she mentions the tailor.

“My father died the day I was born,” I say. “But I also had a man who was like a father to me.” The loss of the architect is more painful than that of missing someone I never knew, a feeling I’m sure she understands.

Philippa pushes cups and saucers at each of us and places a bowl of crystallized honey where we can reach it. “People like you and me are lucky to have such men.” The kinship makes her meet my gaze for the first time since learning why we were here. Her almost cheerful demeanor from earlier has faded, her eyes are slightly bloodshot and pink and puffy in the corners. Like Simon, she looks weary beyond her age.

“Was he married?” I ask, though I know the answer.

“No, never.” Philippa peeks over at Martin. “Some people thought he was inclined in other directions, but I never saw anything like that.”

I raise the steaming cup to my mouth. “Never met someone worth loving?”

“No, my uncle loved everyone. He had plenty of friends, close ones, both men and women. Many were interested in him romantically, but he just ... wasn’t.” Philippa shrugs. “I once asked him about how a man feels when he desires someone, but he said he didn’t know.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Simon says quietly. “Some people simply don’t have those feelings.”

Philippa grimaces. “Which is why the idea I’ve heard that he was lured into the forest for a tryst with a woman—or even a man—is wrong. I’ll swear to that.” The distress in her voice increases. “If anything, he was tricked by someone who claimed to need help. He never could turn his back on anyone who was in trouble.”

That was worth knowing. Simon sips his tea, giving me a slight nod of approval that warms my middle.

“Do you know about what time he left the morning he disappeared?” I ask.

“Early, right at dawn,” Philippa answers. “His goal was to get to the village and be back that evening, so he would be here for the Solstice festival.” Her face falls. “When he didn’t return that night, I assumed he hadn’t been able to travel as he planned, that maybe my mother had given him grief about not wanting to come to the city.” The last bit she mutters bitterly. “She in turn had assumed he’d taken her at her word and not tried to bring her here after

all. Then I was so occupied with customers, it was dusk on the second day before I realized he still hadn't come home. And the reeves were too busy that night to care about such a small matter as a missing tailor."

I get the feeling the relationship with her mother is a little contentious. Also, it's heartbreaking to imagine a city full of people happy and celebrating while Hugh was in such agony a few miles away. "Do you happen to know what he was wearing that day? They found none of his clothes."

"Just his sturdy traveling outfit and cloak," Philippa answers. "They're simple, but I'd recognize them if I saw them. Most important to him was his scarf, given to him by the king's mother. She was so pleased with the dress he made for the coronation that she gave him the sash around her waist. I don't think he ever took it off except to go to sleep. He laundered it by hand almost every night and hung it to dry away from the sun. If it's ever found, I would like to have it back."

Simon and Martin both sit up straighter, their eyes sparking with interest in such a distinctive item. "What did it look like?" the reeve asks.

"Royal violet with golden embroidery in the shape of Gallian roses. There were also her initials, AA, in the vine."

Ailenor of Aquitania. The old queen had been from the continent, and she never let anyone forget it. She'd outlived her husband and all her sons but the youngest, who was now on the throne.

Philippa stirs the amber liquid in her cup with a finger. "I saw what was done to Uncle Hugh. Did he suffer much?"

I flinch. The truth is painful, but I hate lying. "I'm afraid he did. He was alive for at least two days. But that doesn't mean you could have done anything," I add quickly.

She closes her eyes as tears begin sliding down her cheeks. "Uncle Hugh was almost too good for this world. He didn't deserve such a death."

"No one does," says Simon gently.

Philippa brushes wetness from her lashes as she looks at him. "Will you find the person who did this?"

Simon winces as I did. "I can't promise success, but I can promise not to stop searching until I have answers for you." His vow rings with sincerity.

She wipes her face dry with her sleeve. "I suppose that's all I can ask. Thank you."

We all sip our tea to let Philippa draw herself back into her earlier

contained state. “What will you do now?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she replies, staring at the now empty cup in her hands. “That green dress out front was my test out of apprenticeship. I had to do it completely without help, but that doesn’t mean I’m skilled enough to run a shop on my own. I still have a lot to learn. And I’m young. Girls my age don’t live on their own, but I don’t want to get married, at least not right now.”

“I can have the reeves in your neighborhood keep an eye on you and the shop until you decide what to do,” Martin offers. “Make sure no one tries to take advantage of you, business or otherwise.”

She smiles sadly. “I would be grateful for that. I’ll probably have to sell the shop and leave eventually, but I’m not ready to yet. Right now it’s still easy to feel like this didn’t really happen, that Uncle Hugh will return any minute. All his clothes are still in his wardrobe, and three dresses are half made.”

There’s so much pain in her voice that I have to clear my throat before speaking. “What about your mother? Could she come live with you?”

Philippa shakes her head. “I doubt it. She hates the city.” She pauses, like she’s thinking of saying something more, but ultimately doesn’t.

“I think that’s all we need,” says Martin, coming to his feet. “We don’t want to keep you from your work. Thank you for the tea.”

Simon nods and stands. “And thank you for speaking with us. I know this is difficult.”

“Anything I can do to help,” she says.

I’m worried Philippa doesn’t have any work, either to keep her occupied or bring in money. “Would you make me a red dress?” I blurt out.

Philippa’s eyes widen. “For you? Really?”

I flush, having once again forgotten what I’m wearing. But almost every outfit I’ve had until now—either as an orphan at the convent or a worker at the Sanctum—was brown and gray. My Sun Day dresses were always pink or yellow, as was the style in Collis, and I hated them. “I’ve never had anything like that.”

“Isn’t it against your religion to wear bright colors?” she asks.

The truth is Selenae like finery the same as anyone, but a little goes a long way when one can see as well as we do. I shrug. “It’s frowned upon, but it’s not forbidden. I’m just curious, given what you said about how it would suit me.”

I peek at Simon and realize there's a part of me that wants to look pretty for him. A rather large part, I'll admit.

Philippa rises from her chair. "Then I would be honored to make such a dress for you, Mistress Catrin."

Something about her smile hits me, and I can't help feeling again that I *know* her. But that's impossible.

Then again, there have been a lot of impossible things in my life lately.

CHAPTER 14

Caerus and Zosima are in the empty classroom when the three of us return from talking to Philippa, shaking the rain Martin had predicted from our clothes. The archaemon frowns from where he stands by the long table, holding a page from the notes of the most recent murder. It's Zosima who speaks, however.

"I'm told Schola Simon dropped out of physician instruction before he'd properly begun." Her cold tone indicates any patience she had for him earlier has been spent.

Caerus's gleaming eyes dart to Zosima, either in frustration because she spoke first or because she's being overly harsh, adding, "He did not get the proper authorization."

I grit my teeth. Why do they always talk about Simon like he's a child and I'm his mother? Even worse that they do it in front of him. I refuse to answer on principle and step back so he can respond.

Simon might already be in violation of whatever agreement they think he's under in living here, and he treads carefully. He lowers his head contritely. "My most sincere apologies, Archaemon. I did explain to Haema Maia, who then offered use of this room. But I should have sought your approval, and I promise to bring future matters to you first."

Caerus appears mollified, but Zosima's hostility increases. "These murders are a Hadrian matter. It does not concern us."

In the corner of my eye, Martin's red beard twitches at being called a Hadrian. I'm glad he finds it amusing.

The archaemon shakes his head. "I disagree. Hespera has provided her input on all of these cases, and that means she can be called before a *judicare* to testify. It is risky to ignore our obligations to Brinsulli law."

Zosima snorts. “Not all of us share the coroner’s Hadrian sympathies.”
Hespera’s Hadrian sympathies? Now *I* want to laugh.

“It is my decision,” Caerus says quietly. “This arrangement may continue, at least for now.”

“I yield to the archaemon,” Zosima snaps, then turns her ire on me. “Schola Katarene, you were to meet with me hours ago. Where have you been?”

What? That was news to me. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I was helping with the investigation and had no idea we had an appointment.”

“Haema Hespera was supposed to tell you to join me in the lower moon chamber after her lecture.”

I stretch my mind back to this morning but can’t recall any such instructions. Our conversation about Simon must have made her forget. “I’m sorry,” I repeat. “It won’t happen again.”

Zosima glares at me and then Simon. “The two of you are not getting off to a very good start. It seems Haema Hespera’s objections of allowing you to stay were justified.”

Now I’m wondering if the coroner deliberately hadn’t said anything, wanting me to look bad to another member of the Penthæmon.

Without another word, Zosima spins on her heel and storms out of the classroom. The only positive I can take from the whole interaction is that perhaps Martin understands even better the possible consequences of the Selenæ learning Simon’s and my marriage is fake.

Caerus sighs as the door slams behind Zosima. Simon, Martin, and I are left standing awkwardly as the archaemon returns to studying the page in his hand. Though this room is being used with his permission, I consider it a breach of privacy, or at least politeness, for him to be reading Hespera’s and Martin’s and Simon’s notes. After a minute he lowers the parchment back down to the stack. “I didn’t realize you believed this many murders were connected,” he says. “I’m rather curious how you came to that conclusion.”

However Martin feels about Caerus’s nosiness, he approaches him respectfully and indicates how some are grouped together. “I don’t know how much you’ve read, Archaemon, but several of these are virtually identical in what was done to the victims.”

“Yes, I did see that. But the fact that others are not the same and each of the most recent deaths are different implies—at least to me—that the perpetrators are not all the same person.” Caerus indicates the line of

individual cases.

“That’s where I come in, Archaemon,” Simon says. I can tell he’s eager to justify his participation, if not his actual existence.

Caerus raises his eyebrows. “Indeed. That is another topic I am most curious to explore. For all I defied Zosima’s wishes and have allowed you to do this, I’m not yet convinced it is the right decision.”

Simon nods sagely. “I will always answer your questions with openness and honesty. After reading through all of these cases, I agree with the reeve’s instincts, though I am perhaps better at explaining them. What connects these is not the method of murder, but the mindset. Each of these has been designed to torture a man to the point of death, and to do it slowly. The reason there is now only one of each is because the killer has grown skilled at controlling the speed at which his victim dies, perfecting his art.”

The archaemon startles. “His *art*?”

“Forgive the analogy,” replies Simon. “It does sound disturbing, but it’s also apt. A mind like this treats murder that way, whether or not he consciously thinks of it as art.”

Caerus frowns. “And you also think this is a man.”

“I know it is.”

“How?”

Simon shifts his feet. “Some of it is having seen similar multiple murders, some of it is from evidence significant strength was needed.” He hesitates, and I wonder if he would tell the archaemon I’d heard the killer’s voice if Martin wasn’t around. “And some of it is ... instinct.”

Caerus crosses his arms. “What else do your instincts say about this man?”

Martin looks eager to hear Simon’s answer, meaning they haven’t had a chance to discuss that yet. Simon clears his throat. “This killer is at least thirty years old and highly intelligent. He lives here in Londunium and is likely respected in his trade, but he has few friends, if any. While his passions run deep, he doesn’t express them well. His cold exterior puts people off and keeps them from getting to know him. He is capable of deep connection with another person, however.”

The archaemon’s face could be cut from stone. “Explain those conclusions. Start with the age.”

Simon glances at me, and I know he’s actually holding something back. “Many first murders are driven by some combination of passion, rage, and

fear, with a significant gap of time between the first and second. These have been sophisticated from the start and at a steady pace. It is possible we simply haven't found or connected this killer to his first victim or victims, or that he came to the area from somewhere else with experience, but I don't think so based on how quickly he improved, as well as his methodical efforts to do so. That suggests an older killer, five and twenty years old at least, and he's been doing this for four years."

"Which would make him around thirty now."

"At *least* thirty." Simon emphasizes the slight difference. "But no older than thirty-five. And considering the efficiency with which he collects, tortures, and disposes of his victims, he has a cold and calculating nature. Yet he doesn't torture them to death, but rather brings them to a certain point and then waits and watches them die. That suggests he's searching for something, or trying to create it."

"Is he finding it?" asks Caerus skeptically.

"That I don't know," replies Simon. "Yet."

Is he deliberately lying, or does Simon not agree with my belief that the killer has been successful?

The archaemon raises one hand to stroke his chin, bracing his elbow on the other arm across chest, giving me a much closer look at his ring than I've had. While Haema Hespera wears three milky-white memory stones, his holds a single polished black oval with a luminous six-pointed star that seems to hover on the curved surface. I can't tell if the silver brackets it's set in are creating the ghostly image or if it's natural. Either way, I've never seen a moonstone like it—if it is a moonstone. Despite its luminousness, it doesn't radiate absorbed magick the same way. If anything, it feels like a bloodstone, at least from this distance. He turns his attention to me. "And what do you think, Schola Katarene?"

Given their history, I take Hespera's warning about Caerus with a grain of salt, but I hesitate to trust anyone yet. No one except Simon, that is, and he's holding back. "I don't know enough to agree or disagree, Archaemon. My capacity in this investigation is almost purely medical." On impulse, I add, "Though it amazes me Simon can be certain with so little information."

Frustration ripples across Martin's face at my last words, but if Simon is insulted, he hides it behind a bland expression.

"I suppose the future will bear out the truth." Caerus drops his arms back to

his sides. “With that, I’m afraid I must leave you to your investigation. This has been most instructive, however.”

He turns slowly on his heel and leaves the room at a stately pace. I’ve never seen the man hurry anywhere. Simon meets my eyes, and I don’t need a bloodstone to understand he wants me to let him know when Caerus is fully gone. The archaemon doesn’t pause outside the door like I half expect him to, though, and after a minute I’m able to signal he’s gone. Simon’s shoulders relax, which makes me realize how tight mine were.

“So...,” Martin says slowly. “Can you tell me what that was all about?”

Simon smiles ironically. “Consider that a lesson in guarding your house. I will be frank and honest with you—both of you—” Here he glances at me. “But there are reasons to appear unsure and to withhold conclusions and details, even with those you don’t think would share the information. For one thing, people love to feel superior by having knowledge others don’t, and eventually they’ll feel the need to prove that.”

“By telling others what they know?” he asks.

“Exactly.”

The long night and tension of the last hour are catching up to me, and I pull out a chair to sit down. “Some of the details are also important to keep quiet. At some point we may have a person who tries to get away with murder by making it seem like it’s another of this killer’s victims. We may be able to instinctively see the difference, but we can convince others more easily if there are elements that don’t fit the pattern. That happened in Collis.”

Simon had instantly known the third murder he investigated wasn’t the work of the man he was hunting—even before examining the body. Unfortunately, his uncle the provost was so eager to close the inquiry that the man who’d killed his own wife was executed for all three, which of course stopped nothing. If anything, the murderer became eager to make Simon look like he’d failed.

“Does that mean you’re confident in your conclusions?” asks Martin.

“Very,” Simon and I answer together. “And more,” he adds.

Our chorus-like reply makes Martin smile like he knows a secret, his eyes darting between us but settling on Simon. “I’m listening.”

Simon looks to me, his crystal eyes saying, *As much as you feel is safe.*

“The killer *is* creating what he wants,” I tell Martin. “It’s just taken him a few years to construct the circumstances right. But that’s why the methods of

torture change with every murder now.”

“Because the goal is watching them die,” Martin says, and we both nod. “I suppose I shouldn’t be happy at that thought, but I’m glad to understand anything at this point.”

“There’s more,” puts in Simon. “Like most intelligent people, the killer thinks highly of himself, but feels wronged, like something has been taken from him. Maybe something he actually gave up but regrets. That I’m less sure of, but it feels right. Few people embark on this kind of methodical killing without the goal of achieving something they believe they deserve.”

Martin frowns. “But if he’s reached his goal as you say, what will he do now?”

Simon gazes over the line of the last murders, all different. “He’ll grow confident enough to venture into more risky behavior, seeking a bigger, better challenge.”

The reeve also stares at the row of pages. “How do you think that will look and when will that happen?”

I want to warn them that someone has crept quietly down the passage outside to listen by the door. Haema Hespera, based on the scent of preservation fluids that floated out of the folds of her skirt with every step. But Simon’s gaze is unfocused, an expression I know precedes some of the most disturbing and accurate statements he makes. I can’t interrupt.

“Something risky but rewarding,” he whispers. “Multiple victims at once, maybe. As to when, it will be very soon.”

CHAPTER 15

The moon wanes, shrinking closer to a half circle, setting later each morning. Rain that had started while we were visiting Philippa at her uncle's shop continues two days and nights and fills the sky with thick, dark clouds. Even with the barest traces of moonlight available, lessons in magick continue at night, changing to conventional medicine when the sun rises.

I get my first real understanding of how many non-Selenae students attend in the reduced hours, which speaks to the quality of the education offered. The tuition is also quite steep for them, but without it the akademium wouldn't be able to exist. I find it ironic how dependent the Selenae are on the Hadrians they scorn—and how they deny it even to themselves.

Simon and Martin spend most of the next days in their workroom, drawing a map on the large, blank wall and constructing lists of common elements in the cases. Everything is analyzed—from the victims' heights, weights, and builds, to appearance, age, and occupation, to the time of day they vanished and where the bodies were found.

And in all those details, there is no discernible pattern at all.

The reeve is disappointed yet somewhat relieved. He'd hoped for a commonality in the victims, but that there isn't one actually makes him feel better for not having missed something obvious. Simon is certain there is a logic—he just hasn't found it yet.

Our days haven't overlapped very well, and we only have time to talk privately in the hour when he's preparing for bed and I'm rising. On the third night I'm not yet awake when he slides under the covers next to me.

I roll over and sling an arm over his chest and snuggle into his shoulder. "It's been almost impossible to sleep the last couple days," I mutter into his shirt. He smells like charcoal pencils and ink and parchment with a touch of

whitewashing from painting the wall before starting the map.

Simon rubs his thumb in small circles down my spine. "Why is that?"

"The rain. It's so *loud*." I press my ear to his chest, letting the steady rhythm of his heart drown everything out. "And then there's been thunder." Not a lot, but enough to jolt me out of a doze half the times I managed to drift off.

"I think it's finally over now. Why didn't you void your senses so you could rest?"

"Because I need them for classes, and I can't get them back unless I look at the moon."

"And it's been hidden," Simon finishes. "I'm sorry. Maybe you'll get used to it. I knew a man in Mesanus who lived next to the Sanctum tower, but he could sleep through the bells even on solstice."

I can only hope so. "Magister Thomas always said every advantage came with a disadvantage."

Simon tenses, perhaps worried I'll start crying like the last time I talked about the architect, but when I don't, he relaxes a little. "Have you made any effort to find his wife yet?" he asks cautiously.

"When would I have time for that?" My answer is a little grumpy, but more out of guilt for putting it off.

"I could help," Simon offers. I think he knows why I'm avoiding going to the Sanctum.

I sigh. "No, thank you. The task is mine."

Simon drops the subject. He never pushes me to talk about things I don't want to. Sometimes I wish he would, though. It leaves a wide gulf of matters between us.

"When do you have to get up?" he asks after a minute of silence.

"Moonrise isn't for another half hour."

"You can tell even with this much cloud cover?"

I shrug my right shoulder as the left is buried in his armpit. "Just as you could tell sunrise was near under the same circumstances. The actual time is what the still clock on the bell tower indicates. They move the arms daily to the next rise or set."

Simon starts laughing hard enough I have to lift my head off his chest. "What's so funny?"

"I can't believe I didn't realize that's what it's for. The first time I saw it, I

thought it was broken, and I didn't really look at it again." He shifts to look me in the eye. "Which goes to show how wrong and blind I can be."

"Not really," I reply. "You only have so much attention. It's natural to ignore what you think is irrelevant."

He holds very still, his gaze distant. "Maybe..." he murmurs.

I sit up higher. "What?"

Simon refocuses on me. "I haven't found a pattern yet, but I haven't considered the phases of the moon. Perhaps I should."

I raise my eyebrows. "You realize doing so would imply you think the killer is Selenae, as that would matter to us."

"Not necessarily." He rocks his head against the pillow. "And are you saying it couldn't be one of them?"

"Of course not. No one should be immune to suspicion. I just think the Selenae won't appreciate it if they find out."

Simon frowns thoughtfully. "Unfortunately, the easiest way to get information on the moon phases would be from Selenae records."

"Then leave that to me." As I lean down to kiss him, a curtain of hair that's come loose falls around our faces.

He pushes it back against my head with his hand. Something sparks in his eyes as I sit up. It's not all pleasure, though. There's worry and fear. "Is there something bothering you?" I ask, my smile fading.

Simon's fingers tangle in my hair as he pulls his hand back. "No," he says. "Just, thank you for offering to get that."

I know he's lying. "Anything I can do to help."

His gaze drifts down to the open neck of my nightdress, and his breath and heartbeat speeds up under my hand. Even the skin beneath his shirt warms noticeably. As does my own, the heat spreading outward from my core to my limbs and even my cheeks. Simon raises his eyes back to my face, the brown flaw in the left adding that disquieting intensity to his expression—which I can't read, even with as well as I can see.

And that's when it hits me.

I love him.

To be honest, I'd worried my attachment to him was only our initial attraction and then because we were both exiles, hanging on to the one thing that was familiar. Suddenly I know it's not. I wouldn't be completely lost without him, but I would be less than I am now, like I was missing a limb.

And I want to be that for him.

Everyone but Martin thinks we're married. We've been through the ceremony, or at least half of it. What if we just ... were?

But what does he want? His fleeting thought from the Penthæmon chamber echoes in my mind, *I wish I wanted to—*

We'd just consented to go through bonding at the time. Was *that* what Simon wished he wanted, or was it something else? He'd never been that enthused about studying to become a physician and had dropped out at the first opportunity. Maybe it was that.

"Where are you, Cat?" Simon asks softly. When I refocus on him, he smiles apprehensively. "I lost you for a few seconds. Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing." I sit up, moving away from his hand. My curls fall back down around my face. "I don't want to be late."

Asking him about it would reveal that I'd heard something he didn't want me to.

I'm also not sure I want to know the answer.

CHAPTER 16

The clouds are completely gone by dawn. I'm brooding the whole night, even when the moon is finally visible, unlike all the other Selenae whose moods instantly improve. The clear sky doesn't last long, however. Toward the late morning, a haze of smoke drifts into the city from a nearby fire, and the oily burning smell coats the insides of our noses, giving us all headaches. Even the non-magickal students are affected by the foul air.

After classes, I seek out Haema Maia, who's as grouchy as everyone else and has voided her senses. Nonetheless, I ask her how moonrise and moonset are predicted, and after a long lecture on how such things were calculated, which is apparently one of the most basic lessons Selenae children learn, she directs me to the library, where I find a book full of the information Simon needs. I bring it straight to him in the workroom.

"Where's Martin?" I ask, setting the bound ledger on the only empty space on the table.

Simon glances up from whatever he's writing, a bit of a flush on his cheeks as he meets my eyes. "He was called to a reeve meeting. Something to do with the fire."

I blow my nose on a handkerchief, leaving smudges of black soot, which relieves some of my irritation but exposes me fully to the air again, though it's better in this room. "Wasn't it in the woods? I thought that was the jurisdiction of foresters, not reeves."

"It is." We turn to see Hespera standing in the doorway. She looks even more annoyed than usual as she twists the ring on her finger. "They've found the body of a man in the fire."

Simon jumps down from the stool. "How long ago did he die?"

"In the fire itself, so in the last few hours." The coroner holds up a leather

bag. “This is for you, Simon, to examine the body before you bring it to me.”

He steps forward to take it. “Thank you. I’d be grateful if you actually came with us, though.”

Hespera’s mouth pulls into a tight line. “No. It’s enough that I’ve agreed to autopsy the Hadrians in these cases.” She turns away. “I recommend Catrin change out of those clothes before she goes.”

I brush my hands down my black vest, feeling the embroidery. Though I’ve worn this outfit only a few days, it feels right, even if no other Selenae students have ventured to include me yet. I wish I knew if Hespera wanted me to change so I wouldn’t draw stares or because she didn’t think I was worthy of wearing the clothes.

★ ★ ★

Martin waits for us on the street outside, flanked by two older men. One has red hair a shade lighter than Martin’s, though it’s thinning and has receded a good inch. He wears the same insignia but also a much thicker golden cord on his left shoulder, indicating he’s a shire reeve. The second man’s cord is green, and his pin is a silver leaf rather than a shield.

“This is my brother, Edward, who I’ve told you about,” explains Martin, gesturing to the larger man. Then he indicates the other, who nods in greeting. “And Roger’s a forester—a reeve with authority in the royal woods.”

Everything about Roger is shades of brown, from his clothes to his hair, eyes, and skin. He plainly spends most of his time outdoors, and his age is difficult to deduce—his wrinkles appear to be less from age than sun exposure. We’re introduced to them in turn, and when Edward clasps my hand, he tilts his head toward the gate. “You’ll have to tell me what it’s like in there. I’ve always been curious.”

“Anyone is allowed inside, as long as it’s daytime,” I tell the shire reeve as Martin gives him a puzzled look.

“Yes, but it’s not very friendly. Martin seems to be the only one they tolerate.” Edward gazes through the opening, a strange longing in his eyes. Then he shakes himself and turns back to us. “Let’s get moving.”

We set off through the winding streets of outer Londunium, where the houses and craft shops are more spread out and have larger gardens. It’s the

poorer people who dwell outside the city walls. If there were some kind of attack, they'd have to abandon their homes for shelter in the city, but ironically, they have more space to live than the wealthier class.

Martin falls into step beside me as Roger leads the way toward the edge of the forest to the northwest. Simon is already talking with him about what's been found and how. "I don't know why Edward acts like he's never been inside the akademium," Martin says quietly. "About ten years ago he was there almost every day, working with Hespera."

"They were friends?" It's hard for me to imagine the stern woman being nice to anyone, let alone a detested Hadrian, other than perhaps Martin.

"I thought they were," he answers. "Then he stopped going, but there didn't seem to be any bitterness about it. When I started working on these murders, he was the one who told me to seek her out. Otherwise I wouldn't have dared go in there without invitation."

"Did you ever ask Hespera about it?"

"Once. She acted like they knew each other by reputation." Martin shrugs. "I was young, so it's probably my memory of what he was doing back then that's faulty."

I watch the three ahead of us. Edward walks alone, but he's pretty spry, even with the hair loss that's even more obvious from behind. "How much older is he?"

"Nine years, so he's thirty-one." At that statement, Edward glances back, and Martin grins. "Yes, old man, we're talking about you." When his brother faces forward again, Martin lowers his voice. "He needs a wife. I can name a dozen women who would drag him to the Sanctum altar if they could, but he lives as chaste as a Brother of Light." Martin's eyes dart to his brother's back. "I think maybe someone turned him down. Our father died when I was six and he practically raised me. He used to be much more cheerful, especially when he was first elected reeve. Then one day he just wasn't, like something inside him was suddenly broken. He's still good with children, though. Mine love him."

"Have you tried to introduce him to anyone?"

Martin rolls his eyes. "Countless times. He says they're all 'boring.'"

"You don't think..." I pause and search for signs Edward is listening, but he's moved even farther ahead. "You don't think he was attached to Hespera, do you?"

“I have to admit I’ve wondered the same thing,” Martin says. “But he doesn’t act like she jilted him—and when Eddie doesn’t like someone, you know it. It’s more like he never knew her in the first place, though he respects her opinion more than anyone else’s.”

The words hit me like a clap of thunder: *like he never knew her in the first place*. To hide my shock, I turn my face away from Martin and shade my eyes from the midafternoon sun, strong in spite of the persistent smoky haze. That day in the Penthaemon chamber, Hespera had said Hadrians had been erased before. In all the time he spent with the coroner, had Edward stumbled onto things he shouldn’t have?

I keep my expressions hidden as I wrestle with the idea. If Hespera had been the one whose mistakes made such action necessary, it might explain why she was so hostile and paranoid, worried it would happen again.

And those stones she wore ... were they *his* memories?



The burned area isn’t very large, but it was almost completely consumed. Only the recent rain had saved more of the forest from being swept away in the blaze. At the center is a scorched oak with what used to be a man against it. He’s practically melted to the tree, and ropes that held him there have burned away. Though he’s entirely blackened like charcoal, the agony on his face is still visible.

I hold my handkerchief to my face as I walk around the corpse, but it doesn’t help much. Leaves crumble to ash beneath my feet, sending up clouds of dust. If I had my bracelet on, I’d void every single sense I have to escape the choking scents and the taste and feel of the air, but I’ve forgotten it.

Roger points to the base of the tree, where a jumble of charred sticks surround the man’s feet. “Fire started there. I’m guessing the wood was too wet to burn well, so they poured oil on it all. Problem was, with the water on the leaves over the ground, the oil spread.” He gestures to a wooden bucket lying on its side nearby. “Then they tried to put it out but more water made it spread worse. Seen this before, just not when burning a man.”

Martin approaches the body and tugs at what’s left of its clothing. “Only a loincloth,” he observes. “Like most of the others.”

“Where did his clothes go?” asks Simon. “Does anyone see something that could have been what he was wearing?”

We all look around but find nothing. “Going to have a hell of a time identifying him,” mutters Edward.

My attention is caught by a nearby tree. It’s partly scorched, but the shape of it is bizarre. It’s obviously not related to what happened, yet I can’t help myself. The wood is bent and warped almost like it was sculpted, but it grew that way. I run my hands over the twisted grain, tracing chips and faint grooves. There are birds and animals capable of tearing into wood for insects or other small creatures hiding within, but this doesn’t quite follow the pattern those make.

Something about the shape also makes me shiver. It almost has the form of a man in its angles and proportions. Mother Agnes taught us that the soul stays with its body until the first sunset after death, at which time it follows Sun into the Beyond. If the body isn’t buried, many believe the soul might be tempted to stay, which is why funerals are held at dusk. I honestly don’t know if any of that is true, but this feels like a ghostly reflection of the dead man only paces away, like his soul fled his body only to be trapped in the tree.

“What are you looking at?” Simon’s voice makes me jump. Somehow he came right up next to me without my noticing.

“Just this tree,” I reply. “It’s so strange. But it’s not important.”

Simon waves to call Roger over to us. “We can’t afford to consider anything irrelevant.”

The forester approaches, and Simon gestures to the tree. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

Roger studies the twists and angles for several seconds. “Not quite like this, but it resembles trees in the topiary gardens of rich men,” he finally says. “It takes years to achieve, but it’s fashionable to bend saplings to grow into arches or swings or even seats.”

Simon’s brow puckers over his nose. “So this was done deliberately?”

“That would be my guess. There’s a few of these in the forest. We come across them every once in a while.”

I’m mesmerized by the trace of humanity in its depths. “Do you think this was done by someone practicing that method?”

Roger shrugs. “Maybe. People do strange things out here where no one can

see them. Sometimes just to make others wonder.”

A crunching sound makes both men turn, but it takes me another couple seconds to tear my gaze away. The noise was Martin and Edward pulling the burned corpse from the tree, and they lay it on a blanket they’ve spread out. Despite their efforts to lower it as gently as they can, at least one limb cracks audibly and blackened pieces of skin cascade from the break. The horrible scent of burned flesh washes over us, and it’s only with great effort that I manage to hold my dinner down. Simon turns away abruptly and takes several running steps, waving off my call of concern, and barely makes it to another tree before vomiting.

I follow him, putting one hand on his back as he heaves and coughs. When he finishes emptying his stomach, I offer him my filthy handkerchief to wipe his mouth. “I think I’ve lost face with Martin,” he mutters.

“Or not,” I say wryly as we hear the reeve losing his most recent meal off to one side. “If it makes you feel better, I threw up two and a half times during my autopsy with Hespera.”

Simon folds the linen square to hide the wet area. “It’s been a long time since I did, but this one is more difficult to bear.”

“Your father.”

He nods. His father had died in a house fire one night when Simon had left him alone for a few minutes of peace. It was an accident, but he feels guilty, mostly because of how relieved he’d been with the burden of sole caregiver being lifted. His father’s condition had deteriorated to the point that Simon was close to turning him over to one of the religious hospitals.

Simon tucks the handkerchief in his jacket pocket. “I’ll wash this for you before I return it.”

“Keep it, I have more.” The magister’s housekeeper had made me half a dozen last year, and they were one of the few things I brought with me. I take Simon’s hand, and we turn back to the scene as Edward approaches with a waterskin.

Simon takes it gratefully and rinses and spits a couple times before drinking. Though Edward’s blue eyes are a little clouded, he looks much less affected. I imagine he’s seen quite a lot in his many years as a reeve. Roger is also relatively emotionless as he removes more charred pieces of flesh still attached to the tree. Simon finishes with the water and hands it back with a thank-you.

“Your gratitude is unnecessary,” Edward says, then moves to offer the same to his younger brother.

“This must be terrible for you,” Simon says to me. “The smell.”

I wince as Roger rips a chunk from the tree. “The sounds aren’t much better.” Then I stop. “Do you hear that?”

Simon also halts. “Hear what?”

“It sounded like a moan.” I squint at Martin and his brother. “Not them, though.” My eyes search for the two foresters who’d guarded the area until we arrived. They sit on a tree stump over fifty paces away, backs against each other for support. If I concentrate, I can hear them talking quietly about how much they plan to drink tonight in an effort to forget their day.

I turn my head in the other direction, closing my eyes to reduce that distraction. Simon holds his breath in an effort not to disturb my concentration, and I’m about to tell him it’s not necessary when I realize I’m doing the same thing. My head is starting to feel woolly when I hear it again.

My eyes snap open. “This way.”

Simon follows me away from the blackened area. As soon as we’re not walking on charred leaves and sticks, I can discern the trail of someone who left streaks of soot and the scent of burned flesh on branches and foliage. We move down a shallow ridge until we come to where the person tripped and tumbled several yards, scattering a number of articles of clothing, then began crawling.

Two feet stick out from behind an outcrop of rock, and we run at them, finding a scorched skirt and legs above. Together we turn over the body of a woman. She’s alive but shivering uncontrollably as she looks up at us. The skin of her hands bubble and ooze with blisters as they curl up to her chest, shaking from what must be terrible pain. Then her eyes roll back, and she passes out.

CHAPTER 17

The large graveyard next to the hospital outside Londunium gives me little confidence that the woman from the forest is getting the treatment she needs. Edward had insisted on bringing her here for solid reasons, primarily that it was close. And while the akademium does allow non-Selenae patients overnight in extreme circumstances, they wouldn't have permitted the reeves to post guards or visit her at any time of day or night. He did ask me to send for one of our physicians, however. The sun hasn't touched the treetops, but the shadows are already lengthening when Caerus emerges from the hospital's main entrance, fists clenched in frustration.

I shake myself out of an uncomfortable doze against a nearby tree and struggle to my feet. My toes catch on the long skirt, making my rise rather ungraceful. "Is she awake?"

The archaemon catches me before I lose my balance. "Not yet. Have you been waiting here this whole time? I would've thought you'd be doing the autopsy with Hespera."

"She didn't need my help." I neglect to mention that the coroner ordered me to stay when she learned Caerus was the physician inside, saying I should remain as long as he did. Like she wanted me to keep an eye on him.

"And where is your Hadrian and his friend?"

Why can't they ever use his name? Was it deliberate or did they just not bother to learn it?

"Simon is with Martin. They went to search her home as soon as she was identified. Edward is seeking the dead man's family." I lower my voice though no one else is near enough to overhear. "Were you able to hear anything helpful in her thoughts?"

"Unfortunately, no," replies Caerus with a sigh. "It wasn't safe to listen for

more than a few seconds at a time. All I got was the pain she feels even in her unconsciousness. That and images of fire.” He pauses. “It’s clear that she was the one who did this to the man. Former lovers, perhaps. He might have betrayed or abused her somehow. Hadrians are prone to overreaction, especially when it comes to matters of the heart.”

Again with the casual disdain. I grit my teeth. “What will they do with her?”

The archaemon shrugs. “Execution, maybe before she even wakes. Tomorrow is their Sun Day, however, so likely the next day.”

I wasn’t sure it would be that soon. Even in a case as obvious as this one, Martin had claimed she was entitled to defend herself from the charge of murder, assuming she survived the night. Her lungs had rattled and rasped with all the smoke she’d breathed in.

“Your Hadrian is coming,” says Caerus, sounding almost bored.

I lean around the tree to see Simon walking up the road from the city gate toward the hospital. In his arms is a small bundle. With his long stride, he reaches us quickly. Though we could hear him from a great distance, he waits until he’s reasonably close before calling, “Is she awake?”

We shake our heads, but I don’t say anything about Caerus’s attempt to listen to her blood. While the archaemon may know Simon is aware of our abilities, I don’t want to rub his nose in it. Thankfully, Simon doesn’t ask, either, probably expecting me to explain in private later.

“I assume Martin won’t need your help or mine in this matter,” I say. “Seeing as it’s unrelated after all.”

Simon shifts what he’s carrying. “Actually, it is related.” He unrolls it to reveal a long, violet cloth. “We found this in her house.”

Flowers embroidered with golden thread gleam in the sunlight, the vines making the letters AA in several places. There’s only one reason the woman would have this. “She killed the tailor?” I gasp.

He nods. “And several others. Her home was full of men’s clothing, some of which we’ve already connected to victims. They may eventually help us identify the unknown bodies. There was even a sword and a dozen bloody arrows.”

My mouth hangs open. “But ... that’s impossible.”

“How so?” asks Caerus. “That a woman who was never suspected would explain why she was able to do this for so long.”

Granted I'd only seen her lying down, but the woman was slight in stature and almost certainly not capable of tying fully grown men to trees, let alone dragging bodies several hundred paces and throwing them into ravines. Then there was what I'd gotten from Hugh's blood. "But we know the killer is a man," I insist. "I heard his voice."

Caerus startles. "You did? How? When?"

I cast aside both being circumspect about Simon's knowledge and Hespera's warning to keep what happened from the archaemon. "In the autopsy," I explain. "The coroner and I were able to revive Hugh Bolton's last thoughts with lunar caustic, and I heard the killer speak."

He frowns. "You mean you heard him thinking of the killer's words in his own voice."

For a moment I have doubts, but then I shake my head. "No, I was in his head, experiencing his last few minutes as he did."

"That. Is. Impossible." Caerus emphasizes every word, his jaw rigid. "No Selenae can do that, especially a half-breed."

His true thoughts about me are revealed—I'm a mutt, no better than a stray animal. Indignation rises in my chest. "*I can*. I have. More than once."

"This happens whenever you touch the blood of the dead?" The archaemon's astonishment turns into something like eagerness.

I hesitate. Until that day, crossing into the mind of another had never occurred with blood, only when looking at the moon. My cousin, Athene, had cautioned me not to reveal that ability to anyone I wasn't absolutely certain I could trust, which is currently no one but Simon. Something about Caerus's greedy expression raises my guard. "Only when I touch blood with lunar caustic," I answer.

Simon's eyes widen as he realizes I'm lying, but Caerus appears too focused on me to notice the reaction. He covers the strange black stone with his other hand, hiding the ghostly star on its polished surface. "That is most interesting," he says softly. "Does Hespera know?"

I swallow. The coroner will be furious when she learns what I revealed. "Yes."

"And yet she did not tell me." The archaemon's eyes harden as he turns on Simon. "And neither did this Hadrian."

"I wasn't asked." Simon meets his gaze steadily. "And I have sworn to keep Selenae secrets."

“Hmm.” Caerus draws himself up to his full height, which is a good inch shorter than Simon. “I think it best if we return to the akademium. Katarene has only a few hours before her next classes, and she needs to rest.”

Simon gives a slight bow. “I agree and appreciate your concern for her. If your excellency will excuse me, however, the reeves have requested my assistance. Word of what we found has already spread through the city, and people are restless for justice. They want to have this woman’s trial tomorrow if she regains consciousness.”

“Yes, go.” Caerus waves his hand, the tension in the movement at odds with his dismissive words. “Attend to your Hadrian matters.”

When Simon is out of earshot, the archaemon addresses me. “And you, Katarene, will report to me after classes finish tomorrow. I will test this ability of yours personally.”

“I’m supposed to meet with Haema Hespera,” I say. “I’ll have to let her know.”

He narrows his eyes. “Don’t bother. She answers to me, not I to her.”

“Yes, Archaemon.” I follow him meekly.

Moon and skies, what a mess.

CHAPTER 18

Simon doesn't return that night. Most likely he stayed at Martin's home to avoid a fuss at the gate like the last time he tried to enter after sunset. I can barely pay attention through several hours of lectures, wondering about the woman. Was everything staged by the real killer to make her appear guilty?

The meal after classes is unappetizing, and I'm pushing a burned end of pork around my plate when I hear Simon approaching and spin around to face him. He stops. "You turned like you knew it was me."

"I did. I know the way you walk. You tend to drag your left heel."

"Interesting." Simon carries the bundle of purple fabric from before. Dark circles ring his eyes and unpleasant scents cling to his shirt—damp, stone, and unwashed human, like that of a cave someone has been living in for years. "She confessed."

Despite the assault on my nose, I scoot over to make room for him on the bench. "She's awake, then?"

"Awake and moved to the gaol." Simon lifts one leg over to straddle the seat next to me. "Martin and I talked to her half the night."

That explains the smell on his clothes. "When will her trial be?"

"It's over."

"Already?" I gape at Simon. "But it's Sun Day."

He leans on the table and stretches his neck from side to side. "They wanted it done. Between the evidence and her confession, it only took an hour. We were able to connect her to over thirty bodies, plus a dozen that are probably the ones Martin never managed to identify. There's an angry mob outside the citadel, demanding her execution."

"Will that happen today, too?"

Simon shakes his head. "They won't violate Sun Day in that way, plus

anyone sentenced to death has to see one last dawn.”

That’s to give even the worst criminals a chance at redemption. “Then she’ll be hanged or beheaded in the morning?” I ask. “In her condition?”

“They don’t want to delay the punishment too long. With her burns she’s likely to die of infection in the next few days.”

He sounds so frustrated. I set a hand on his thigh without thinking, but it’s only to offer some comfort. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t understand,” Simon growls at the table. “She’s not at all what I predicted. How could I be this wrong?”

I throw one leg over the bench to face him, taking his left hand in both of mine. The dining hall is almost empty, and the workers are clattering dishes at the far end of the room, but I lean close to whisper. “Simon, I know it was a man. I *heard* him.”

He grits his teeth. “She knew details about Hugh Bolton we never told anyone. Other victims, too. I have no doubt she was there. But she’s not right. She’s too timid. Definitely not strong enough to tie all those men up or carry them to the ravines.”

“Then she obviously had help,” I say.

“She insisted she acted entirely alone.”

“And they believe that?”

Simon turns his head to look at me as he sighs. “Cat, they *want* to believe that; it’s just like the grain merchant. And what can I say this time? That I know it’s wrong because you spent a minute in the mind of a dead man?”

Not even Martin would be able to believe that. More men would have to die before anyone would accept that this woman wasn’t completely to blame. Or, perhaps worse, the killer would leave Londunium and continue his grisly art somewhere else. There was only one living person who knew who he was. “Simon,” I whisper. “Can you get inside the gaol to talk to her again?”

“She won’t be there. They’re placing her in the stocks on the citadel wall facing east until morning.”

“Even better.”

Simon grimaces. “I doubt she’d answer any questions.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But when asked a question, one can’t help but *think* of the answer.”

He worries his bottom lip for a few seconds. “We’ll need Martin. Only reeves have access to those places, especially at night.”

“Do you think he’d help us?”

Simon nods and takes a deep breath. “What time?”

“The eleventh bell would be best. Moonrise is about an hour after midnight, which should give me enough time to get back here.”

Still he hesitates, his hand rotating to weave his fingers with mine. “Cat, it’s risky. The stocks are in full view of the streets below. What if someone sees you?”

“Schola Catrin,” interrupts a voice.

We startle and move apart, though our hands stay connected. Hespera stands on the opposite side of the table, wearing the familiar scowl. “You are late for an appointment with me.”

Hell Beyond, I’d completely forgotten. I jump to my feet, and Simon also rises, both of us awkwardly stepping over the bench. “My apologies, Haema. I couldn’t find you earlier to tell you the archaemon has ordered me to meet with him instead.”

The coroner raises her eyebrows. “And if you were on time for that, you would know he left on urgent business.”

Not that I was looking forward to dodging his tests of my magick, but I’m surprised anything could be more urgent than what I’d accidentally revealed. “What business?”

“I didn’t ask.” Hespera focuses her glare on Simon’s and my linked fingers, but I refuse to release him. “And so you are now free to relabel two shelves of specimen jars in my office. The current ink is fading.” She turns on her heel and stalks away.

“Ugh.” I roll my shoulders to release some of their tension. “She’s in a worse mood than usual.”

Simon squeezes my hand. “Do you want some help?”

I sigh and shake my head. “You should get some rest while you can.”

“As should you.”

“Yes, but I at least slept a few hours last night.”

He tightens his fingers and pulls me closer. “But then we could sleep together.”

A jolt of lightning goes up my arm. What was he suggesting?

Simon reads my mind and spots of color rise on his pale cheeks as he drops my hand. “I didn’t mean *that*. Just that I miss you. None of our hours line up anymore.”

Something like disappointment sinks my stomach. “I know; it almost feels like they’re trying to drive us apart, especially Haema Hespera.”

“The new moon is coming, though,” Simon says softly. “You’ll be awake during the day. We’ll be able to talk.”

We’d also be going to bed at the same time for a few nights at least. I wish I knew if he was thinking about that, too. We start to move to the exit, but a glint of gold catches my eye. “Don’t forget that,” I say, pointing to the table. “Are you planning to return it to Philippa?”

Simon picks up the violet scarf. “I thought you might like to, seeing as she’s making that dress for you.”

It was also for him. I take the silky fabric, slightly in awe, as it was hand embroidered by a queen. “I can do it later this afternoon.”

His hands linger as they brush against mine. “I’ll probably be gone by the time you return.” Then, probably because the dining hall workers are watching discreetly, he leans close and kisses my cheek. “I’ll see you tonight, by the main gate.”

“Don’t tell Martin I’m coming, though. He doesn’t need to see me.”

Simon knows what I mean. “Right.”

We part ways, me heading for the coroner’s office. She’s standing impatiently near her desk as I walk in, a length of cloth hanging over her arm. The fabric glows faintly, like the moonlight it was woven under, but it’s the moonflower dye that makes it almost invisible to those without magical sight. Hespera settles the garment on the back of her chair with a frown. “Do me a favor and lock the door behind you when you leave; these cloaks are valuable.”

I’d thought moonweave was relatively common among Selenae, especially those who enjoy walking the streets at night without being seen, but maybe that was only in Gallia. Why she would keep it here and not in her quarters is a mystery. I lay Philippa’s scarf over the other chair. “Yes, Haema. Where should I leave the key?”

“Keep it until the break for morning meal tomorrow. I had to present the autopsy evidence at that woman’s trial, and now I plan to sleep until dawn.” She turns to go. “I doubt the reeves will bother to consult with your Hadrian again. He’ll have to find a new occupation, if he can.”

My jaw clenches so hard it aches. “You don’t have to sound so happy about it.”

She pauses and looks back over her shoulder, brow arched over her Kohl-lined eye. "Simon being wrong about the killer is bad for all of us, not just him. I suggest he prove his worth, and quickly."

"He will."

The coroner shrugs and heads out the door. "If you say so."

CHAPTER 19

Haema Hespera's words bother me so much that I have to rewrite at least ten labels, and the job takes much longer than it should. Because of the lateness, I consider skipping the visit to Philippa until tomorrow, but I really do want to see the dress, and I know she'll be grateful to have her uncle's scarf back. Plus I haven't made any friends at the akademium, and part of me just wants to talk to someone—a female someone, besides Hespera.

Philippa invites me inside with a friendly, though sad, smile. "I heard the woman who killed Uncle Hugh was found, and she'll be executed in the morning."

I don't have the heart to tell her the real killer is still out there. "You've heard true. This was found in her home. Simon said you could have it back." I offer her the scarf.

She takes it with reverence, her eyes glistening with tears as she strokes the golden threads. "Thank you. And thank Simon, too."

"We're glad to be able to return it to you. It ... it should probably be washed," I say awkwardly.

"I'll do that later."

I watch as Philippa places it in a small cedar chest. "How are you?"

She sighs as she closes and latches the carved lid. "I've been better. Most days I wake up thinking everything is normal; then I remember, and it's like I lost him all over again."

"I know what you mean," I say. "The woman who raised me died recently, and it's the same for me." I hesitate, wanting to relate to her but not wanting to reopen wounds of my own. Finally, I force myself to continue. "She was murdered, too. I found her body."

The brow over Philippa's blue-gray eyes puckers in sympathy, the shape of

the wrinkle sparking some vague recognition. “I’m sorry. Was that back in Gallia?”

I nod, trying to swallow what feels like a whole apple in my throat. It was both my fault the killer went after her and that Mother Agnes let him into the abbey that night. She thought he was Magister Thomas coming to discuss matters concerning me.

“Did leaving Gallia make it easier to bear, since you’re not surrounded by constant reminders of her?”

“In some ways,” I admit. “I can imagine she’s still there, leading prayers every few hours, listening to which sisters or novices have overslept for extra chores later, but also which voices are sad or angry. She was blind for the last few years, but it never prevented her from mothering everyone to the end.”

Philippa smiles. “She sounds like a good woman and a mindful prioress.” Then she frowns a little at my black outfit. “But, to have been raised in an abbey...?”

I sigh. “It’s a long story.”

“If you’d like, I can make some tea and we could talk,” she offers.

The idea is unexpectedly tempting, but the afternoon is ending, and I only have a few hours before a very long and busy night. “Some other time, I promise.” Then I bite my lip shyly. “But I did want to ask how the dress is coming.”

Philippa brightens. “Oh yes. Do you have time to try it on?”

“It’s done already?”

“Not quite.” She leads the way to the back room. “Frankly, I didn’t have much else to do, and it occupied my mind.” In the corner is a body-shaped frame covered in bleached linen. The hem of a red skirt peeks out from the bottom.

Philippa unpins the wrapping to reveal the dress underneath, and my mouth falls open in awe. The main color is a deep crimson, with vines in a shade of reddish orange that my eyes naturally follow up and around, much like the design of a Holy Sanctum that draws the gaze to the heavens or the altar. On closer inspection, the vines are more a difference in texture than hue and from many angles aren’t even noticeable.

“How did you do this?” I ask, tracing a heart-shaped leaf on the bodice.

The tailor takes a bottle from a nearby shelf and uncorks it before holding it out, but I don’t need to get very close for the scent to burn the inside of my

nose. She quickly recloses it. "It's an acid that dissolves fabric, but it has to be rinsed out before it does too much. I practiced for hours on scraps."

It looks almost finished. "You did all that, designed the dress, and put it together in just the last few days?"

She shrugs modestly. "Sometimes when a project has me in its grip, I can do little else."

"When will it be done?"

"Tomorrow, if you'll let me do some final fitting adjustments now."

I agree, and Philippa takes the dress off the frame while I disrobe. The material she used is heavy, but it won't always be summer, and she had to have something thick enough to create the moonflower designs without the acid eating all the way through. As she pins a few places that need to be tighter, she talks about her plans to experiment further with other fabrics. "This could be the one thing that sets me apart from other tailors," she says around the pins in her mouth. "If I can keep it secret."

Secrets everywhere. "I won't tell anyone," I assure her as I admire the light dancing across the fabric. "This has such a nice balance and symmetry."

I worry I've used a word she doesn't know, but Philippa smiles, pleased. "Something I always strive for in my dress designs."

I chuckle. "Like an architect."

"That's what my father was," she replies, reaching in to tuck a loose end of the trim in place. "I think that's why my mother hates grand buildings, why she refuses to live in Londunium. Maybe they remind her of him, but she never talks about it. I only know his occupation because Uncle Hugh told me. She was furious."

She suddenly has my full attention. "Your mother hated your father?"

Philippa shrugs. "I'm not sure. Like I said, she never talks about him."

My mind spins with calculations. Philippa is a few months younger than me. Magister Thomas's wife disappeared right about the time I was born, leaving a note saying that she was going home to her family. Their daughter had died a year earlier, in the plague, and his grief had caused him to bury himself in his work, neglecting her.

What if the architect's wife was pregnant when she left him?

I study Philippa's profile as she walks around me, tilting her head. It's difficult to find much similarity. Magister Thomas has a beard that covers his jawline. The shape of her nose, maybe.

I clear my throat. “When did your father die?”

She shrugs again, absorbed in her inspection. “Uncle Hugh never said. But I called him Papa once and he corrected me, telling me my real father wouldn’t like it. So I asked about him, and Mama walked in and stopped him before he could tell me anything more than what he did. She made him swear on the Light never to speak of my father again.” Philippa makes a face as she bends over to adjust the length of the hem. “And he was true to that promise, no matter how much I begged.”

I’m silent, stunned by the possibility I’ve discovered, until Philippa cringes. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to burden you with my family drama like that.”

“Not at all,” I manage to say. “I was just thinking I never knew my father, either, and the prioress also refused to talk about him. Of course, that’s because he was Selenae.”

“That makes me feel better.” She smiles in relief, and there it is: The way her mouth tilts and her eyes crinkle is exactly like Magister Thomas. That’s why I felt like I’d met her before.

But it’s not certain yet. My voice trembles as I finally ask, “Philippa, what is your mother’s name?”

“Eleanor, after the queen mother, but spelled the Brinsulli way, with an *E*.” Philippa glances up, her brow wrinkling in the exact way the architect’s does. “Why do you ask?”

It has to be her. It *has* to be. But she’s been through enough the past few days, and dropping this on her now—especially when I *could* be wrong—is a bad idea. “No reason.”

Philippa stands up straight, and the way her eyes light up as she admires something she’s created erases any lingering doubts I had. She’s Magister Thomas’s child, through and through. “That’s good. Are you sure you don’t have time for tea?”

She sounds lonely, and even if she wasn’t the architect’s daughter, I would want to stay, but I can’t.

“I’ll come tomorrow,” I promise. “I have a very urgent letter to write before tonight.”

★ ★ ★

The Sister of Light places ink and parchment before me, and I thank her. I

was worried they wouldn't let me in the convent while I was wearing my Selenae black, but when I explained I wanted to write a letter to a sister at Solis Abbey in Gallia, they cautiously unlocked the gate and ushered me to the library. My real intent is to write to Magister Thomas, so I feel a little guilty, but Marguerite is the only way to get a message to him in less than two or three months.

I dash a note off to my friend, assuring her Simon and I arrived safely, my studies are going well, and promising a full, more detailed letter soon. The sister watches me from the corner of the room, but she can't see what I'm writing as I set the page aside and pull up a second sheet, beginning with the same update for the architect. Then I dip the pen in the ink to fill it as much as I can before continuing.

I am almost certain I've found your wife, Magister. She doesn't live in Londunium, however, so I haven't been able to deliver your letter. It may be some time before I can travel to where she is, but I have learned something else I think you should know.

You have a daughter, Magister. Philippa is seventeen and was apprenticed to a tailor in Londunium who recently died. Her designs have such elegant lines and balance. When she talks about her work, she sounds just like you, and her smile is your own.

I pause, struggling with how to phrase the next part.

Philippa knows nothing of you, other than your profession, and assumes you are dead. Learning the truth will be a shock, but I intend to tell her when the time is right. She will be the best judge of what to tell her mother and how. I will urge her to wait until I've heard from you, though. From what she's said, Eleanor may not be forgiving, unless, perhaps, you arrive in person. I know it's a long journey to undertake without the promise of success, but I urge you to consider making it, if only so you can meet your daughter.

The evening prayers will soon be rung, so I quickly sign and fold the page before sealing Marguerite's around it. As I leave, I drop a generous donation in the poor box outside the gate while the sister locking up can see, hoping it will encourage her to give my letter some priority. Then I return to the

akademium, a spring in my step and a smile on my lips.

CHAPTER 20

The previous night is catching up to me by the time I reach our room, and I only have a couple hours remaining to nap. I yawn as I flop onto the bed without bothering to change out of my clothes. Simon is gone, but the pillow smells like him—woodsmoke and parchment and ink with a touch of mint, and I bury my nose in the linen-covered down and breathe deeply to calm myself. The sleep that comes, however, is fitful and full of dreams of Magister Thomas arriving in Londunium only to have his wife and daughter refuse to even speak with him. I feel sick on waking, wondering if I've done the right thing in encouraging him to come here.

Restless energy causes my hands to tremor as I change out of my skirt and into the blue-black breeches. Tonight will be more than a little bit risky. My nerves are humming, partly from the bloodstone in my shirt pocket. I'd swiped it from Hespera's supplies, picking one strong enough to make my skin tingle and the air in my lungs heavy with magick. Rather than bring the stick of lunar caustic I also nicked from the coroner's cabinet, I carefully wrap it in a scrap of waxed parchment and tuck it in the back of a drawer. I don't know what it would do with the blood of a live person—and there should be no actual blood tonight anyway. My reaction had been so extreme it's also foolish to experiment with it outside very controlled circumstances. Something I'll have to do with Simon.

The Sanctum bell is announcing the eleventh hour as I clasp the moonweave cloak at my neck to hide me from non-Selenae sight. Back in Collis, my cousin, Athene, had given it to me to aid in our escape from the city to the Gallian coast; otherwise, I would've felt no guilt in "borrowing" that from Hespera as well. I almost did so out of spite.

The shortest path to the gate is across the courtyard. Sneaking around is

pointless, since anyone here can see me, but I stick to the shadows on the edge, hoping Simon hasn't been waiting too long.

He's a dozen paces away, facing the akademium wall. Martin holds a lantern with red glass and chats with him while looking outward at the streets radiating from the intersection. Both wear the gold braid of Martin's office on their left sleeves, and Simon picks at his nervously. Impersonating a reeve is likely to be a serious crime, but if Martin gave it to him, he must believe in Simon, which is reassuring.

I put my hood up and slip through the iron lattice when the guard has it open enough for me to squeeze through. Simon shifts his eyes to the gate as soon as it closes but is unable to find me. I walk toward them, silent as a cat, and reach for Simon's hand, careful to keep mine hidden under the cloak. He can't help the slight jump of surprise when I touch the back of his wrist, which Martin notices.

"Do you see her coming?" the reeve asks, turning to look over his shoulder.

Gooseflesh rises on Simon's skin and for a fractional moment he focuses on me before losing whatever he managed to see. I pull my hand back as he shakes his head. "No. I guess she wasn't able to come after all. Haema Hespera had her working late."

"That's a shame." Martin gives Simon's shoulder a hearty slap, and I have to duck out of the way of his huge arm. "But it gives us a chance to continue our earlier discussion."

Simon vigorously disagrees. "I'd rather not. It's late, and we don't want to disturb anyone."

"Ah, but you're wrong," says Martin. "Two men walking silently through the streets is suspicious. Talking actually attracts less attention, as long as you do it quietly."

Simon's pale eyes dart to the place he last knew I was. "Fine, but we can finish that particular conversation another time."

"Your earlier excuse for avoiding it was because Catrin was coming. You're not getting out of it now." Martin leads the way, and I follow the pair, acutely aware how much this is like eavesdropping, even if one of them knows I'm here. "Did you say anything to her yet?"

Simon hunches his shoulders and shoves his hands in his pockets. "We only had a few minutes, and I had to tell her about the conviction and execution."

“She’s smart, Simon. You won’t be able to hide it for much longer.”

Simon is keeping something from me? My steps quicken to get closer, though I can already hear them clearly.

“I know she’s smart, but it’s complicated.” Simon can’t help glancing behind him. Martin also looks, but neither finds me and they turn their eyes forward again.

“Because you’re dependent on her? I’m paying you for your help.”

“It’s not completely about money. She’s the only reason the Selenae tolerate me.”

Martin grunts. “You’d always have a place to stay with me.”

“You’re assuming they’d let me leave.”

Simon wants to leave the akademium completely? Wants to leave me?

They walk in silence for half a block as I struggle with the idea. Was that why he’d said the other day that I don’t need him? I don’t want him to stay with me out of obligation, but imagining life without him rips a hole in my middle.

He’s also right that the Selenae may not allow him to leave. I trust Simon hasn’t told his friend anything he shouldn’t, but just the fact that the People of the Night actually *do* have secrets worth keeping is dangerous to know. Everything now is only rumor and speculation. Fortunately, Martin is true to his earlier promise and doesn’t pursue that topic, but he doesn’t let go of the original matter. “All that aside, you have to be honest with her.”

Simon barely stops himself from looking over his shoulder again. “I don’t know how to say it.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just kiss her.”

The skin visible above Simon’s collar is red, and not with the lantern light. “I do.”

“I mean, kiss her everywhere.”

Simon snorts. “The Selenae aren’t keen on public affection.”

The reeve grins. “Not that kind of everywhere, Simon.”

I trip on a stone sticking out of the packed dirt and catch myself. Both men stop and turn around. I freeze, my moonweave hood hanging half over my face as Martin holds his lantern higher and squints up the street. “I keep thinking I hear or see something behind us,” he murmurs.

“Then we should be quiet.” Simon’s cheeks are scarlet and his expression frantic. “In case we’re being followed.”

Martin rolls his eyes as he begins walking again. “Fine. But promise me you’ll tell her soon. She deserves to know, and you deserve to know if she feels the same.”

Simon lowers his face and massages his temples with his thumb and fingers. “Somehow I think she’ll figure it out.”

★ ★ ★

I give the two of them more distance as I follow them through several turns, my mind spinning like a wagon wheel in mud, unable to move forward.

Simon is in love with me. That’s what they were discussing.

But ... he didn’t want to marry me. I’d heard that thought as clear as a bell in the Penthæmon chamber. Maybe he’d changed his mind.

Or maybe I’d misunderstood. It *had* been only a fraction of a thought. I rub my forehead like Simon did. Whatever his hesitant feelings before, they were obvious now. I should’ve seen it, given how he reacts when we’re close. How he said he missed sleeping next to me.

Now I feel silly for ever having doubted him.

I’d thought my steps were light earlier, but now my feet barely touch the ground.

We arrive at the citadel before I know it, the stone edifice blocking half the sky as we approach the gate guarded by two men. Though Simon isn’t recognized, the braid on his shoulder and being accompanied by Martin gets him inside without question. Seeing no threats, the watch isn’t quick about closing the entrance, and I have no trouble passing through behind them. The reeve’s expression changes to one of consternation as they reach the stairs leading to the top of the wall. “There’s supposed to be a lot more torches lit,” he mutters. “Especially around her.”

“That should make things easier, though, right?” Simon points out. “We had expected to have to block or douse a couple.”

“True,” Martin answers. “But I don’t like it.”

The stocks are on top of the tower in the middle of the eastern wall, black shapes against a blanket of stars. I can smell the rotten food scattered around before I can see it. Simon steps over a slimy cabbage. “Perhaps they put out the torches to discourage people from throwing things at her all night.”

“That’s definitely possible.” Martin continues toward the tower, kicking a

fist-size stone aside.

I lean over the crenelated wall to peer down. The earlier mob is gone and the main avenues below are almost empty. Those that are out walk in pairs, many unsteady from a night of drinking, their lanterns swaying as much as they do.

Martin peers through the open archway and up the spiral staircase. “Where’s the damned guard?” he grumbles. “There should be one up here.”

Simon frowns. “I thought you said there would be two.”

“One can step away or patrol for as long as a quarter hour, but I don’t see anyone at all. Wait here.” He hands Simon the lantern and gestures for him to stay inside the tower before walking down the wall.

As soon as he’s gone, I can’t hold back anymore and lean to whisper in Simon’s ear. “No one is around. Not for at least two hundred paces.”

He jumps. “Hell Beyond, Cat.”

I push my hood back. “Did you forget I was here?”

“Of course not.” He avoids my eyes. “Sometimes I swear I saw you for an instant.”

“Maybe you’re developing Selenae senses.”

Simon snorts. “More likely because I knew you were there.” He sighs. “That wasn’t how I wanted to tell you, by the way.”

I edge closer, soaking in the heat radiating off his body. “Tell me what?”

“Don’t pretend you didn’t hear everything.” I suspect he’s flushing as badly as before, but the red glow from the lamp makes it hard to tell. “Or that you didn’t understand.”

My hand finds his, and the pulse in his fingertips thunders against my skin. “Maybe I just want to hear you say it.”

“Cat, this really isn’t the best time. Or place.”

I suppose he’s right, but it’s still disappointing. My fingers slacken. “All right.”

Simon tightens his hand before I can let go and pulls mine up to lay a kiss across my knuckles. “We’ll talk later, I promise.” Then he opens my fingers and presses his lips to my palm, sending warmth up my arm. “I want to do this right.”

His mouth moves to my wrist, and my elbow feels like it’s suddenly made of jelly. This not being the best time and place aside, whatever he’s doing feels extremely right.

I'm so distracted I almost don't hear Martin until it's too late. Simon releases my hand and yanks my hood up again as the reeve sticks his head inside the tower doorway, his mouth set in a grimace. "My plan to send them both off for a few minutes on some task and taking their place on the watch was risky enough," he says. "This actually makes me nervous."

"Do you want to wait for them to show up?" Simon asks.

Martin leans back out, scanning the walls in both directions. "No, just go, now. Get what you need. I'll stay here."

I move eagerly up the stairs since I know I can see better, pulling Simon along. "Let me ask the questions," he hisses as we step through the trapdoor and into the open air. "You listen."

"Yes, yes, I know." More stones and broken eggs are strewn across the floorboards around the sagging figure in the stocks. I push my cloak back over my shoulders to dig into my pocket for the bloodstone. "She's asleep or unconscious. We'll have to wake her."

"I'll do it." Simon leans close to where the woman's neck rests on the wood, wrinkling his nose at the stench of blood, urine, and excrement. "Joan," he says, but not too loudly. "Joan Clopton, wake up."

The woman doesn't move. Simon nudges her temple, repeating her name, but the head only rolls to the side a bit. "I should've thought to have you bring smelling salts or something," he mutters.

I shift the metallic stone between my tingling fingers, suddenly realizing what is missing. "Simon," I whisper urgently, and he stands straight to look at me. "I can't hear her heartbeat."

His scowl releases halfway in surprise. "Should you? From that distance? With no moon?"

"If I concentrate."

Simon turns back to the woman, eyes wide. "Oh no."

Her neck is almost completely encircled by the stock, so Simon pulls one of her hands a short way out of the hole and presses his fingers to the limp wrist. I already know he won't be able to feel anything.

CHAPTER 21

Curses I've never heard in my life fall from Simon's lips as he releases the woman's arm and steps back.

I move past him to examine the body. "It must have been from her injuries," I murmur. "Not only were they careless with her, but this is a terrible position for breathing, and her lungs were already damaged by smoke."

Simon balls his hands into fists. "I dragged you out here for nothing."

"She's not even cold yet." I bend my knees to examine the woman's drooping face, prodding her eyelids open. Her mouth is twisted in pain, and dark wetness stains the wood below. I rise from my crouch, lifting the woman's head gently to show Simon what I could see from the low angle. "Her throat's been cut."

He swears again. "It could only have been the guard."

I chew my lip. Though it's something Selenae physicians regularly do, listening to the dying thought of a person feels more intrusive than listening to the living. Perhaps because it's the last shred of consciousness they possess. Or maybe I hate it because the only ones I've heard have been those of men and women who were brutally murdered. This one will be no different.

There's no guarantee that whatever she was thinking will be helpful, either, and certainly not in finding the true killer.

"I can try to find out," I finally offer. Without waiting for a response, I lower the woman's head and press the bloodstone to her scalp with my palm. Simon holds his breath as my face tightens with the strain of concentrating, and his hand brushes my shoulder as though to comfort me, but then he backs off, likely worried about distracting me.

I hear nothing.

Frowning, I slide the stone to her temple, where a light pulse resides in life, but still there is silence.

The seconds lengthen until Simon can't take the suspense. "What is it, Cat?" he whispers hoarsely.

I pull my hand back, shaking my head in frustration. "I can't hear anything. I should be able to, though. Juliane was gone nearly a day when I listened to her..."

There was one more way to try.

Before Simon can stop me, I kneel and press my fingers to the woman's wet neck. The wound is wide and jagged—a hacked job, probably because it was difficult to reach her throat around the stocks. I try not to notice the feel of the flesh that's still warm but already cool enough to know how lifeless it is.

Lifeless and silent.

I grit my teeth and shift my hand, pushing fingers deep enough into the wound that it makes an audible squelching sound.

Nothing.

"I can't understand," I whisper.

"Like it's in another language?" Simon asks.

"No." I drop my hand to the weathered wooden boards below her, running my fingers through the shallow puddle of blood like I'm sifting for a lost object. "There's nothing there. No thought. No emotion. *Nothing.*"

Simon exhales in resignation. "She must have been unconscious."

"No, Simon." I push the woman's chin up with my bloody fingers. "Look at her expression. She was awake when it happened, and terrified. But even asleep or unconscious the mind never stops thinking or dreaming. I should hear *something*, even if it doesn't make sense."

"Her mind was empty?"

"Completely," I insist. "Which is impossible. Have you ever been able to think nothing? To *feel* nothing?"

"Yes," he says quietly.

I glance up at him. "You may think so, but you're wrong. Not to this extent. Death is the end of thinking, which is why the last thought remains—nothing is there to replace it." I lower the woman's head again and stand, holding my bloody fingers so they don't come near my clothes. "And even

animals have emotions. Primitive and simple ones, but detectable all the same. This is like..." I gesture to the body. "Putting my hand in water and it not even coming out wet."

"Your hand is wet," Simon points out.

"You know what I mean." I dig my other hand into my pocket for a handkerchief and wipe my sticky fingers as clean as I can. Then I squat down to the puddle and dip the cloth in it to soak up some of the blood.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"I'm taking this back to the akademium. I need to understand it."

"Martin's coming."

I jump up, folding the cloth and stuffing it in my pocket as I pull my cloak around me. Why didn't I hear him? Simon moves forward to block me as I step back, and I barely get my hood up before Martin's head appears out of the trapdoor.

"Have you learned anything?" Martin calls softly.

"She's dead," Simon answers flatly.

"Dead?" The reeve rushes up the last few steps and out onto the tower, and I maneuver farther from the body in the stocks. "How?"

"Her throat was cut."

"Hell Beyond, this complicates things." Martin lifts the woman's head to look as Simon holds the lantern closer. "Why didn't you come back down once you realized she wouldn't be able to answer any of your questions?"

"I was examining the body. It's still warm."

"I noticed." The reeve pauses. "Who were you talking to?"

"No one." Simon's tone is cautious. "Just myself."

Martin scans the open tower with a frown. "But I heard another voice. A woman."

"I can't explain what you think you heard."

Despite whatever kept me from hearing before, I can tell several armed men are approaching at a trot now. Someone must have seen movement up here, or the missing guard had reported the woman's death. I'm helpless to say anything, but they're making enough noise that Martin steps up to peek down on the wall. "Blazing skies," he swears. "It's Edward."

Simon's eyes desperately search for me, but I'm as invisible as the dark side of the moon. "We need to go."

"We'll never get away without being seen," says Martin. "Just be glad

Catrin isn't with us; it's going to be difficult enough to explain why we're here. Better to act like we have nothing to hide, though."

For a moment Simon focuses on where I stand. "Nothing to hide," he mutters.

It's probably the darkness, but they've completely forgotten Simon is wearing the shoulder braid of a reeve. I slide up behind him and tug his shirt in an attempt to remind him. He completely misunderstands and reaches back to grab me. "Stay still," he hisses.

Martin turns from watching the stairs his brother is now thundering up. "What?"

Simon brings his arms back around to his front. "Nothing. Talking to myself again. I'll *be quiet*."

As Martin turns away again, I grip Simon's sleeve, trying to draw his attention to the braided cord. He swats at me and steps away. I know he's worried about protecting me, but I want to scream.

The trapdoor is a rectangle of golden light until the huge form of the shire reeve blocks most of it as he steps out of the hole, sword drawn. The torch carried by the man behind him shortly illuminates the whole area, and Edward startles at who he sees. "Martin?" he says, sheathing his weapon. "And Simon? What are you doing up here?"

"We wanted to ask the condemned a few questions before the execution tomorrow," answers Martin, his tone carefully moderated to sound innocent.

I have to edge back as Edward strides around to look at her. Another torch and two more men crowd onto the top level, bathing the woman in the stocks in light, and giving me very little room to avoid being brushed against. The shire reeve lifts the woman's face, inhaling sharply. "Martin," he says quietly. "Tell me you didn't do this."

Martin stiffens. "Of course not. Surely you can tell she didn't die in the last ten minutes."

"I can't see a damn thing except that she's dead, and you're the ones standing here."

Simon raises his palms into the light. "If it was us, we'd have far more blood on our hands." Martin follows his example. Both have only a little from touching the woman's head.

"Then what is that?" Edward points behind Simon. The scarlet and white handkerchief lies on the floorboards. I must have missed my pocket in my

haste to hide under the cloak. One of the guards snatches it up and holds it out to the shire reeve.

No! I need that!

Edward unfolds it and holds it up to the light. The middle is soaked with blood, but the outer edges have a clear handprint. Even worse, Martin's blue eyes dart to Simon with a flash of suspicion.

Simon lifts his arms away from his body. "Search me, I have no weapon."

One of the guards snorts. "And there's no possibility you didn't just toss it over the wall."

Shouts from below interrupt anything Edward might have said. The head of a fifth man appears, breathless from running up the steps. "Sh'reeve!" he gasps. "We found the body of a man under the stairs."

So that was where the missing guard went.

"How did he die?" Edward asks.

"Stabbed in the neck. Very messily."

Edward crumples the cloth in his fist and points at his brother and Simon. "You two, follow me. You—" He indicates one of the men with a torch. "Stay here. No one comes up or down."

"Yes, Sh'reeve."

I'm helpless to do anything but watch as Edward leads everyone else down the stairs, the last man pulling the door closed with a rusty screech of hinges. Then I have to back away as the remaining guard paces around the edge of the circular wall, peering over the edge several times with a torch held high over his head.

I'm trapped.

Or maybe not.

The half-moon peeks over the eastern horizon as I study the rough stone of the tower. In the light I can see places large enough to grip with my fingers and place my toes. I've never tried anything like this, though, and certainly not while wearing a cloak—which I dare not remove. It's about two stories down to the wall. I've been higher, but there are no scaffolds or a safety rope around my waist. The invisible effects of the moonweave will only last until the sun rises, however, and Simon is in danger. I have to make the attempt.

Just to be safe, I wait until the man is facing away before I step backward between crenelations and crouch, then ease one leg down. Fortunately, I'm wearing climbing boots the architect had made for me specially, and they

allow my feet to flex as they find a place between stones deep enough to place my weight. The guard is watching what's unfolding below, which is also in my favor but adds a sense of urgency as I sweep my cloak behind me so I can lower my body over the edge. My breath hitches when it takes several seconds to find a second toehold. Then I settle my weight on them and disappear over the edge.

I thank the Sun—or should I be thanking the Moon?—that I chose to wear breeches tonight. The cloak doesn't help, though. One peek down sends a shudder through me, and I keep my focus on the stones. My limbs tremble with nervousness and effort as I lower myself bit by bit. At one point I have to move laterally to find a way down. The noise and torchlight below is distracting, but the rising moon offers some comfort with its presence, even with the little magick it provides.

At last I reach a height I feel comfortable hopping down from, glad for the attention on the body being carried from the tower to an open area on the wall stretching the other direction. Simon's upper arms are being held tightly by two men as he watches, but he doesn't struggle. Sometime in the last few minutes, the cord Martin had given him was ripped from his sleeve, leaving a long tear in the felt jacket, exposing the bleached linen shirt underneath. He keeps glancing up at the tower. "I'm sorry," he whispers over and over. "Cat, I'm so sorry I got you into this."

As if coming here wasn't my idea.

I creep as close to the edge of the commotion as I dare. Edward has taken Martin aside and is dressing him down. "Do you have any idea what a mess you've made?"

"You don't honestly believe Simon or I did this?" Martin asks.

"What am I supposed to think?" Edward demands. He holds up the thin, gold cord. "And what were you thinking giving this to him? The trust people have in us can be completely ruined if we have false ones running around."

No excuse is sufficient for such a violation of his office. Martin stares at his feet. "It was only for this purpose."

"Which was?"

"To get him up here. Only reeves are permitted."

"For damn good reasons." Edward lowers his arm and places his fist on his hip. "And what in the Name of the Light was so important about bringing him here in the dead of night?"

“He wanted to ask her some questions,” Martin insists. “That woman couldn’t have done everything she confessed to.”

“You have no proof of that.”

“We have instinct. And logic.”

“Instinct means nothing,” Edward snaps. “And your logic wasn’t good enough for the judicare to grant further examination.”

Martin raises his eyes to his brother, his expression hardening. “Would it have been enough for you in that position?”

The shire reeve exhales heavily. “Probably. But that doesn’t matter. This isn’t Gallia, where one unelected nobleman makes all the decisions. We have procedures, Martin. We have *laws*. Which you’ve sworn to uphold.”

Martin’s stony countenance falters. When the enlightened rules he was so proud of had tied his hands, he’d been willing to bend them. “What will happen to Simon?”

“There will be a thorough investigation.” Edward raises his hand before Martin can interject. “Which you will not be a part of. In fact”—he turns his hand over, palm up, and extends it—“your authority is suspended until your wrongdoing is addressed.”

I’m not the only one watching this argument. The guilt on Simon’s face is unbearable as Martin slowly unpins the golden cord from his left shoulder and pulls it down his arm. “How could you do this to me, Brother?” he whispers. “In front of everyone?”

“How could I not?” Agony drags the corners of Edward’s mouth down as his younger brother places the cord in his hand. “I won’t put you in gaol, but stay here until I take your sworn statement of events.”

What about Simon?

Martin’s face is an odd jumble of shadows from the light of three torches as he turns around and walks to stand next to Simon, chin high.

Edward frowns. It’s better for Martin if he separates himself from Simon, but he doesn’t challenge it. “Light,” he calls, gesturing for a torch bearer to follow and stand next to him as he examines the body.

The shire reeve squats down and turns the dead man’s head to expose the deep and wide wound in his neck. “He either knew his attacker or never saw him coming,” he says. “There’s no sign of struggle but a lot of blood. Whoever did this got close and knew right where to stab him.”

The corner of my bloody handkerchief pokes out of a pocket in Edward’s

breeches, taunting me with the dead woman's thought that I couldn't hear. Proving Simon's innocence is the most important thing, yet I desperately need an explanation for that silence. I study my hands. Most of what was left of her blood came off in my descent down the wall, but some remains in the lines of my palm and around my fingernails. I don't think it's enough to test, even with lunar caustic.

There's little doubt whoever killed her also killed the guard at the bottom of the tower. If the body was stuffed under the stairs, there will be blood there.

Everyone has their back to the doorway, and I slip easily inside. After being in moonlight, the shadows are so dark I almost can't see with just the moonstone, but I follow the black smear on the floor from the man being dragged out from where he was hidden—only a short way from where Simon and I had stood waiting for Martin. The puddle under the curved staircase is substantial, as it couldn't soak into the stone and mortar as the woman's did into the wood above. How had I not smelled it? My mind must have been occupied with our conversation.

Then again, I can barely smell it now.

I squat next to the shallow pool, trying to shake the feeling that something is wrong with my magick. After a quick glance at the open archway, I extend my cleaner hand and dip my fingertips into the liquid. *What did you see before you died?*

The blood does not answer.

I flatten my hand to press it against the floor, immersing my skin as much as possible.

Nothing. No thought. No emotion.

Only silence. Just like the woman above.

I can't get her blood now, but I can get his. Pulling the corner of my cloak around, I touch it to the edge and let the crimson soak into the moonweave. I hate to desecrate an item of magick this way, but I see no better option.

Now I have to get back to the akademium. That lunar caustic I took from Haema Hespera will come in handy after all.

Rising to my feet, I wipe my hand as clean as I can above the solid stain and move quietly to the doorway. Everyone is focused on Edward and the body, and only Simon is still facing the tower. His eyes divert immediately to where I am, going so wide there's white all around his irises. I take a couple

cautious steps outside and three faces immediately turn toward me.

One of them is Edward. “Who the hell are you?” he demands, standing straight.

I freeze. Is someone behind me?

Hands all around him reach for weapons. The shire reeve also puts his hand on his sword hilt and advances. “You in the cloak!” he calls. “What are you doing here?”

He can see me.

“Cat,” Simon whispers urgently. “*Run.*”

CHAPTER 22

“Stop!” Edward shouts. “Stop in the name of the king!”

Not on my life. I sprint away along the top of the wall, my useless cloak flying behind me like a sail. To my left, the half-moon gives me magick to see by, but in my panic it’s not enough and I trip and stumble on the uneven stone. The commotion has drawn the attention of guards along the wall facing the river, and they run to intercept me.

The citadel is up against the Tamse River on one side, with a gate on the water itself for bringing supplies—and criminals—in by boat. It will be closed at this hour, and there’s no possibility of my reaching it before anyone on my tail or those trying to head me off. The city is close enough to the sea that the river levels are affected by tides, and with the moon rising, the water will be deeper.

I just hope it will be deep enough.

A small storage crate is against the crenelated wall, creating enough of a step that I don’t have to break my stride to get to the top and leap out into the open air. My arms and legs flail in a useless reflex as I fall down, down toward the silver and black surface several stories below. The cloak drags behind and above me, flapping loudly and choking my neck at the clasp. My feet hit first, and my upper body continues forward to slam into the water at an angle that drives the wind from my lungs. I sink under the waves, the force of my impact paralyzing me for several seconds but probably saving my life by keeping me from immediately inhaling water.

I struggle to the surface against the clothes and cloak weighing me down. The clasp comes undone as I break into the air, gasping, and I have barely enough awareness to grab the cloak before it floats away. Shouts and directions tell me the guards haven’t lost sight of me and won’t just let me go

—not that I expected them to. At least none were intent enough to jump off the wall after me. I almost discard the useless cloak as I stroke with one arm and kick through the water, but I don't want it found to identify me as Selenae. The tidal current thankfully carries me upriver faster than I could swim on my own. I head for one of the more sheltered docks as the citadel's gate begins to open with the creak of rusty gears and chains.

Moon above, this river stinks. The water is more than brackish in my mouth, and I spit it out, gagging. My senses are fully awake again. Their constant flickering over the last hour reminds me of my first experiments, moving in and out of moonlight without the benefit of a moonstone to provide magick in the shadows.

There are no ladders on the closest pier, but a number of ropes around the posts give me something to climb up. As soon the dock is eye level, I fling the cloak over my head to land on the wood with a wet slap. Then I heave my body up over the jagged edge and give myself a few seconds to breathe before rolling over and pushing to my feet and scooping up the sopping cloak.

The alarm at the citadel has spread to those walking the streets. A stitch in my side hampers me as I limp up the sagging planks, avoiding trip hazards easily this time, wringing water from the moonweave. My clothes are deep blue and black, the violet embroidery standing out only to me, but it marks me as Selenae. The Penthæmon will never forgive me for the trouble that would bring down on the community. My only choice is to sling the cloak back on my shoulders to hide my outfit as I run. I also pull the hood over my hair. The less anyone sees, the better.

“Stop!”

I run faster, heading for an alley between two warehouses, intending to climb the walls to the roof, but as soon as I'm inside, the space opens up to an outdoor storage with a thatched ceiling I wouldn't be able to punch through if I climbed a wall. It's also a dead end. I'm trapped.

“Got you!”

I freeze with my back to the panting form blocking the entrance. It's over.

The man steps in, holding his red lantern high. “Come out!” he calls. “Show yourself!”

What? I'm in plain view, several steps in front of him.

He pulls open the tinted glass door of his lamp, and the beam of light is

golden, brighter. He waves the lantern side to side. "Come out with your hands in plain sight!"

I slowly turn around to face him, ready to extend my hands from the cloak, palms up, but he looks right through me. Scowling, he steps forward, eyeing our surroundings. "I know you're in here."

I pivot to watch as he moves around the perimeter, poking lumps of canvas over boxes with his spear until another night watchman enters the area. "What are you doing?"

"Whoever climbed out of the river ran in here."

The other man grunts. "I didn't see that. He was going west when he disappeared."

"Like hell he was," the first guard growls. "There's a trail right there." He points to the water at my feet that dripped and leaked from my clothes and boots.

His companion steps forward, holding up a hand to block the direct lantern light, and I back away, careful to stay on the wet path that led to where I was standing. "I see it, but where did he go after that?"

"Damned if I know. Just vanished. Like a ghost." He peers into the dark rafters above. I keep moving toward the mouth of the alley, my eyes never leaving them.

The other shakes his head. "I'd say you were drunk again if I didn't see the water myself. How are we going to explain this?"

"We don't," says the first, lowering the lantern. "We never saw nothin'."

I reach the entrance and turn and run.

★ ★ ★

Even if I hadn't already missed the start of classes, my return to the akademium could not go unnoticed. The first sign that things will be worse than I expected is when the gate opens without any questions. The second is when a third guard appears, saying he's to escort me to the Penthæmon chamber, where Caerus is waiting.

"Did the archæmon say anything about my absence?" I ask as I follow.

The man doesn't even acknowledge my question. Between that and Simon being Moon knows where and in what condition, I'm ready to vomit by the time we reach the circular room. The iron-embellished doors close as Caerus

gazes at me from across the chamber, stroking the black stone on his knuckles. The only light comes from the moonstones in his throne-like chair. They must be removed and renewed with magick on occasion, or maybe the bloodstones between them keep them from draining.

“Schola Katarene of Collis,” he begins after a long silence. “You left the akademium grounds after sundown without telling anyone.”

I clear my throat. “I wasn’t aware that was necessary, Archaemon. I thought I was free to come and go, unlike Simon.” The thought of him stabs me in the heart. Was he in the gaol being questioned? I trust Edward not to use unsavory methods to get him to reveal information, but not every reeve and guard is as honorable.

“It isn’t required, technically,” Caerus admits, and I get a tiny relief from not having broken a rule there. “However, it’s dangerous for any of us to be about in the dark without someone knowing where they’ve gone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” I say. “I was with Simon.” Martin, too, but he wasn’t aware of my presence.

“And where is he now?”

I swallow. “In Londunium’s citadel.”

The archaemon glowers at me, but he doesn’t appear surprised. I suspect someone has been keeping track of Simon at every hour, and the commotion in the city could not have been unnoticed. “And why is that?”

“He was found in the presence of a crime, so he’s being held by a shire reeve. But he’s innocent.”

Caerus rises to his feet, thundering, “Are you saying the one Hadrian privy to our secrets is now being questioned by an outside authority?”

“He is *innocent*,” I insist. “And they have no reason to ask about his life here.”

“That is not reassuring. We—”

“We have a bigger problem,” I interrupt. “There were two dead bodies found, and I could read the thoughts of neither.”

Caerus sits down, silver-ringed eyes narrow. “How long had they been dead?”

“An hour, give or take. They were still warm and limp.” The rigidity that takes over muscles doesn’t happen for several hours.

The doors behind me swing open, and Caerus shifts his ire to the person entering. “You were not called, Hespera. I saw no reason to wake you for this

matter.”

“Yet I am awake and here, and I will stay.” The doors slam shut and the coroner strides around me to her chair but does not sit. “It would be most inappropriate for you to question a woman alone. What has happened?”

Caerus snorts like he’s insulted. “Katarene was wandering the streets at night with her Hadrian husband, who is now in custody of local officials, being questioned about two murders.”

Hespera pales slightly, but the harsh set of her mouth never wavers. “Why do you look and smell like you just crawled out of the Tamse, Catrin?”

For some reason I’m reluctant to tell them about the temporary failure of the moonweave cloak. “I ... it was the only way to get out of the citadel after the alarm was raised.”

“She also claims neither body spoke to her when she tried to listen,” says Caerus. “Can you explain that, Hespera?”

The coroner responds with her gaze locked on me. “I did tell you her blood magick was temperamental and often weak.”

Do not contradict me.

I startle at Hespera’s voice in my head, then realize there’s a small fresh cut on her thumb, oozing blood into the soft light. She turns to Caerus as she rotates her hand so the wound is in shadow before continuing, “As for Simon, he can remain where he is.”

“And if he reveals what he knows about us?” demands Caerus.

“Then I will handle it, as I have before.”

Panic clenches my throat. She’ll erase Simon’s memories like she erased Edward’s.

Hespera folds her arms, briefly exposing the cut again. *Stay calm, Catrin. I will get you out of here.*

“As for Catrin—” The coroner casts a disdainful glance in my direction. “I have matters to address with her.”

“Such as?”

“Theft from my office.”

I’d replaced the bloodstone I took with one of my own, so she must mean the lunar caustic. There had been over a dozen sticks in the jar, but apparently she kept count of them. I can’t help feeling I was set up—she knew I wouldn’t be able to resist experimenting with it on my own.

Caerus frowns. “A grave offense. Worthy of expulsion.”

At this point I only care about getting Simon out of the gaol—and now probably Londunium itself—with his memory intact.

Hespera's molten glare fixes on me. "I will give her a chance to either explain herself or prove her innocence," she says. A silent thought immediately follows: *Look contrite, you ninny.*

Anything to get out of this room so I can start planning our escape. I focus on my feet. The cold river has almost rinsed the murdered man's blood from the moonweave, but a shadow of the stain remains.

The archaemon humphs. "Go, Katarene, and answer Hespera's questions. Such things are not taken lightly, but extreme punishments must go through me."

Not a word until we get to my office.

Hespera stomps out, her wooden-heeled shoes echoing on the stone threshold. I keep my gaze on the floor and follow her skirt out of the room and through the maze of halls and tunnels she takes rather than walk across the courtyard. No other thoughts or instructions reach me, accidental or intentional. When we arrive at her office, the coroner produces a key from her skirt pocket and opens the door. She must have only given me a spare. I step into the stone-lit room and raise my head as she bolts us inside.

Now I have to escape this room.

She stalks toward her desk, then stops abruptly and pivots to me. "You didn't take my cloak."

I glance at the moonweave hanging over the back of her chair as she'd left it. "I ... no, I didn't. This is mine."

She didn't actually know about the lunar caustic. Relief weakens my knees. There was no reason for her to keep me here now.

Except Hespera points to the seat facing her desk. "Sit, Catrin."

"No." If I make her angry, maybe she'll throw me out.

She waves her hand like it doesn't matter and drops into her chair. "I was listening to what you told Caerus, about not hearing the blood of either dead body. When you said that, I knew I had to get you out of that room."

"Why?" I demand.

"Because your blood magick is far too strong for that to have happened."

I cross my arms defiantly. "I thought it was weak and temperamental."

"It is anything but." The coroner leans forward and puts her forearms on the desk, gesturing to the seat again. "Please, sit. I'm on your side."

Somehow I have my doubts, but I lower myself into the chair. Now that I'm not fleeing for my life, my limbs are shaking with exhaustion.

"Tell me what happened tonight."

"First promise me that you won't harm Simon, even if Caerus orders you to."

Hespera breathes through her nose for several seconds, the fingers on her right hand rubbing the white stones of the ring on her left. "I promise."

I'm not sure I believe her, but the last few hours have thrown everything I knew—everything I *thought* I knew—about magick into question. My descriptions are halting at first as I describe why I went to the citadel until the coroner's pointed questions make it obvious she already knew or guessed our intent. I tell her about the dead woman's empty mind, Edward taking the soaked handkerchief, climbing down the wall, and the silent blood under the stairs.

"Then you left Simon in their custody, not knowing where they would take him or what they would question him on?" she asks, incredulous. "With several more hours you could have moved about unseen?"

"That's just it, they saw me." My desperation for answers loosens my tongue, and now I'm spilling every detail. Hespera listens to my story of walking out and being spotted, jumping into the river and being seen by guards—and then *not* seen. I hold up the edge of my cloak. "Why did this stop working and then recover its magick?"

Hespera shakes her head, worry deepening her usual frown. "I have no idea, Catrin. That's never happened before."

Never happened before. The story of my life.

She sighs. "And all the blood washed out so you have nothing I can test on that matter."

"I'm sorry I was too busy fleeing for my life to save it for you," I reply sourly.

The coroner ignores my sarcasm. "The circumstances would be impossible to re-create completely, but there are places to start. I would begin by examining your cloak."

"What about Simon?" I press.

She taps her ring on the desk eight times before answering. "I will go to the citadel at dawn and see what I can learn."

"May I come?"

“No. You might be recognized.”

“It was dark,” I argue. “And I had my hood up. They didn’t get a good enough look at me.”

Hespera raises her eyebrows. “Are you willing to risk Simon’s life on that assumption?” When I hesitate, she concedes some ground. “You can wait outside, out of sight. It may be several hours before I can get them to release him, though.”

I startle. “Do you think you can?”

Her focus is on some point beyond me as her thumb twists the stones around her finger. “I still have some influence.”

CHAPTER 23

As she promised, Hespera petitions to enter the citadel as early as is reasonable. I stand in the shade of a house about a block away with the moon just visible so I can hear her speaking to the guards at the main gate. At first she tries to say Edward the shire reeve is expecting her, but they call her bluff and send for him to authorize her entrance. Their show of vigilance is likely because one of their watches not only let a murderer inside but to escape. The coroner has a slightly worried tilt to her brow as she clutches the handle of her medical bag with her ringed hand, but otherwise she appears completely calm.

That is, until Edward himself arrives. Hespera immediately drops her arms and clenches her free fist in her skirt, even as he smiles when he sees her.

“How is it you always know, Haema Coroner?” There’s a bit of an edge to his voice, but I don’t think it’s for her. After all, he has two dead bodies and his brother is under house arrest. Her arrival actually puts more spark in his eyes than I’ve seen before.

Hespera’s shrug is made small by her tense shoulders. “I assumed you were going to call me, and I would rather visit before moonset, so I didn’t wait for your message.”

The shire reeve glances up at the half-moon sinking in the western sky. “Then I’m grateful you came, and we can get this done in time for bed.” His back goes rigid and pink rises to the cheeks above his rust-colored beard. “I mean, so you aren’t troubled outside your hours. I know you’ve already been up for quite a while.”

At first I think that comment means he keeps track of the moon, but then I remember he was outside and on the wall and saw when the moon rose around midnight. He doesn’t look like he slept at all.

“Physicians are up at all hours with no regard to Sun or Moon,” Hespera replies.

“I’ll be glad for your expertise, Haema,” Edward says, turning back to the gate and offering his arm. Her own reflexively moves to take it, then shifts her bag to that side. He lowers his elbow with some disappointment, and she strides stiffly beside him into the citadel.

My anxiety prevents me from mulling over their rather interesting conversation after they disappear. It also wasn’t until now that I realized Hespera’s pretense for getting inside was to examine the bodies. I’d assumed her medical bag was for treating any injuries Simon had from being questioned, but it’s—mostly—for conducting autopsies. As the haema said, I’m in for a long wait.

Shops around me are opening for the morning, and I start attracting a few hopeful looks, like perhaps I was waiting for their goods in particular. When I don’t move to any tables, the expressions turn annoyed and a little suspicious. It would be best if I moved on, at least for a bit.

I wander the streets aimlessly, ignoring the hawkers calling after me to view their wares. The moon drifts in and out of view, lower each time, and I find myself following it until I catch sight of the city’s Sanctum towers rising above all others. I stop suddenly, overwhelmed by an unexpected feeling of longing.

Back in Collis, my entire life had revolved around the Sanctum and its expansion under Magister Thomas. Though we’d visited several others on the continent, Brinsulli was one place we never came, but this building had been the first he worked on—and the reason he was expelled from Londunium.

Curiosity restarts and quickens my steps as I dodge carts and storefronts to get to the main square at the end of the long building. When the facade comes into full view, it takes my breath away. Nothing can be as majestic as the one in Collis, in my opinion, but this is worthy of plenty of awe. I climb the steps with reverence, searching for signs of Magister Thomas’s influence, but he was only an apprentice and journeyman here. His master’s refusal to use any of his designs was what caused their argument, which turned physical. A punch in the nose might be forgiven, except that it occurred in the Sanctum itself, where drawing blood is absolutely forbidden.

Selenaë don’t go into places dedicated to the Sun, but my dark clothes are drying from their wash this morning, and I’m dressed more or less like

everyone else. I make it up the steps and to the grand arching doors of bronze before doubts plague me enough to make me pause. Not for the first time, I wonder which of these worlds I belong in—Sun or Moon—and whether choosing one means I have to completely shun the other.

My hesitation vanishes as soon as the scent of incense hits me, and then I'm drawn forward by the promise of beauty and comfort.

I am not disappointed.

The interior echoes with footsteps—those entering and leaving, as well as the faithful walking along the figure-eight-shaped marble path inlaid in the floor that traces Sun's yearly journey across the heavens. They pause in their miniature pilgrimage to chant prayers at the four corners of the seasons—north and south for the solstices and east and west for equinoxes. I'm tempted to join them for the peace the ritual will bring, but I see a familiar face sitting on a bench under a stained-glass window of one of the great martyrs.

Philippa looks up as I approach. "May I join you?" I ask.

"Yes, please." She waits as I lower myself carefully down to minimize the creaks I know will echo through the whole Sanctum. "I heard the woman who killed Uncle Hugh died last night, so she escaped execution."

"I heard the same." It's a small relief that she doesn't mention Simon, which hopefully means his involvement in last night's events isn't widely known, at least yet. "Does it bring any relief to know she won't hurt anyone again?"

Philippa sighs. "Some, but I still can't understand why a person would do anything so evil, and to so many." Her eyes drift to one of the colorful windows to our left. "It's silly, but I sometimes imagine my uncle's suffering as like one of the holies. At least then it has meaning."

The window depicts Sant Bartom la Ronce of Gallia, who was roasted like an ox on an open fire by unbelievers—not Selenae, though they're often lumped with other heretics, but those who were conquered by the Hadrian Empire. Despite the agonizing way to die, his face is serene as he gazes lovingly at the Sun. None of the other holy portraits along the nave are much less horrifying—beheadings, beatings with clubs, half-naked men pierced with arrows or bleeding from numerous stab wounds, torn apart by wild animals ... one was put in a barrel studded with nails and rolled down a hill over and over. All of their expressions through their torture are peaceful, however—something Magister Thomas's apprentice and I used to mock

when we were younger, imitating the placid countenances behind his back during services. I still think they're overly romantic, but I admire the windows as complex works of art. And the holies themselves, to be honest. Their faith in the face of such torture is inspiring.

Beneath the wave of homesickness, my sense of unease returns. Maybe I don't belong in the Selenae world, if the Sanctum still brings me such a sense of peace and belonging. Even Simon, who has little faith, is awed by such places.

"I've always loved this building," Philippa is saying, jolting me out of my musings. Her gaze follows the graceful lines of the vaulted ceiling. "No matter where I look, it draws my eyes upward, to the heavens. Sometimes I wonder if my father created such things."

I know he did, and worked in this very place. It's quite possible he sat in this actual spot. "Of course he did," I reply. "If he was an architect."

"Well, yes, but they don't just build Sanctums," she says. "They design houses and castles and bridges." Then Philippa sighs. "I wish I could have known him."

Was it only yesterday that I wrote that letter to Magister Thomas? It feels like a hundred years ago now. The folded envelope is probably still at the abbey where I wrote it, waiting in a chest of others set to cross the Narrow Channel to Gallia. I wonder if I should tell Philippa about him now, whether she'd be happy or angry at my meddling. "What would you say if you did meet him?" I ask cautiously.

She picks at her fingernails. "I would want to know what he did that hurt my mother so much, and why." Suddenly she clenches her fist. "And why, in all of that, we weren't important enough to him to stay, or to come back to us."

I hesitate. "You did say he might be dead."

Or perhaps he doesn't know you exist.

And truth be told, I don't know if Magister Thomas would have left his work at Collis's Sanctum if he did know, at least back then. I think he feels now it was a mistake not to follow Eleanor. And he was banned from Londunium for at least ten years. Maybe his wife came here so he *couldn't* come after her. The whole thing was complicated.

"Where is Simon?" asks Philippa, startling me out of thought for a second time.

The image of him sitting in the corner of a gaol cell, probably more worried about me than himself makes me clear my throat. “He’s with the reeves,” I answer. “Doing I’m not really sure what at the moment.”

She brightens. “Would you like to come back with me to the shop, then? I finished the dress last night.”

I did promise to come by today. The coroner will be busy with two autopsies for a while yet, but it seemed ridiculous to do such a thing while Simon was in prison. Hespera had been fairly confident she could get him released, and I wanted to be there when he was. After the conversation I overheard and what he almost said in the tower, we have a lot to talk about. I rather liked the idea of wearing something pretty for that discussion, but Simon probably wouldn’t be in a condition to appreciate it right away.

Finally, I sigh. “I wish I could, but I have to meet Haema Hespera soon, and I’m already in hot water with her. Being late will make things much worse.”

Philippa nods. “I understand. Everyone says the akademium is demanding and the instructors very critical.”

I grimace. “You have no idea how critical.”

★ ★ ★

When Haema Hespera crosses the drawbridge out of the citadel, she heads straight to where I’ve waited through two guard changes, though it’s not where she last saw me. Her face is pale as she thrusts her medical bag into my arms and gestures for me to walk with her.

“Where’s Simon?” I demand, shifting the wooden handles to my other hand and matching her pace with effort. The heat of the day has me sweating and woozy, and I’m more aware than ever of how long I’ve been awake.

“If you’ve been watching the gate, that’s a foolish question.”

He’s still in the gaol. “I thought you said you could get him released.”

The coroner eyes me sideways. “And you failed to mention he also impersonated a reeve.”

I’d completely forgotten about that. “He only did that so we could get inside to question the woman.”

“That is not a valid excuse under any reasonable law, especially considering he’d already been denied permission to do so.”

Which was exactly what Edward had told Martin. “So what will happen now?”

“The judicare will preside over all he’s accused of in a few hours.”

I stop. “He’ll be judged in a court? Where was your touted influence?”

Hespera halts and pivots to face me, anger further deepening the lines around her mouth. Instinctively I raise the bag in front of me like a bulky leather shield, and the instruments inside bang together audibly. “There are some things that could not be prevented,” the coroner snaps. “Having him cleared of suspicion in the proper, legal way is ideal. Even you should be able to see that.”

“But Edward is convinced of his innocence?” I press.

She flinches at the mention of the shire reeve. “Yes. He will testify as such and that all evidence points to an unknown, cloaked man being the perpetrator. In that sense, we’re lucky you were spotted. I was also able to establish the time of death for both bodies was two hours before Simon entered the citadel.”

Even with blood magick, I’ve learned such judgments are imprecise, based mostly on temperature and rigidity, which can vary widely due to several factors. The bodies were still quite warm when we found them, however, and less than an hour dead, I’m absolutely certain. She’d lied to Edward.

Hespera turns and continues up the street, and I lower the bag and follow with guilt forming a pit in my stomach. What she’d done was more than a breach of her professional integrity; it violated the trust of someone important to her.

“So Simon will be cleared of murder,” I say quietly. “What about the charge of impersonating a reeve?”

“He will plead guilty.” She holds up a hand to stop whatever protest I might make. “If Simon was willing to break the rules, he must be willing to face the consequences.”

I feel like that’s also meant to apply to me. “And what are the punishments for such crimes in Londunium?”

“Given that Martin provided the means and disgraced his office, harsher judgment will fall upon him. He’ll lose his position as a reeve at the very least.” Hespera waits for that statement to sink in. “Simon will likely pay a hefty fine and serve time in the gaol, which often comes with labor expectations.”

All because of me. I had suggested questioning the woman with bloodstones, and Simon in turn convinced Martin to enable us. Trust was violated all around, it would seem. “Do you have any idea what amount would be reasonable?” I ask. “Whatever I can’t pay, I’ll borrow.”

“You will do no such thing.” We’ve reached the akademium gate, and the two guards nod respectfully to the coroner while eyeing me with some hostility. “We cannot bring your connection to their attention. I had to act like I didn’t know him and had no interest in his fate, otherwise my testimony would have been suspect.”

The courtyard is completely bathed in sunlight, and I shade my eyes, which are watery for reasons other than the brightness. “And if he can’t pay the fine himself? What then?”

“They will release him but keep track of where he lives until he works off the debt.” Hespera pauses. “Until that is settled, we cannot allow him to stay on our grounds for the reasons I mentioned.”

But what about after? And how long would that be from now?

“Did you see him?” I ask softly, dreading the answer.

The coroner’s mouth curls up in what I might assume was sympathy, but I can only see part of her face, so I doubt it. “Yes. He is well. Edward managed to protect him from ... enthusiastic questioning, and will continue to do so.”

Relief briefly manages to fill the pit in my stomach. “Thank you.”

Hespera doesn’t acknowledge my gratitude. We stop at the outer doors of the building with the council chamber, and she faces me again. “I have to report everything to the Penthaemon now. You should get some rest.”

“Wait,” I say, clutching the bag in front of me again. “What about the bodies? Could you read their blood?”

Hespera’s eyes dart around, searching for anyone who may have overheard that, before responding in a low voice. “You will discuss this with no one except me, but no, I could not. Not with bloodstones, not even with lunar caustic.” She raises an eyebrow. “Though I seem to have misplaced my strongest bloodstone.”

It’s in my wardrobe, next to the lunar caustic. “I hope you’ll find it soon,” I say cautiously. “Maybe right where you thought you left it.”

The coroner snorts, but what’s almost a smile takes over half her mouth as she pivots back to the door and pulls it open. “I expect I will. In the meantime you can take my bag to my office, given you still have a spare key.”

As the door closes behind her, I suddenly realize not only had Hespera known exactly what Simon and I intended to do last night from the beginning, she'd given me unsupervised access to her supply cabinets with bloodstones and lunar caustic *and* her moonweave cloak. I just hadn't taken that last one.

What the hell kind of game was she playing?

CHAPTER 24

Somehow I manage to sleep until almost midnight, deeply at first and then dreaming of Martin being turned away from every possible employment. The tavern owners who used to offer him free meals now refuse to give him their scraps while his children and pregnant wife starve. Weary as I am, it's a relief to be roused from my nightmare by an insistent rapping on my door. Hespera stands in the dim passage, an even sterner expression than usual on her face as I struggle to recall whether I'd replaced her bloodstone.

"I have a message for you," she says brusquely, holding out a creased parchment. "Simon has been judged."

I seize the page and unfold it fully, recognizing Martin's handwriting immediately.

Haema,

Please tell Catrin that Simon has been sentenced to seven days in gaol with labor starting tomorrow and fined 60 shillings. I have found us both employment at Northgate Yard which will allow us to pay off our debts in about a month, though Simon cannot earn toward it until his release.

Please also offer my profound apologies to Catrin for what happened. I take full responsibility for Simon and his well-being and will return him to her as soon as possible.

*With gratitude,
Martin Wellys*

My eyes burn as Hespera takes the parchment back. Martin blames himself for everything. Not only that, but his signature lacks his title as reeve, meaning he's now officially lost the position he strove most of his life to achieve, and he's obviously also been fined if he has to work off a debt. And

Simon ... I dry my face on my sleeve. "How long before it will be safe for Simon to live here again?"

The haema snorts. "Until his debt is worked off at the very least. Much depends on the situation at that time, which could be worse. Caerus is most displeased."

That's not a comforting thought. "What is Northgate Yard?"

"A cemetery," she answers. "Grave-digging is not a popular profession, so it's more commonly done by those who can find no other employment."

Martin has been reduced from one of the highest occupations to the lowest. I swipe at the wetness that re-forms in my eyes.

"Moon is rising soon." Hespera's voice cuts through my wretchedness. "You should eat before lessons."

Anger replaces misery in an instant. "Do you really expect me to attend classes while Simon is in prison?"

"I expect you to continue the education that justifies your staying here, not to mention what your blood requires," is her cool reply. "And investigations into the cloaked man will extend to anyone who knew about the woman, which means both you and Simon are better off if you act like you have no connection or interest in his fate."

"Fine." I rub the back of my neck under my messy braid. "Just give me a day."

"No," Hespera says firmly. "You've already missed one night, and you need all the knowledge you can get if you're to find the killer."

I blink. "You don't think the woman was guilty?"

The coroner makes a noise of disgust. "You and I both know she wasn't, and she was obviously killed to prevent her revealing the truth." Hespera starts to turn away. "In the meantime, Haema Zosima is expecting you in the hospital in the next hour."

"But I haven't been here long enough to start shift work," I protest.

Hespera glances back. "I know, but we must accelerate your learning. In the absence of dead bodies to study, live ones will have to do." She faces away again and vanishes into the gloom of the passage. "One hour, Catrin. Don't be late."

★ ★ ★

For that night and through the next morning, I follow Haema Zosima almost everywhere. The second- and third-year students working in the hospital ward look at me oddly when I'm presented as mostly an observer, but they obey the order to answer any questions I ask. They do take some pleasure in making me do menial tasks like fetching bandages or the stomach-churning work of cleaning up bodily fluids. I have no time to dwell on Simon, which fills me with guilt whenever I remember where he is and what he's doing. Then my Selenae name is called, and I'm too busy again.

Zosima has surprising energy for a woman of six decades, but the benefit of being the head of injury treatment is that she mostly tells others what to do, supervising and occasionally consulting with Haemon Nestor when she suspects infection. I take notes for her then. Haema Maia is in charge of surgeries, but it isn't until midafternoon that the two of them have cause to work directly together.

We hear the commotion outside before the runner even gets to the hospital. Despite her exertion, the girl's face is pale as a linen sheet, the black kohl around her eyes stark against her skin. "Broken leg," she gasps. "Coming on a stretcher."

A few questions from Zosima reveal the girl knows nothing more. Her hands and apron are grimy with dirt, which means she was likely tending flower beds in the courtyard when someone picked her to alert the physicians. The haema expresses no dismay at the lack of details and points to a third-year student. "Surgery room three."

He knows exactly what she wants and hurries away. "Surgery?" I ask. "You already know that will be necessary?"

"No, but setting leg bones is better done in private, away from other patients." She makes for the front of the ward, toward the screaming now echoing in the doors. "And if surgery is needed, then we'll be in the right place."

A few seconds later, two burly Selenae men burst through the entryway, carrying the two poles of a canvas sling. On the stretcher is a young man, already hoarse from his agony, covered by a thin sheet. His lower left leg hangs over the side, but it appears fine.

"No signs of bleeding," Zosima mutters. She raises her arm to indicate where the men should go, and from the surgery room off to the side, two students beckon. As the stretcher pauses to change direction, the haema

catches up to them, and I'm right on her heels. "What happened?"

The older of the two men's faces is streaked with tears running through a thick layer of dust. "Run over by a wagon," he growls. "Damn Hadrians don't look where they're going." To the young man he carries, he says, "It's all right, son! We're at the hospital."

I don't think the boy hears him.

"What's his name?" asks Zosima. "How old is he?"

"Linus," the man answers over his shoulder. They pivot to go through the surgery doorway. "He's fifteen. My son."

Zosima sighs like the task just became more difficult. Inside the room, students gesture to a high, polished table, and the pair set the stretcher on top rather than try to lift the boy off it. The poles hang over either side, as does the unhurt leg, and the haema gestures for them to remove the sheet from over him. His injured right leg is clad in breeches and a boot, but the damage is obvious—the lower calf is bent at an impossible angle and the marks of a steel-clad wheel run across the wool and leather. Within seconds, Zosima's assistants are cutting it all away with scissors and a sharp hooked blade much like the one Hespera uses in autopsies. I didn't think it possible, but the boy's wailing grows louder.

The leg revealed looks even worse. His ankle is mangled in addition to the broken shin bones. Though there's still no blood visible, the skin of his calf is dark blue and shiny with swelling—the bleeding is within. Haema Zosima prods it gently as her students gather around. A third and fourth have joined, crowding me out. As they discuss what must be under the skin, the boy's father tries to soothe him. He's not very successful, but the noise decreases when he holds his son's face to his chest and muffles the cries. Kohl now runs through the tear tracks on his dirty cheeks as he looks up at me helplessly. "It would be unbearable even for someone who was used to it."

He means magick. At fifteen, the boy has only known the powerful senses gifted by moonlight since his initiation a few months earlier. The pain is a hundred times worse for him than it would have been a year ago.

"Katerene," Haema Zosima says loudly. "Please escort this man outside the surgery room and fetch Haema Maia. We need to operate quickly as blood vessels within are broken."

"But his pain—" begins the father.

"Will soon be lessened," Zosima assures him. "I promise. But you are too

dirty to be here; it could cause his death from infection.”

The man pales and lowers his son’s head back to the table, and the screaming and writhing increase again. I take the father’s arm and gently but firmly pull him toward the door, promising I will update him when everything is over. Haema Maia nearly runs into him as he shuffles out. She’s carrying a bag similar to Hespera’s autopsy kit. “It sounded like I might be needed,” she says.

“Your instincts are correct,” Zosima says. “Katarene, close and bolt the door.”

I obey, then move to stand by the table again. One of Haema Zosima’s team has wheeled high counters closer to hold surgery tools Maia begins laying out, while another sets up several large moonstones that illuminate the room as brightly as day. I suspect they don’t help the boy’s pain, though. He wears no moonstone—his father must have ripped it from his neck—but all the ones around him might as well put him in actual moonlight. The two other students begin strapping the patient’s body and limbs to rings on the underside of the table. It looks cruel, but I imagine him moving during the procedure would be disastrous.

Meanwhile, I’ve done nothing to help. Can do nothing. “What should I do?” I ask.

“Hold his hand,” Zosima says. “Use this.” She tosses a flat bloodstone at me, and I catch it. “Let us know if anything goes wrong in his thoughts, if he goes into shock.”

“First things first,” Maia mutters. Leaving all her instruments near his mangled foot, she steps up to his head, holding a voidstone. She hovers over his face and presses it to his neck. “You must dull your senses...” She glances up at me.

“Linus,” I say.

Maia nods her thanks. “Yes, Linus. I know it’s difficult, but you must push everything you can into this stone. Only then can we proceed.”

The boy shakes his head as much as he can with a restraint across his temples, his teeth now clenched so hard I worry he’ll crack them. “It’s too much,” I tell her. “He can’t grasp his senses enough to wield any control.”

His blood didn’t tell me that so much as shriek it. My head aches from his mental anguish, but I hold his hand tighter.

“He’s young,” adds Zosima. “Not experienced enough.”

“I still want him to try,” Maia says.

“We don’t have time for that,” Zosima snaps. “Do what you must.”

Maia removes the voidstone from his skin with a frown. “There are risks.”

“They’re smaller than that of him bleeding to death in the next ten minutes.”

“I know.” Maia drops the stone on the high table and picks up a black-edged scalpel. “I wish I didn’t have to do this.” Without another word, she uses the tool to carve deep into the boy’s calf.

Linus’s body suddenly goes limp, but more disturbingly, his thoughts abruptly cease. “Haema!” I yell. “We’ve lost him!”

Maia lifts the blade from the long cut, and the boy’s mental cries return, softer, and his body tenses again, though less than before. I stare at him. Had he just *died* for a second?

“Thank you,” Zosima says.

With a sigh, Maia addresses the waiting students. “Your priority is to stop the bleeding of the torn blood vessel. If you’re fast enough, we can reset the bone, too, before the pain catches up to him.”

The students are a blur of motion, handing each other sharp knives, pulling back skin and muscle, and mopping up the dark red blood spilling out of his leg. Meanwhile, the boy whimpers, and I squeeze the bloodstone against his hand. His mind is flowing again, though everything is unorganized, just a haze of pain. The only barely coherent thought I can get is that he wants his mother. I gape at Haema Maia. “What did you do to him?”

She holds up her cutting tool, allowing me to see the edge isn’t metal, it’s stone.

“You voided him?”

Maia wipes the voidstone blade on a towel. “Not my preferred way to dull pain, but he was unable to put his senses in the stone himself. It brings everything down to what a Hadrian would feel, but it’s so much less than it was that it may be enough if they hurry.” She glances at the students working together to find and stop the source of the bleeding deep inside. “Clamp that vein lower,” the haema tells them. “It will give you more flexibility in sewing it closed. And use the finest thread we have. The stitches must be as close together as you can make them.”

I crane my neck to see what they’re doing, but what little I can glimpse makes me glad I can’t view anything more. Everyone takes turns in the steps,

though. Selenae only use sutures to close wounds in extreme, emergent cases—bloodstones next to most cuts will have them healed in a few hours—so this is experience the students are eager to get. From the sound of it, Linus’s mother has arrived and is outside the door, sobbing in the arms of her husband.

“Why were you so reluctant to void him?” I ask. “It worked well.”

Haema Maia answers me with one eye on the surgery. “Because it will cause complications later. Bloodstones will be nigh useless in speeding up his healing without reawakening the magick in his blood.”

Doing so requires direct exposure to moonlight. “Because the moon won’t rise again for another twelve hours?”

“That’s the least of our problems,” Maia replies. “Even in a waning crescent as we are now, the shock can be fatal. The restoration is worse than the initiation, even for a healthy person, and he is weakened.”

And the first moon is usually terrifying. My cousin, Athene, said most initiates are crying in the shadows within minutes, and many vomit. Something in the back of my mind is nagging me, but I’m distracted by a memory of when I voided myself accidentally. I’d cut my arm with the voidstone I was using to slash through a rope, but then I’d renewed my magick in three steps out of necessity—and instinct. “What if you used moonstones to partially restore his magick first?” I ask. “Or exposed him to moonlight through colored glass, muting it?”

Maia shakes her head as she gestures to the bright moonstones in sconces around the room. “Interesting thought, but you can see moonstones aren’t enough, otherwise his magick would already be recovering.”

“But what if you touched a stone to his blood?” That’s how I’d done it. It was frustrating at the time to not regain everything, but now it seems that may have saved me from a bad reaction.

“You know, that might work,” Haema Zosima says from where she palpates the misshapen ankle. That will have to be set, too, when they’re done with the splintered calf.

Maia shrugs. “It’s worth trying when the time comes.”

The boy suddenly faints, his thoughts fluttering and fragmenting into shapes and colors. Haema Maia notices his body going limp and smiles a little. “It’s about time. Teenage boys can be so stubborn about bearing pain, but they eventually succumb.” She bends down and raises the uninjured leg

still hanging off the side and sets it on a stool so it's a little higher than the rest of his body, then pulls a wool blanket off a shelf and lays it over his upper half before looking at me. "Why did I do that?"

"To prevent shock," I answer, and she nods in approval. Linus's thoughts are now sludge-like as he goes deeper into unconsciousness, trickling to me through the bloodstone. "How will I know if that happens?"

"His mind will freeze and thoughts will cease flowing."

"Like before?"

Maia frowns. "What do you mean 'like before'?"

The nagging feeling is back and growing stronger. "When you voided him, all his thoughts disappeared completely like he'd died for a second, except the dead hold their last thought."

"Ah." Haema Maia understands now. "That was the effect of voiding. Once the voidstone was removed from his flesh, it was no longer absorbing those thoughts. With shock, they will go still, like a painting, whereas death makes it echo."

I barely hear the last part. Because now I know what happened to the woman on the citadel tower.

CHAPTER 25

Hespera barely glances up from a large tome as I barge into her autopsy room. “I heard there was a dramatic surgery you got to witness this afternoon.” She scrunches her nose as she runs a finger down the page. “Smells like a bloody one. You’re lucky. Some students wait months before —”

“I know why the blood was silent,” I interrupt, my exhaustion from the endless day forgotten.

The haema relaxes her hand and sits back. “Indeed?”

“They were voided.”

Hespera frowns. “Both the woman and the guard were Hadrians.”

“Yes, but they still have thoughts in their blood.” I explain what happened with the boy. “Everything vanished for those few seconds—all thought, all emotion—but when Haema Maia lifted her voidstone blade, it all resumed, though much quieter.”

The coroner closes her book with a snap, eyes wide. “But, unlike him, the victims at the citadel had no more thoughts to follow that emptiness.”

I nod, relieved at her immediate acceptance. “I’d even wager they were killed with a voidstone knife, so no blood that was spilled would have anything, either.”

Hespera stares into space. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that, but I’ve never used a voidstone on a dead body. Almost wish I had a corpse now to test it on.” Then, to my amazement, she focuses on me and smiles. “Good work, Catrin.”

My mouth drops open. “I ... I still don’t understand why the cloak failed, though.”

“That’s actually obvious now,” the coroner says. “Everything was fine

until..." She pauses expectantly.

I inhale sharply. "Until I soaked the corner of it in blood."

"Exactly. Moonweave fabric holds magick within its fibers. The voided blood drew that magick out."

"And the river water washed the blood away," I finish.

Hespera rises to her feet from her stool. "You were fortunate the moon was up and it restored the magick as if it were a voided person. Otherwise you would be in the gaol, too."

I feel like dancing, even if the discovery won't help Simon. The coroner's expression keeps my feet firmly on the ground, however. "What's wrong?"

She pinches her pale lips into a thin line. "Think, Catrin. What does this mean?"

I hadn't thought beyond solving the mystery. Now I realize what happened had to be deliberate—done by someone who knew exactly what needed to be hidden from us, and how to do it. "The killer is Selenae."

"Or someone who knows our secrets. I don't know which is worse."

She can't possibly mean Simon, but I'm sure the news will only make Caerus more paranoid. "At least this narrows the list of possibilities," I say. "How many Selenae are there in the city?"

"About two thousand," she answers. "Plus perhaps two hundred in the surrounding countryside. We can eliminate half as they're female, then another third as too young or too old to be the killer."

I do the mental math and then let the number eight hundred sink in. Much smaller than Londunium as a whole, but I have no doubt if we start questioning people in the Quarter, the killer will hear about it before we get close to him. A long, slow breath escapes me. "How do we tell the reeves about this?"

"We don't." Her fingers twist her ring as they do whenever a conversation brushes against Martin's brother Edward. "We say nothing."

Nothing? "Why?" I ask. "We don't have to explain how we know."

"Because it's an invitation for disaster," she snipes back. "In Queen Maude's time, there was a rumor a Selenae had killed a Hadrian child, and a mob burned down all the Quarter and half the akademium—including the hospital—and almost a hundred of us died, which is why we have the treaty that now protects us. If word of this gets out, there will be another massacre, treaty or no." The coroner shakes her head. "We'll have to handle this

ourselves, before the Hadrians find out.”

“What about Simon?”

“Simon isn’t here,” the haema snaps. “Something you need to accept.”

Like hell I will. Fury rises in me so fast my vision blurs. For several seconds, it’s all I can do to keep from bursting into tears.

When I’m able to focus, I find Hespera’s stern eyes fixed on me. “That’s not the first time your feelings have overwhelmed you. As a physician you must be able to put passion aside and think quickly. Lives may depend on it.”

Simon had talked about pushing emotion behind a mental wall to think dispassionately about horrible crimes in order to solve them—and how I was what kept him from going too far and sealing himself off completely. It strikes me that the coroner is a perfect example of the deadened soul he was afraid of becoming. I cross my arms. “Then perhaps I shouldn’t be one.”

Her eyes widen almost imperceptibly in the soft light. “Don’t be ridiculous, Catrin. You belong here.”

“I belong wherever Simon is.”

My answer takes her aback. “You would give this all up?” She sweeps her hand around to indicate the akademium. “You would turn your back on powers stronger than anything we’ve had in generations? On the chance to become the greatest physician among us and possibly save the magick of our entire culture?”

It’s my turn to be stunned. She doesn’t even know the full extent of what I can do—or does she? “Do you really believe I have that much power?”

“I know you do, Catrin,” she says. “Which means you have a decision to make.” Hespera clasps her fingers to cover the ring on her left hand and lowers her voice to where I can barely hear it. “And if you choose that boy over us, we will have no choice but to cast that power into the void.”

He’s not just “a boy,” he’s *Simon*. I know what his reaction to this ultimatum would be, too. He’d do anything to keep me from throwing my magick away, especially over him.

Even if it broke him to let me go.

“How long do I have to decide?” I whisper.

She shakes her head in disgust, as though the debate itself is ridiculous. “At least until he’s released from the gaol next week.” The coroner pauses. “But do not speak a word of what we’ve discovered to anyone. As long as Simon is in Hadrian custody, Caerus’s primary concern will be keeping our secrets,

and any distractions put all of us in danger.” When I don’t respond for a few seconds, she presses, “Do you understand me, Catrin?”

“Yes, I understand.”

I understand I need to be ready to leave as soon as Simon is free.

CHAPTER 26

There are matters I need to take care of first, however. I'm too tired—and covered with blood—to visit Philippa that afternoon, but the next day I ask Zosima if I can leave the hospital an hour before moonset. To my surprise, she has no objection.

“By the way,” she calls to my back. “Twelve hours is plenty for an active shift. I don't care what Haema Hespera says, you're only an observer so your absence is not a burden, and you can't learn if you're exhausted. Come back rested.”

It's nice to be treated like a human being.

I make my way through the streets, taking note of places I could buy traveling supplies. Where would we go, though? I need to discuss our next move with Simon.

Philippa is closing up her shop as I arrive. The donation box and mourning banner are still by the door. Her uncle died more than ten days ago, but the funeral was only eight so they will remain a bit longer. I call her name right before she shuts the door, and when she sees me her face lights up.

“Come in, come in!” she says, holding the lower half of the door open. “I was getting worried that you hadn't come.”

“Sorry.” I duck into the cool shade of her front room. “I've had to work in the hospital. We all do.”

“That's all right. Did you hear about Martin Wellys, the reeve?” she asks in one breath.

My stomach twists. “Some of it. What happened?”

Philippa latches the door behind me. “I'm not sure, it's been very mysterious, but there was some sort of incident at the citadel the night before they were supposed to execute that woman. He's lost his position.”

Not a word about Simon—yet. “I’d also heard that.”

She walks to the back room. “His neighbor came by this morning, collecting coins for his wife and children.”

“That’s good to hear.” Also, heartbreaking.

“I gave as much as I could. Uncle Hugh would have wanted it.” The tailor pulls the cover off the frame in the corner. “Well, here it is! What do you think?”

The dress is even lovelier than I remembered. In the evening light coming through the window, the crimson and deep orange ripple like flames as my eyes trace the designs. It takes my breath away.

“All the laces are in the back,” Philippa is saying. “So you can see as much of the texture work as possible. And I added some extra embroidery.” She pauses shyly. “Do you like it?”

I can’t even form words, but she seems to understand. I count out the coins of the price we agreed on and hand it to her, and she tucks it in her apron with a sly smile. “I wish I could see Simon’s face when he sees you in this the first time.”

“What?” The mention of him hits me physically. “How did you know about us?”

She grins back at me. “Was it supposed to be a secret?”

“Not exactly.” I rub the bondmark on my wrist. “But we wanted to be discreet. What gave us away?”

“That day you first came, he kept looking at you, and when you asked if I could make you a dress, your eyes went straight to him.” She shrugs. “You’re Selenae, but you’re obviously uncomfortable with it. I figured it was over him. That maybe this dress was a step toward leaving their community.”

Philippa is more perceptive than I realized. “It’s much more complicated than that,” I mutter.

“I don’t think it would be that difficult to figure out,” Philippa says as she lifts the dress off the frame and lays it on a table to fold. “If you love someone it should be enough to weather whatever storms come your way.”

Ironically, we’re both living proof of how naive that thought is. The storms that came destroyed my parents and broke hers beyond repair. It was a warped vision of love that set Lambert on his murderous path. Perhaps that last is unfair—you can’t judge something by an example that doesn’t meet the true definition.

But that reminds me of the other reason for my visit. “Philippa, I came here mostly to tell you something.”

“Oh?” She tucks the ends of the dress into the folds.

There’s no easy or delicate way to put it. I force the words out. “I know your father.”

Philippa stops tying a wide ribbon around the bundle and stares at me blankly. “What?”

“When you told me about your parents the other day, I realized who your father was. He’s the master architect in Collis.”

She shakes her head. “That’s impossible.”

“I know him, Philippa. I used to work for him. Sometimes you look just like him.”

The face she’s making now could be mapped onto his expression of confusion. “No,” she insists. “You’re wrong. My father is dead.”

“You said yourself that your uncle never told when he died. That’s because he didn’t.”

“How in the world could you know that?”

“Because Magister Thomas’s wife’s name was Eleanor,” I say. “She left him and came back to her family in Brinsulli. They were married here, in the Sanctum, while he was working on it in his apprentice years. You said yourself that your mother hates Londunium and the Sanctum. That’s why.”

Philippa sits down heavily on a low stool, dazed. “It could all be a coincidence, what you’re saying.”

I pull Magister Thomas’s letter out of my skirt pocket. “Read this and tell me if you still think so. It’s a message he wrote to his wife. I promised I would try to find her while I was here.”

Her hands tremble as she breaks the wax seal and opens the pages flat. I wait, gnawing on my lower lip, as she reads, sometimes going over a paragraph more than once. When she reaches the end, a pair of teardrops fall on his signature as she lowers the parchment. Her voice is a wisp I’m not sure I could hear without my senses. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

My shoulders sag in relief. “You believe me now?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “He talks about Therese. My sister. Mother still weeps for her.” Her voice grows stronger, bitter. “But he doesn’t mention me at all.”

“He doesn’t know you exist,” I say. “Your mother must have left while she

was pregnant. She never told him. Maybe she didn't even know herself."

"If that's true, it's his own fault," Philippa says dully. "He talks about neglecting her and working all the time while she cried herself to sleep every night. It's no wonder she left."

I want to say that was a long time ago, but the wound is fresh and painful to her. She'll need time to forgive him. "I know he'll want to make things right with you."

Philippa refolds the letter and stands, wiping her eyes. "I'm not sure I want anything to do with him, but I'll have to tell Mother. Let her decide whether to write to him."

I bite my lip. In the last few minutes I've realized I crossed a line I shouldn't have. "That's another thing, Philippa. I already told him."

She narrows red-rimmed eyes at me as I rush through my confession.

"I wrote him a letter the day I realized who you were. It's on its way across the Narrow Channel by now."

"You *what*?"

"I was excited. I wasn't thinking." I raise my hands, palms out, pleading. "I got caught up in the idea of how happy he would be to know your mother was alive and you were here. He's been like a father to me."

"And you think that makes us what? Sisters?" She spits the word at me. "How dare you think you had the right?"

"I know, and I'm sorry. If I could get the letter back I would, but it's too late."

Philippa crushes the parchment in her fist. "Get out of my house."

It's what I deserve, so I can't argue. I reach for the dress that's not quite tied up, but she steps in front of it. "No, this isn't for you anymore. I'll set fire to it before I let you have it. Get out."

Tears blur the room as I stumble to the door and through the front workshop. Philippa follows, picking up a spool of thread from a basket and hurling it at me as I yank the bolt across. The box of coins clatters as I fling the door open, startling a bald, middle-aged man who was making a donation. He jumps out of my way as I escape onto the street. A second and third spool fly after me, but I turn back, pleading. "Philippa, please. I really am sorry."

She stands in the doorway and reaches into her apron pocket. "Don't ever come back here again," she says, then throws my payment at my feet.

The sound of the coins hitting the packed dirt makes heads turn, but I don't

care. “Will you at least give your father a chance when he comes?” I beg. “Because he will. I know it.”

“No, he won’t,” Philippa says coldly. “My father is dead.”

The door slams shut so hard the mourning banner comes off its hooks and flutters to the ground in front of the man. After a long moment, I turn and walk away, leaving the money behind for the beggars and street urchins, who scramble to pick it up.

CHAPTER 27

The coroner is pacing inside the gate when I return to the akademium. “There you are,” she snaps. “One of the advantages of you working in the hospital is that I know where to find you. A few more moments, and I would’ve had to leave without you.”

“Where are we going?” I ask, then realize she’s holding her autopsy bag. “Has there been another murder?”

“So it would seem, though the few details I have don’t make much sense.” She shoves the kit at me as she goes by, and I fumble to adjust to the weight as I turn to follow. It feels bulkier and heavier than usual.

“How did you hear about it?”

“A note from Martin Wellys, of course.”

But his brother specifically forbade his involvement in any investigations. “How does he know about it?”

“Because he was smart enough to figure out a way to keep himself and Simon aware of suspicious deaths. Think about it.” Haema Hespera glances sideways at me, but I have no idea what she’s referring to.

After ten steps and an increasingly exasperated expression, she tells me. “They’re gravediggers, Catrin. Simon and Martin are getting a good look at practically every body that goes into the ground.”

That was brilliant. It also makes me feel slightly better that he chose the grisly work rather than it being the only job he could find after having his reeveship stripped from him. My heart flutters against my ribs. “Will Simon be there, too?”

The coroner makes a noise of disgust. “I imagine he will be. And if you don’t promise here and now not to make a spectacle of yourself, you can turn around and go back home.”

“I won’t.” It will be impossible to tell him about my forming a plan for us to leave if she’s around. “I’ll act as though I don’t even know him.”

My steps are lighter anyway.

Our progress through the street is slowed by wagons and carts but when we exit the northerly gate and stay on the road heading to the other hospital, we’re able to walk much faster. It still takes us an hour, and the sun is low in the sky. Funerals are held at dusk; once the soul of the deceased has followed our Sun over the horizon and into the Beyond, the body can be buried.

“What do you know about this victim?” I ask when it’s finally unlikely we’ll be overheard.

“Same as the others. A man,” Hespera answers. “From what Martin said in the note, wild animals got to the body, which will make our job more difficult.”

It also means the man didn’t die recently. “How long ago do they think he was killed?”

“Yesterday. He was found this morning.”

Well, that at least was better for an autopsy. But it also meant if we’d managed to find out who the real killer was from the woman, this man would still be alive.

Simon and Martin are resting under an oak tree in the corner of the cemetery, waving reed fans to ward off the lingering heat of the day. Next to them stands the forest reeve we met the day of the fire—Roger, I think his name is.

Hespera and I can’t help scrunching our noses as we approach. Both Simon and Martin reek of the sweat that soaks their shirts, but worse is the scent of decay in various stages wafting up from the rows of low earthen mounds. I wonder if she’ll void her sense of smell, even with an autopsy to perform. I might, except I’ve forgotten to wear my voidstone bracelet again. A peek at the coroner’s arm tells me she doesn’t have one, either. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen the silver circlet with a black stone on her wrist since that first day.

Simon meets my gaze almost immediately, and his worried expression eases into something more neutral when he sees I’m all right. The last time he saw me, I was jumping off the citadel wall into the river several stories below. His clothes are much dirtier than Martin’s, owing to his accommodations in the gaol and not being able to change his outfit. The

jacket with the ripped sleeve lies on the ground, its tear crudely mended. I search for bruises or signs of injury, but it seems Edward was as good as his word in keeping him safe from “enthusiastic” questioning, as Hespera called it. I want to find a way to ask if he’s truly well without making the haema angry with me, but I settle for a slight smile and a nod, which he returns.

The coroner watches our subtle interaction like a hawk, then gets right to business. “Where is the body?”

“Not here yet,” answers Roger.

Martin comes to his feet. “But the two others to be buried at sunset have already arrived, so it should be any minute.”

Hespera frowns. “Does this mean you haven’t actually seen it yet?”

Simon’s rise is much slower than Martin’s. He’s not used to such hard work, and the last two days have made him sore. “Only Roger has seen him, but he insists that something is wrong, and we trusted that.”

“How so?” the haema asks. “What happened to him?”

“Looked like he was torn apart by wolves,” Roger replies, using the same calm monotone as the day I met him. “But he wasn’t.”

“What does that mean?”

The forester shrugs. “It means he had bites from a wolf, but they weren’t right. I’ve seen wolves attack, and I’ve seen what they’ve left behind. This wasn’t that.”

“Over there.” Martin nods toward the cemetery gate. A somber group has arrived, carrying a wrapped body on a stretcher similar to the one Linus arrived on at the hospital. Behind it walks a pale woman holding the hands of two children. Both are too young to understand what’s going on, because they keep asking when their papa will be there. The widow doesn’t answer, only glances to the holy Sun in relief. When they all stop at the last open grave, the little ones collapse to sit on the ground, exhausted by their long walk from the city. They were probably the reason the procession was almost late.

As the bottom edge of the sun touches the treetops on the horizon, all three funeral groups begin singing. Like the familiar nursery rhyme, the tunes are the same used in Gallia, and it makes me wonder if we should return to the continent we know better than this island. Maybe to southern Gallia or Doitchlend. Does Simon speak Doitch? Half his family comes from there, but I never asked. My grasp of the speech is passable.

The song is designed to last as long as it takes for the sun to sink completely below the horizon. They seem to sing it slower than I'm used to, but it might be my impatience that makes it feel that way. When it's over, people wipe their eyes and begin making their way to the road. I'm sure none of them want to be outside the city when it's fully dark. The widow sighs and urges her children to get up again, and of course they protest. Two of the men who carried her husband scoop them up, while a third takes her arm. She must also be spent, as she leans on him heavily as they walk out.

A fourth lingers for a moment, looking over at us. In an odd coincidence, I recognize him as the man who was at Philippa's door when she threw me out a few hours ago. He's not entirely bald as I'd thought. There are fringes of dark brown hair around his ears, though they're cut close to his head. In the twilight, his eyes are dark pits in his face.

Next to me, Haema Hespera inhales sharply through her nose. They hold each other's gazes for a few seconds; then the man's mouth twists up in a half smile. The coroner doesn't respond as he dips his head and pivots away to follow the group he came with back to the road.

I'd ask her how she knows him if I thought I'd get the truth.

Martin reaches for his shovel. "I'll get the other two while the rest of you inspect the body."

"I'll help you." Simon picks up his own.

"No, go with them." Martin waves him away. "It won't be light much longer and the guard will be here to take you back soon."

Simon joins us in walking to the hole in the ground. I stare at Simon's free hand as he carries the shovel in the other. It's streaked with blood from scratches and blisters that have broken open. "Are you all right?" I blurt out.

Hespera glares at me from where she stops and holds out her hand expectantly. Oh, she wants her bag. I give it to her, and she squats to open it. "Worry about him later."

Does that mean I'll have permission to dress his wounds when we're done?

After making sure the man's family are far enough away that they won't see what we're doing, Simon and Roger unwrap the body and lay it flat again. I shudder at what's revealed. Barely an inch of his skin hasn't been torn open by teeth marks, though his head was mostly spared. The frozen expression on his face leaves no doubt as to the pain he was in.

"Do you know his name?" the coroner asks the men as she hands me a

writing board and parchment, then a sharp stick of charcoal.

“Alan Pounce,” Roger answers. “Worked as a carpenter.”

The smell of sawdust is deep in the man’s clothes and hair, so that’s not a surprise. I scratch out the information at the top of the page. Haema Hespera has her own notes, and she sketches the man’s wounds on a pre-drawn outline of a male body as I record her words. “Ligature marks on ankles, knees, and elbows are deep, indicating he struggled against some binding.”

“Large bruise on the back of his head,” adds Simon. The corpse is so stiff that we have to turn his whole body up to see the colorful swelling. “Happened several hours before he died.”

“Agreed.” Hespera gestures for Simon and Roger to set the man back down and prods the ripped, graying flesh with a wooden tool. “These wounds are also prior to death; you can tell they bled freely.” She gives Roger a pointed look. “It seems obvious what happened to me. He was hit on the head, tied up, and left for the wolves. Murder one degree removed.”

“Yes, but this isn’t how wolves attack.” Roger speaks with an enthusiasm not present before. “Almost all the bites are on the arms and legs, and they aren’t deep enough. The animal also pulled back straight, rather than twisting and wrenching.” He points to the man’s neck. “You can tell this was one of the last wounds, but a wolf goes for the throat first.”

“Maybe the man was curled up to protect his head,” I say. “His face is almost untouched.”

The forester shakes his head. “If that were so, there’d be bites on the back of his neck and head, puncturing the skull, and there’s none of that.”

I’m not ready to let go of my idea yet. “Perhaps he had some sort of helmet or armor on.”

“Could’ve been,” Roger concedes. “Except that his gut is also pretty intact. Once their prey is down, the soft innards are the first thing that gets eaten. Usually, entrails are strung out everywhere. Wolves kill for food, not sport, and he weren’t eaten at all.”

“Unless the animals were interrupted,” suggests Simon.

Roger pokes a stiff arm in the rapidly fading light. “Then there’s these teeth marks. Why aren’t the forearm bones under them shattered? It’s almost like the wolf’s jaw was unable to bite with much force.”

Hespera has been measuring distances between punctures. “All exactly the same,” she murmurs. “Don’t wolves hunt in packs?”

“Mostly, yes.” Roger sits back on his haunches. “A single one alone isn’t unheard of, however.”

Simon folds one arm across his stomach and braces his elbow on it as he taps his chin. “Was the man tied up when he was found?”

“No, just laid where he died. The ground was soaked in blood.”

It would’ve been dangerous for the killer to have watched, unless he was in a tree or something. “Maybe he chased the wolf away.”

Roger shrugs. “Possible, but it would’ve come back. The area he was found didn’t have any of the marks of an attack, neither. No signs of dragging and struggle in the brush, no fur, no paw prints, no droppings anywhere. Just one bloody handprint on a tree.”

I startle. “A handprint on a tree?”

“A little above the ground, slapped on the bark like this.” Roger holds his hand at an angle, fingers up. “Like he grabbed at it right before he died.”

“How could he have done that if his hands were tied behind his back?” I ask.

Simon looks straight at me. “I’ve been thinking the killer cuts the bonds right before they die, once they’re too weak to resist anymore.”

He’s asking if I recall that from having lived Hugh Bolton’s last minute. I nod. The rope across the tailor’s chest had been to hold him upright and breathing, not to restrain him.

Simon takes Roger’s arm and leads him out of earshot. “Can I ask you a few questions while the haema and her assistant finish up?”

The coroner has completed her drawings. “No real point in cutting him open,” she mutters. “It’s obvious what killed him. I’ll have to take the forester’s word on the odd nature of the attack. Give me your notes.”

I hand them over, and she studies what I’ve written. “You didn’t record much.”

“Is there anything you’d have me add?”

“Not at the moment.” She tucks my pages and hers back into the bag. “I haven’t actually touched his blood yet but I suspect it was voided.”

The body is two days old. Bloodstones alone won’t be enough. “Do you want me to check?”

“Please. I would need lunar caustic at this point, but I don’t think you will.” Hespera keeps her voice low. “I suggest the back of the head, where blood has pooled.”

It feels strange for the haema to simply state—and accept—that I can do things she can't. I will my stomach's contents to stay in place as I obey.

Nothing.

When I tell Hespera she merely nods and hands me a wet handkerchief to wipe my fingers on. "Now to find and test the handprint."

"The one on the tree?" That blood could provide a glimpse into what happened *before* his last thought—and only the haema and I can interpret it.

"Yes." Hespera thrusts her bag into my arms as we stand but then reaches in to pull out a folded parchment—Simon's map of the forest marking where all the bodies had been found. "You have until I've established where that is to treat your Hadrian's wounds."

I yank Simon away as he and the forester return, taking him back to the graveside so he's where he should be if anyone comes looking for him. It's getting darker by the second, but that's not a problem for me. Across the cemetery, Martin has lit a lantern and moved on to burying the second body. Simon sits on the edge of the hole he and Martin dug, feet dangling, while I sort through the coroner's bag, finding a basic medical kit with all the autopsy tools. Also, her moonweave cloak, which is why it was heavier and bulkier than usual. "Give me your hands."

Simon holds them out, fingers relaxed. "This is familiar, though reversed."

He's referring to the night I escaped from the killer in Collis—Lambert—who had chased me up the Sanctum scaffolding and left me bleeding and soaked in cold rain. I ran to Simon with a deep cut from broken glass across my palm, which he bandaged.

I shake my head at the torn and dirty skin. "This is a recipe for infection, especially if you go back to that filthy gaol."

"I'm afraid I don't have a choice."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry I got you into this." I pour lunar caustic dissolved in water on a scrap of bandage. "Wipe this all over your hands. We don't have time to clean them properly, but this will burn away infection, as long as it's minor."

"Don't want to hear my thoughts?" he asks, taking the dripping cloth.

I do and I don't, but I busy myself unraveling gauze. "We have to hurry."

Simon hisses through his teeth as the liquid touches his ripped blisters. "Stings." He dabs it around, wincing. "I think my heart stopped when I saw you come out of the tower that night. Then again when you jumped off the

wall.” He pauses. “What happened?”

I pull one of his hands toward me and begin wrapping gauze around his wrist before angling up to the palm and thumb. “I swam to the docks and made my way back—”

“I mean to the cloak,” Simon clarifies. “Why did it suddenly not hide you anymore?”

My eyes dart to Hespera, who glances up from where she and Roger squint at the map. She’s listening, of course.

“Too much to explain,” I whisper as I loop the bandage across his palm. “But the killer voided the blood of the woman, also the guard, which is why there were no thoughts for me to hear. The cloak was voided of magick when I got blood on it.”

“I’ll take your word for all that,” he says.

“That body is silent, too.” I tilt my head at the gray corpse on the other side of the grave.

Simon digests that as I tie off the bandage and reach for his other hand. “So this is our killer’s work.” He hesitates. “And if he knew how to do that he’s...”

“Selenae, yes.”

I hear Hespera’s disapproving snort.

“I need you out of gaol,” I whisper. It’s all I dare say right now.

Simon squeezes my arm with his wrapped hand. “Selenae are people like everyone else. Same motivations, same patterns. You know what to look for. I have faith in you.”

That’s not what I meant, but with the coroner glowering at me and listening to every word, I can’t tell him that we need to leave Londunium as soon as he’s free. Not yet.

The second bandage is secured, and I’m both relieved to have finished before Hespera and despairing that our short time is up. Simon flexes his fingers. “These are excellently wrapped. Much better than what I did for you last month.”

I huff a short laugh. “That’s because I’ve spent the last two days in the hospital, undressing and redressing wounds.” I dig into the bag for two of the bloodstones I can feel humming in the bottom. “Here, take these and put them in the wrapping over your palms before you go to sleep. They’ll speed up your healing at least a little.”

Simon tucks them in his pocket. “I wish I could kiss you, but Haema Hespera said we couldn’t act like we know each other.” He bends his neck to look into my face. “Is something wrong?”

Just about everything is wrong: The killer is on the loose and claimed another victim, Simon’s in gaol for five more days and Moon knows how long it will take him to work off his fine, and Martin is shoveling dirt over corpses to feed his wife and children. And then there was Philippa. I’m tempted to tell Simon what happened earlier this evening, but I don’t need a lecture from the eavesdropping coroner on staying out of Hadrian business. “Tired and frustrated,” I answer. “And worried about you.”

“Don’t be,” he says, swinging his long legs up out of the hole and rising to his feet. “I can endure it for a few days. And grave-digging isn’t all that bad. Gets me outside.”

Hespera appears as Simon helps me up. “The citadel guards are coming to collect Simon,” she says. “He’d better finish his work.”

Roger begins helping Simon recover the body in its shroud, soon joined by Martin, whose light is needed for them as it’s now fully dark. The coroner draws me off to the side and pulls her moonweave cloak from the bag, then tosses me mine. At this point I wouldn’t be surprised if she pulled dinner out of there, too, but no such luck.

“It should be easy enough to find the tree the forest reeve described,” she says in a low voice. “Once in the area we’ll be able to smell where the man was killed.”

I swing the moonweave around my shoulders and clasp it at my neck. The haema laundered the cloak at some point, but it was probably more for her benefit, given how it smelled after being soaked in the Tamse River. I follow her example and sweep it behind my back until we’re passing through the gate onto the road, then pull it fully around me—which is awkward as I’m carrying her bag again. At least it’s significantly lighter now.

Then we head for the woods and the blood that awaits us there.

CHAPTER 28

I wait until long after I know anyone can hear us before speaking. “How far is this place?”

“A good walk, and I want to take a roundabout way to get there to stay on roads and paths as long as we can. The moon won’t be up for three hours, so there’s no need to hurry. We can take our time and be safe.”

Our superior senses will keep anyone from sneaking up on us, as long as we pay attention, and our moonweave makes us invisible—once the moon is up, we won’t even cast a shadow. Unfortunately, neither of those are an advantage we would have over a Selenae stalker.

“Aren’t you worried this could be a trap?” I ask. “The blood could’ve been left there so we would investigate it.”

The question doesn’t even cause her to hesitate. “First, whoever the killer is, coming in the day would negate *our* strongest assets. Second, that blood will only be readable for so long. Lastly, I’m not alone, I’m with you, and you’re carrying a bag full of knives.” She clears her throat. “Of course, I won’t force you to come along.”

She says it like she’d go on alone if I went back. “No,” I tell her. “I’m coming. I just wanted to make sure you at least considered that.”

“Very well.” The relief is subtle, but I can hear it.

We enter the woods, losing most of the starlight, but it doesn’t change much for us. Hespera pauses about fifty paces inside, listening. It feels significant that she waits for my agreement that it sounds safe to go on.

“Out of curiosity,” I say after we are deep enough into the forest that we can’t see the wheat fields behind us. “Is there some point at which you, too, will call me Katarene? When I’ve given up Simon?”

My marked hand clenches into a fist at the thought, but I’m not surprised

when the haema replies, “I will never call you that.”

“Because, even as powerful as I am, I’ll always be an outsider?”

Hespera turns her head to look at me with slight bewilderment. “No, because that is not what you wish to be called.”

“That’s not what you said before.”

She grimaces with what might be guilt. “That was perhaps a little harsh. I did feel you didn’t belong at the time, but putting that aside, I see no reason for anyone not to address you as you wish to be addressed.”

What a simple concept. I can’t help needling her, however. “Not using it to sweeten the idea of staying?”

“If that’s the matter which would tip the balance, I’ll start using Katarene right now. What anyone calls you says more about them than you. You’ve not let any of us define you, why start now?”

Her serious—and poignant—reply to my silly accusation throws cold water on the conversation. For not the first time, I admire her quiet wisdom.

“Definitions aside,” I say, “if it were up to you, I would’ve been voided on that first day.”

“You misunderstood my position. The rest of the council was enamored of your potential, and I only sought to remind them of the risks. When everyone agrees on something, it’s the duty of thinking people to challenge that idea, to make certain it is truly sound.”

Magister Thomas used to say no building could stand unless it was buffeted by forces from all sides, and decisions were no different. Though the coroner’s reasons are in line with that, I have a hard time believing that was her motivation that morning. “So you’re saying if most were for voiding me, you would’ve argued in my favor?”

“At least on that occasion.” Hespera smiles wryly at me. “One can always change their opinion with new evidence.”

Once again I feel outmaneuvered. We walk in silence for a minute before the haema speaks again.

“Simon, too, I misjudged that day.”

★ ★ ★

Hespera refers to the map every time we reach a point of deciding which path to take. Off the main road, the trails become narrower and more overgrown,

though the signs they're used by both beasts and humans are clear.

Once we have to walk a dozen paces off the path and wait for a pair of poachers or bandits carrying a boar between them. They never present a threat to us, however—we heard them from half a mile away, and they weren't aware of us as they passed. The smell of old blood reaches me as the moon rises after midnight, but it takes another half hour to reach the spot.

Once we've caught the scent, Haema Hespera pauses three times as often to stretch out our senses. I hear the heartbeat of a few forest creatures, including a deer and her fawn. As we draw nearer to the bloody scene, however, animals become fewer. They don't like the smell, and I quite agree. There's also a growing undercurrent of fear and pain in the air that the coroner says comes from the victim's sweat in his final hours.

By the time we reach the clearing, the fat crescent moon is high enough to shine through the canopy of trees. The heavy metallic scent reminds me of finding Perrete's body in a Collis alley. It's the hallmark of the brutal spilling of blood.

But unlike that night, the blood is silent.

Hespera tests it nonetheless, though she waves me away when I offer to try, saying she doesn't want to risk contaminating the handprint with a fragment of voided blood that can't quite be cleaned off.

That means the handprint will be mine alone.

The coroner gives me a fresh piece of lunar caustic, and then pours a salt solution into a small cup. It's precisely balanced to not destroy the blood, though it will mix and fade as it does in plain water. I drop a fragment of the silvery stick into the liquid and let it dissolve.

When that's ready, I pry a small chunk of blood-soaked bark from the tree. Without gloves I can't avoid touching it, and to my shock it's already whispering to me.

I drop the piece into the cup and count to ten as wisps of blood flow out, turning the clear liquid slightly pink. Before I can dip a finger in, the haema grabs my wrist. "Do me a favor and sit down first."

Last time I appeared to faint as I relived the dead man's last minute. My courage falters as I realize it will likely happen again.

Then I steel myself. If Simon can risk his sanity by climbing into a killer's head for the sake of justice, I can go into the victims'. I stick my finger into the murmuring liquid.

I'm flat on my back, looking at the blue sky beyond the gap in the oak and birch leaves. Every inch of my body aches from dozens of bites and tears from sharp teeth. It's a thousand times worse than any beating my father ever gave me. Something I swore I would never inflict on my own children. How would Anna feed our two—soon to be three—without me?

The twine binding my arms and wrists is cut, but I'm too weak from loss of blood to lift them. Wish I could have passed out, but the bastard keeps waking me up.

My view of the sky is suddenly blocked by a bleached white skull. Wolves are even more frightening under their skin and fur. Never knew they had that many teeth. The jaw falls open and a hand grasps it.

"Last one."

The skull rotates and rushes downward. I shut my eyes as the fangs close on either side of my neck.

Clamp.

Twist.

Rip.

A brief surge of energy has me grabbing my throat as hot blood spills out, covering my fingers. White light bursts in my vision, then fades around the edges, and somehow I'm falling, though the earth is solid under me. My one arm reaches up, catches what feels like a tree trunk, and I try to hold on to it, but it's too large to grasp, and I'm sliding, sinking into blackness.

I tip backward, spilling the cup off my lap. Hespera has my hand and is wiping my wet finger with a water-soaked cloth.

Gradually, the vision fades completely and my surroundings reappear, but I'm gagging on the heavy, metallic scent of blood and shaking so hard I can barely feel the glass-like stone the coroner presses into my palm. "Void your senses, Catrin." Her voice cuts through the fog. "It will dull everything."

Much as I hate using a voidstone, I shove everything into it until I feel I'm sitting on the bottom of deep lake. The darkness and quiet soothes my mind until the waves of panic recede to something bearable.

Hespera is pale as she crouches over me and peers into my face. "Perhaps I should have done it," she mutters as she lifts one of my eyelids, then the other.

I shake my head in an effort not to vomit as much as in denial. “You would have only heard his thoughts. I could see and feel as he did.”

“And?”

“Roger was right about the throat being last.” I hesitate. “And I didn’t see a wolf, just a wolf’s skull, held by a man.”

Hespera frowns as she sits back on her heels. “Are you saying there was no animal at all?”

I recall all the things Roger claimed were wrong. “That makes sense, though. The forester said the wounds weren’t deep enough, and a wolf would have gone for the throat first.”

“Which the killer didn’t know.”

“Or he didn’t truly care. If he wanted to kill someone slowly and watch his life bleed away, he wouldn’t do anything that would make him die too soon.”

“Agreed.” There’s genuine concern in her silver-ringed eyes. “How are you feeling now?”

“Better. The voidstone helped, thank you.”

“You weren’t wearing a bracelet, I noticed.” She tucks the stone back in the open bag. “Is that forgetfulness or arrogance that you’re powerful enough not to need it?”

I grimace. “Forgetfulness mostly. I don’t like reducing my senses, but it’s come in handy more than once.” I raise my eyebrows. “I see you’re not wearing one, either.”

The coroner shifts to take the weight off her skirt before standing. “That’s because, like you, I’m quite good at tolerating undulled senses, though it did take a few years of practice,” she admits. “Are you ready to get yours back now?”

“Yes, but you’re standing between me and the moon.”

Hespera pivots out of the way, reflexively looking at the glowing crescent at the same time. As soon as the light hits my eyes, I’m yanked forward.

★ ★ ★

Catrin goes beyond every limit I expect. I wonder what else she can do, and how I can get her to trust me enough to test those limits. That boy Simon doesn’t stand in her way, but she depends on him too much. It will be impossible for her to give him up if she ever figures out how much he loves

her.

Look at those eyes, wide and pure silver. Is that what happens when the magick surges past the dams around voided senses and restores them? I've never seen that before, but then, I don't know that I ever looked.

Why is she still frozen in place? Why is she not responding?

"Catrin?"

Her body is stiff and unyielding, like when she dived into the minds of those victims.

"Catrin!"

She's not breathing. Something is very, very wrong. A seizure? It's the only thing I can think of. Damn it, Hess, you're a physician. Think.

She needs to breathe. Muscles locked as they are, laying her on the ground isn't feasible. I haven't prayed in years, but ...

Moon and skies, Hear my cries

Answer my plea, Have mercy on me

★ ★ ★

I slump backward, inhaling the flavor of leaves, live and dead, of blood, pollen, pinesap, and cut wood.

Hespera spins around, eyes wide and full of stark relief. I shutter my own, not wanting to risk that happening again. Was it because the haema was so close? Had I unconsciously reached for the woman's mind in my struggle to understand her?

Hands on my upper arms lay me back. "Open your eyes, Catrin."

It's safe to do so now. She's right over me, searching my face. The black outline around her eyes narrows. "They aren't as silver anymore." She sits back a little. "What happened?"

I cover my face with my hands and rub my sore cheek. "You didn't have to slap me."

"You didn't seem to notice or care at the time."

"I was aware, though. I heard you starting to pray."

For several seconds, the only sound in the clearing is the beating of her heart. "Catrin," she whispers, "were you inside my mind?"

My intent in saying that was to offer proof I was conscious, but I suddenly realize that the plea to the Moon had been entirely in her head. It had come to

me in her voice, which was why I couldn't distinguish it from spoken words.

"I don't—I don't know."

"How did you do that? What did you hear?"

Everything. That she's afraid I need Simon too much and that he's in love with me. That my eyes became fully silver, and I stopped breathing while I bridged into her mind. That she's certain I can do more than I know or have revealed.

"Nothing," I insist. "I just—the moonlight just hit me hard. My senses were overwhelmed for a few seconds, like a cramping muscle." My explanation becomes more natural with each word.

"I don't believe you."

I push back into a sitting position, keeping my eyes off the moon. "Maybe I'm not as powerful as you think."

"Nonsense. You *went* somewhere. I saw it in your eyes."

"The only place I want to go is home."

A smugness tugs her lips. "Yes. We have what we need. Let's go."

She likes my referring to the akademium as home. If that distracts her, I'll play along. "Yes. Home."

"I hope no one was able to hear us or sneak up while we were occupied," Hespera mutters.

We both stand a little unsteadily, her from stiff knees and me from the light-headedness of not breathing for a minute. After a pause to expand our senses—mostly hearing—we feel safe to head back. As we turn to the path, and I draw everything back in, the scent of cut wood tickles the inside of my nose. "Wait."

She stops as I rotate slowly, trying to find the direction. It's coming from almost behind me, and I step off toward it. On the edge of the clearing is a low, flat stump. I'm not familiar enough with trees to know what kind it was or when it was brought down, but it was very recent. Wood chips of various size are scattered around, and a pile of limbs and branches is nearby.

Roger had said stumps like this were common in the forest, but it's at least the second at the site of a murder, and felled around the same time. Maybe the killer was a woodcutter who used his work to find isolated places to conduct his twisted art.

Why do I keep thinking of it as art? Simon's influence perhaps. My chest tightens. He should be here, with me, investigating, not digging holes in the

ground.

Hespera comes up behind me. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I say, turning back. "It's only a tree stump."

We walk in silence, her watching me, and me never looking at the moon again.

CHAPTER 29

Our return is faster, and dawn hasn't quite broken when we reach the city gate. Once the sun is up, our cloaks will be visible again, and we hurry through the entrance so as to remain unseen. Not that we would have been stopped or harassed. It's just a habit of any Selenae to avoid being observed after centuries of being blamed for crimes and strange events. I doubt they are entirely innocent, though.

I half expect Hespera to say I should go straight to the hospital, but she takes the bag from my weary arms and tells me to return to my room to sleep. She won't get an argument from me.

It's difficult to rest, however. Unshared by Simon and me lately, the bed feels unbearably empty without him. My dreams are also plagued by memories of dying and a voice that keeps saying, *I'm nearly finished*.

And then there's Philippa. She had needed a friend as much as I did, and I betrayed her trust. More than anything I want to go back and try to apologize, but it was only yesterday that she threw me out of her shop. Waiting to approach her will let her cool off a little. I just hope she doesn't think I'm returning in hopes of getting the dress. I don't care a whit about it, truthfully, especially if Simon will never get to see it.

That day and the next two drag out to feel as long as a month. In between following Haema Zosima around, I add a new sheet of scant information to Simon's row of victims, recording everything safe for a non-Selenae to know about the clearing in the woods, including the cut-down tree.

Something about it bothers me. I peruse the other scene notes for references to tree stumps nearby. None are mentioned, but Martin hadn't known such a thing might be important. Maybe I can ask him if he remembers any.

I also keep a list in my head of items I want to discuss with Simon: the tree stumps, the wolf skull, the fact that I accidentally bridged into Hespera's mind.

The fact that I love him.

The waning crescent moon is present for sixteen hours at a time, and most of them in daylight, making for long work hours. I avoid the coroner easily, as she spends day and night in the library, searching for any reference to voided blood. In our one short interaction, we agree that the killer is using this new method to keep us from seeing or hearing him, and the handprint was a lucky occurrence we can't count on happening again.

After the third day at the hospital, I return to my room to find a note pinned to my door from the coroner, telling me to report to her office as soon as I see this. Weary as I am, I'd rather obey her summons than face the empty room, though I had wanted to at least try to apologize to Philippa. I planned to offer penning a letter to Magister Thomas telling him not to come after all, if that was what she wished.

Well, if whatever the coroner wanted didn't take too long, I'd still have time before nightfall. With a sigh, I drag myself to her office, where I find another note, saying to join her in the autopsy chamber.

I'm fully awake as I hurry down the passage, hoping against hope that Simon is also there, but it's only Edward the shire reeve with her. He must have recently arrived because he and Hespera are wrangling a covered body onto the table when I walk in.

"Wash up and put on gloves," the coroner says when she sees me. "Today you'll be doing much of the work."

The corpse is smaller than the others. "Another victim?"

Hespera straightens the bundle. "Murder? Yes. But this one is a woman."

Not our killer, then. After rinsing my hands, I slide on gloves treated to repel liquid and unroll them halfway up my forearms. "Who is she?"

"I don't know yet," answers Edward. "Her face is covered with a cloth, but Haema Hespera taught me long ago that bodies must be brought to her just as they're found to preserve evidence." He pauses, frowning thoughtfully. "Not sure when that was."

I have no doubt as to why he can't remember that.

The measuring marks on the table indicate the dead woman is a handsbreadth shorter than me. Hespera is already setting up the weights to

balance, though we won't record that until the body is minimally covered. From the bulk of the canvas, she's fully dressed. I wonder if Edward will stay for the whole exam.

"Where was she found?" I ask.

"In the woods, half a league in."

Not what I expected. "Are deaths in the forest that common?"

He shrugs. "It's a convenient place to dump bodies. I prefer to find them there than in the river."

Understandable. I pick up a knife, noting that Hespera has also laid out a sharp voidstone. Her intent is probably to verify that thoughts can be erased after death, though we're reasonably certain that is so. "Can you uncover her, please?"

Edward starts at the top. "I'm guessing she was strangled."

Her head is tightly wrapped in a silken cloth of violet and gold, which is knotted around her neck. The knife I'm holding clatters onto the slate floor as I recognize the embroidered letters AA visible on one of the ends.

Philippa's scarf.

The coroner begins testing the woman's arms, *tsk*-ing at my clumsiness. "Died yesterday. Rigor is just setting in."

"Can you pinpoint an hour?" Edward queries.

He's asking because Hespera had claimed to be able to determine the exact time for the bodies in the tower. Lying.

She avoids his eyes. "Not this far out, but no earlier than yesterday morning."

I haven't moved a muscle since recognizing the scarf. Edward clears his throat. "If we can identify her quickly, her family can bury her tonight, if they wish."

Haema Hespera finally notices my wide eyes and shaking hands. "If you aren't ready for this, Catrin, step aside." She uses her hip to nudge me out of her way. "We'll cut the scarf off in a way that preserves the knot."

Destroying Philippa's most treasured possession, but it means nothing to a dead girl. Still, I flinch as the hooked knife cuts through the fine weave.

The features revealed have the telltale signs of strangulation—blue-tinged skin and bulging, bloodshot eyes.

But the face is not Philippa's.

★ ★ ★

I tear through the streets, cutting in front of wagons and bouncing and spinning off anyone in my way. Philippa's house is shuttered and dark in the late afternoon light.

My arm is up to pound on the door the moment I reach it. Right before my fist hits the wood, I realize I'm still wearing the autopsy gloves. They muffle the sound, though it doesn't matter as the door swings wide open on the first blow.

I burst inside, my senses rising as soon as I'm out of the sunlight. The latch isn't broken, only undone, but the room is a mess of overturned drawers and bolts of fabric.

"Hello?" I jump over a pile of threaded beads to get to the back room. There's no light coming from it or the kitchen beyond. "Philippa?"

I barely suppress a scream as a stray cat jumps down from an open cabinet where it had been gnawing on a dry sausage. The animal dashes across the floor, claws scratching the stone threshold as it scrambles out the back door.

The bolt dangles from one nail above the latch, broken. It's been forced open.

"Philippa!" I dash to and up the narrow stairs in the corner. At the top, the first bedroom must have belonged to her uncle, the tailor. It's neat and undisturbed, probably just as she made it but couldn't bear to empty out yet. Stumbling down the dark passage, I find Philippa's private chamber. The red dress lies on a small table, tied neatly with a white ribbon. Next to it, the bed is made and the covers are smooth. Everything is tidy and undisturbed.

And empty.

Outside the door is a set of steep stairs more like a ladder. I climb up to stick my head into the attic and squint into the darkness, listening. More fabric is stored in chests and shelves. Another sheltering cat hisses at me from its perch on a stack covered in canvas. I take a deep breath, drawing in every scent. The animal has relieved itself in one corner, but there's no other heartbeat or telltale smell up here.

I jump back down and return to the ground floor. If robbery was the intruder's motive, surely they would've gone upstairs looking for valuables, but only the front room was ransacked. I check for Philippa's money box but find it intact, though empty.

With no other clues, I close my eyes and inhale as I did in the attic. Each scent is like a thread to its source. Velvet, satin, wool ... the wooden dress frame in the corner ... blood. Faint. Dry.

Throwing aside a pile of fabrics, I find a small wooden chest, the one in which Philippa had put her uncle's treasured violet and gold scarf. On the lid is a red-brown handprint. The blood is silent, but the message is clear: He will never make the same mistake again.

CHAPTER 30

I lock Philippa's front door from the inside and slip out the back, closing that one as securely as I can. Hopefully the cat in the attic can find another way out. Or it can live on the mice I hear scurrying in the walls.

The neighbor next door is sweeping dust off her front stoop as I exit the alley. Fortunately, the woman assumes I'd tried knocking on the back door when the front was unanswered. "She left town for a few days," she says without prompting.

Relief makes my knees weak. "When?" I ask. "Where to?"

"Two days ago. Went to see her mother." The neighbor leans on her broom and wipes sweat off her face with her apron. "The Sun has over-blessed us today. I understand your type always wear black"—she nods to my clothes—"but those gloves must be awful."

I look down at my hands, realizing they're still clad in the thin waxed leather. "Oh, I'd forgotten." I strip them off with difficulty as the heat and sweat have swelled my fingers. The skin revealed is wrinkled as though I've been in a long bath. "I had been expecting to ... do work," I finish awkwardly.

The woman shrugs and goes back to her sweeping, jamming the bristles into the cracks between stones. "Said she'd be back in a few days. Should I let her know her Selenae friend came by?"

Since I wasn't sure Philippa would be happy to know I was here, I shake my head. "No, thank you. It wasn't important."

I wander away, dazed. Haema Hespera is probably furious with me for running out as I did. There's no point in hurrying back for the lecture that's brewing. Philippa is safe. Probably. For now. But I worry that getting to and from her mother's village requires traveling the forest where her uncle was

taken.

It seems obvious the killer had somehow discovered our friendship, and, like in Collis, associating with me made Philippa a target. My telling her about Magister Thomas may have infuriated her but likely saved her life, because she was gone when the killer came for her. The best he could do was to take that scarf and find a similar victim to strike fear in me. But that also meant some other poor woman had to die. I feel horrible about that, and relieved. And horrible for that relief.

Does this also mean Simon is in danger? Hespera was more worried about outsiders knowing we were connected, but I have little doubt the entire Selenae community has been gossiping about us since the night we went through the first bonding ceremony. Ironically, he's safer right now than if he were free. Martin is with him all day in the graveyard, and otherwise he's sitting in the gaol. Whoever killed the woman and the guard on the tower got through one layer of protection, but getting into the deepest levels of the citadel's prison would be far more difficult, even in a moonweave cloak.

Soon, however, Simon will be free, and we can leave.

But what about Philippa? Or the other victims this killer goes after?

Just as I know Simon would give me up to keep me from throwing away my magick, I can't imagine him abandoning what he feels is his responsibility. He'll want to stay and see this through.

A set of stairs appears in my path, and I realize with a start that my feet haven't led me to the akademium. Before me is the city's Holy Sanctum, its white limestone facade turning to shades of rose and gold with the light of evening. The chanting prayers of the hour drift out of the open doors and wrap around me like a blanket.

Come in, they whisper. Your comfort and answers are here.

Unlike last time, however, my clothes will tell everyone I don't belong in a place dedicated to the glory of the Sun. I'm already getting odd looks from those going through the three sets of double doors. One of the brethren handing out candles scowls at me from the nearest archway. Selenae heretics are not welcome.

Having been raised in a convent, I know all the major feasts of martyrs of the faith, but I can't recall anyone important enough for a vigil less than three weeks from the Summer Solstice. They must be honoring a local holy, uncelebrated in Gallia.

Most of those flocking inside now aren't merchant types, either. From the scents clinging to their predominantly dun and green clothing, these are men and women who spend much of their time in the woods. Several of them are actual forest reeves, and most have spouses and children with them. As much as I long for the rituals of my past, I resist the tugging on my heart and turn away, nearly running into a brown body as I step off.

Everyone had pointedly avoided me, and I didn't expect another person to be so close—or quiet enough that I didn't hear them. Then I realize it's Roger, the forester, and understand why. He'd passed through the woods the other day with the softness of a breeze.

He sweeps his sweat-stained cap off his head and gives me a polite bow. "I thought it was you standing here, Mistress Catrin."

I offer him my hand. "Yes, I was just curious why so many people are going into the Sanctum tonight."

Roger clasps my fingers before re-donning his pointed hat over his matted hair. "It's a special vigil to Sant Ignasus. After the attack this week, people are afraid to go into the woods."

Now the service makes more sense, as does its attendees. Sant Ignasus was torn apart by animals, though it was in an arena for sporting entertainment rather than in the wild. They're asking for the holy's protection now, as many beg for Santa Dimah's assistance against mental affliction in Mesanus. Traveling in groups with weapons would be more effective protection from beasts than prayer, but I suppose it can't hurt.

The forester clears his throat. "Did you and the coroner manage to find the spot he was killed?"

"Yes, we did. Thank you for your help." I don't mention we went that very night. I also wish there was a way to tell him his suspicions were correct, and the man wasn't really killed by a wolf. "The haema and I were curious about the bite marks on the body, though. Is there some place we could buy or borrow a wolf skull to study?"

Or perhaps find out who may have bought one for himself?

Roger thinks for a few seconds. "There's a man who specializes in the preservation of dead animals to look like they're still alive," he says. "He and his brother also sell furs and bones. I would start there."

Perfect. "Where can I find them?"

"On the other side of the river, among the tanneries."

Where the smells from their acid vats for treating hides would be less bothersome to the general population. Not that the city smelled much better. All the heat of late and the lack of rain was making the streets unbearable. But across the Tamse is too far to go tonight. I guess I know what I'm doing tomorrow, once I'm free of the hospital.

I thank Roger again and continue away from the Sanctum. My path, however, turns to walk outside the length of the building. I'm not ready to leave it, even if I'm not welcome inside.

The images in colored glass glow from the candles within. Martyrs, mostly. The window with Sant Ignaus is the brightest, as that's where the people inside are centered. Singing from the Sanctum rises as I continue down the line of holy portraits. Next to him is Sant la Ronce, burned at the stake for his belief in the Sun.

I stop abruptly. Those are two ways men in the woods died. Then I find myself walking faster to see what else is depicted.

Holies pierced with swords.

Holies studded with arrows.

Holies beheaded, dragged, crushed with stones, flayed alive.

One that stands out is Sant Jerod, who was placed in a barrel studded with nails and rolled until he died of what would've been countless puncture wounds.

Just like Hugh Bolton.

I'm running down the side of the building, connecting the martyrs' tortures to the men in the woods. Not all have a victim to match, though. Not yet.

The transept arm is dedicated to holy virgins, and it's not even a surprise that the first is Santa Lumilla. Her face is completely covered by the wedding veil her unbelieving husband used to strangle her and knotted at her neck.

These are what the killer is imitating.

★ ★ ★

I've never been as grateful for my religious education as I am tonight. It takes me barely an hour to add the name of a martyr to each page laid out in the workroom. Some overlap, and several have three or four names. I begin to suspect Simon was actually wrong in the reason some methods were repeated. While the killer was undoubtedly improving his techniques of

execution with experience, it wasn't about attaining perfection of some kind—there were simply a number of holies who had died by the sword or beheading, and he was covering them all.

When I've finished that, I begin a page for the woman he killed with Philippa's scarf.

"There you are!"

Hespera's sharp voice makes me jump in my chair. She's standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. "Where under the Moon did you go? The watch said you ran straight out the gate and didn't come back for hours." Her mouth hardens. "Don't tell me you went to see that boy."

"I didn't."

"Then why did you leave like that?"

For some reason I don't want to tell her about Philippa. But I have what will serve as an excuse that isn't exactly a lie. "Because I realized something." I hold up the page I've started. "The woman who was murdered died the same way as Santa Lumilla."

The coroner's brow creases. "Who?"

"A holy martyr to the Sun," I explain. "There's a window commemorating her death at the Sanctum."

Hespera rolls her eyes. "Catrin, it's unfortunate, but that is probably the most common way for a woman to die by violence. I've lost count of how many I've had on my table in ten years."

"Except the scarf covered her face exactly like the stained-glass picture."

"That's not unusual, either," the haema says. "I heard you and Simon discussing how covering a body meant the killer was ashamed or regretful. Choking someone to death is up close and personal, and it's usually a person they know, like a husband or lover."

"But in those cases, the covering comes after. Hers was before." I wave my arm at the long row of pages. "And what about men who were stabbed, burned, or shot through with arrows? Those are all shown in the windows, too." The order of my actual discovery is backward, but it doesn't matter. I pick up the pages for the man in the fire and Hugh Bolton. "As are holies burned at the stake or rolled in a barrel spiked with nails."

Hespera steps into the room, much of the skepticism dropping from her face, and takes the parchment for the tailor. She studies the picture of his injuries for a long moment before murmuring, "The repeated pattern of

punctures.”

“Yes.”

She lowers the page to pierce me with her silver stare. “And most of them can be matched to a Hadrian martyr? Why would he do that?”

“All of them can be. Though I don’t know to what purpose...” I pause, distracted by the why. The choosing of methods doesn’t change what we know about the murders so much as adds to it. Which means I only need to fit it within what we’ve established.

The killer orchestrated these deaths so he could see them, experience them. But why? Weren’t the stained-glass images enough? Or the statues all over the outside of the Sanctum? For Moon’s sake, he could buy one from an artist. On Sun Days, there’s a market for religious art set up in the Sanctum Square outside.

It hits me like a ton of limestone blocks: Those depictions aren’t realistic. As children, Remi and I used to make fun of the martyrs’ serene, adoring expressions, though imagining them any other way was horrifying.

The coroner watches me with barely dammed criticism on her lips. I clear my throat before continuing. “He needs to see what those deaths were truly like. Maybe he’s ... drawing them or something. Simon believes he was recording them.”

Hespera’s breath catches, and her narrowed eyes widen. She sits down heavily, her gaze going unfocused. “I don’t know enough about Sun martyrs —”

“But I do,” I insist. “And I feel like a fool for not making the connection before tonight. If you’ll just read what I’ve written, you’ll agree.”

The coroner pulls herself together. “Who else have you told about this? Simon? Martin?” Her voice hitches slightly. “The shire reeve?”

How fast does she think I can run? “No one, but Simon needs to know. As soon as possible,” I add defiantly.

She huffs. “You have too much faith in his abilities.”

“Who else do you think gave me the tools to put this together?” I retort. “But once Simon is free, we’ll have to figure out what to do.”

Hespera begins gathering all the pages, keeping them in order. “We don’t need to do anything. If the killer is choosing to imitate Hadrian deaths, then he’s not Selenae. I was having my doubts—”

“What about how he’s using voidstone?”

“Hadrians put it and other stones on knives and jewelry. It was entirely accidental that it erased thoughts as well. The single handprint on the tree proves it.”

I don't see how. “He must at least know what it does.”

“This is now completely a Hadrian matter,” she says, sweeping the last parchment into her stack. “You will participate no longer.”

“People are dying, Haema.”

“People die every day,” she replies coldly. “And it doesn't matter what you think you know, I forbid you to further assist in such investigations, and the archaemon will agree as he never wanted us involved in the first place. It's too risky.”

My hands curl into fists. “Simon can't ignore such things.”

“Then as a Hadrian, that is his choice, but it will no longer concern Selenae.” She pauses. “You went into the woods the day of the fire. Who saw you then?”

“Edward, Martin, and Roger, the head forester,” I answer distractedly. “And a couple others who were there. I didn't really talk to them.”

She nods. “If anyone asks about that day, you were acting as my assistant, not Simon's, as you were at the cemetery the other night.”

“Fine.” None of it matters.

“Is there *anyone* else who knows of this or your involvement with the investigation?”

Philippa.

“No,” I answer.

CHAPTER 31

The next morning is Sun Day, but emergencies do not rest. A crying mother stands outside the gate at dawn, holding a child of perhaps four years. The toddler's left elbow is bent at an odd angle and her face is a bloody, swollen mess. Whatever tears she's shed over her pain are spent, and she hangs limply from the woman's arms, whimpering occasionally. They aren't Selenae, but that doesn't matter.

"What happened?" Zosima asks crisply as the weeping woman lays her daughter on the exam table.

"Sh-she fell," the mother stammers. "Out of a tree. I mean, a window. Onto—onto the street."

The physician frowns. "Great Moon, when?"

"Last night. Near midnight."

"And you waited five hours to bring her to a hospital?"

"My husband..." The woman trails off.

Zosima's expression changes as she looks up at the mother. Her kohl-lined eyes soften, but her mouth remains grimly set. "Did you fall down the stairs in your rush to get to her?" she asks.

I'd been so distracted by the child that I hadn't really paid attention to her mother, but the woman's left jaw and cheekbone are purple and swelling and her forearms are mottled with fresh bruises. She swallows. "Yes."

Student assistants are cutting away the child's ragged clothes, revealing more bruises. The physician glances at me. "Please fetch Haema Maia."

"Should she bring her kit?" I ask as I back toward the door. The haema has her favorite tools.

"No, schola, this isn't a surgical matter."

Puzzled, I do as I'm told. When I return with Maia, she takes in the

battered pair and grits her teeth. “How many times will you put up with this, Letty?”

“The child has a fever, Maia,” says Zosima.

“Already?”

The mother shakes her head. “Since yesterday. She’s been sick and crying.”

“And wouldn’t stop?” Maia asks dryly. “Is that what the problem was this time?”

“He’s never hit Eva before,” the woman whispers. “I’m the one who always angers him.”

I slowly realize all the damage done to both of them was inflicted by her husband, the child’s father. And it’s not the first time, at least for the mother. My stomach rolls over. I could never imagine Simon doing anything like this.

Haema Maia’s atrophied arm curls tighter against her body. “How bad is it, Zosima?”

“Dislocated shoulder and elbow,” she answers. “Ligaments are stretched, but intact. Not sure about the head injuries yet.”

Maia relaxes slightly. “We’ll need to discuss payment.”

“I can launder bandages like before—”

“No,” Maia says firmly. “You will leave him. Your payment will be our knowing this will never happen again.”

The mother’s brown eyes spill over with tears. “I have nowhere to go, Haema. You know I only married him because I had no choice.”

“You have a choice now.”

On the table, the child—Eva—suddenly wails as Zosima twists her upper arm back into place with an audible pop. The mother flinches.

“One down, one to go,” the haema mutters. “Elbows are harder to get right. Always want to come back out. She’ll be in a brace for weeks.”

“Well?” Maia’s stare is merciless.

“I have nowhere to go,” Letty whispers again. “He’ll find me.”

I clear my throat. “Not if you go to Gallia.”

The woman’s anguish flips to anger. “You think I’d be better off in a strange country?”

“There’s a place in Collis you could go,” I say. “An abbey. I know the prioress.” My insides are suddenly hollow as I remember Mother Agnes is dead. They’ve elected a new leader by now, and I doubtlessly know her, too,

but my in is with her secretary, Marguerite. “I can write her a letter, explaining, and they’ll take you in. Both of you. When you’re ready, they can find you work in the city as a housekeeper.”

Remi might need one. He’s an architect in his own right now, and he can’t live with Magister Thomas and his mother forever. But that’s for later. Right now, this mother and daughter need to be safe.

Haema Maia nods approvingly. “That would be perfect, Katarene, thank you.” She looks to the woman. “Will you accept this offer?”

“I ... I don’t have enough money for the journey,” she protests.

“I will pay for it personally,” says Maia. Her mouth turns up in a wry smile. “We lose money on you every month anyway.”

Letty shakes her head, but the idea of freedom has lightened her shoulders. “He’ll catch me before I get very far.”

“We’ll have him arrested.” Maia can see she’s winning. “We have connections that can assure he’ll stay in gaol as long as it takes to get you to the coast.”

She must be talking about Hespera and Edward, which means their past association is not quite a secret, at least among the three women. Martin would willingly help, too. “And I know someone who would escort you,” I add.

Still, the woman hesitates. Her gaze drifts to her daughter as one hand unconsciously moves to rest on her lower stomach.

“Does he know you’re pregnant?” Maia asks gently.

“No.” Letty’s reply is almost too quiet to hear, even for us.

“Don’t you think it’s better that he never finds out?”

It strikes me how similar this situation is to that of Magister Thomas and his wife. Yet it’s also very different—he was neglectful, not abusive. The woman slowly nods.

“Good,” Maia says. “Your daughter is young. It won’t be long before she forgets this ever happened. And that’s what’s best.”

Haema Zosima raises her eyebrows from where she watches over the splinting and bandaging of little Eva’s arm. “Sounds like it’s settled.”

Maia doesn’t give the woman a chance to rethink her decision. She takes me by the elbow and pulls me from the room, saying, “We’ll get those arrangements started.”

Outside, she closes the door. “I need Haema Hespera, now.”

“To get Letty’s husband arrested?”

“That will come later,” Maia says. “First we must help that child.”

I blink, confused. “And you want the coroner for that?”

“Don’t ask questions,” she hisses. “Just do as I say. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be.”

★ ★ ★

But I can’t find Hespera anywhere. She was supposed to be giving a lecture, but Haemon Nestor is at the front of the room, his raspy voice droning on about the development of a child in the womb. Despite the fascinating topic, at least a quarter of the students are asleep or halfway there. I run to the coroner’s office, which is empty, then the autopsy theater—likewise empty, and finally her quarters, which are locked and silent. In desperation I try the main gate, and there I learn she left the grounds a half hour ago. Had I come here first, I might’ve caught her, but now she’s long gone. “Where did she go?” I ask the guard.

He shrugs. “The haema’s business is her own.”

I return to the hospital, where Maia paces outside the closed door of the treatment room. She spins around as I walk into the ward, her face falling. “Where is she?”

“Somewhere in the city.”

“Blazing stars,” the haema curses. Then she stands up straighter, her weaker left hand holding something tightly to her chest. “It will have to be me. Come along, this is something you need to learn about.”

She pushes the door open and enters the room. A non-Selenaean student jumps up from where he sat on a stool in the corner, reviewing a medical text. I recognize him as a first year, which means he can’t do much more than me. “She’s just fallen asleep.”

Maia gestures to the door. “Which you were told to prevent from happening,” she snaps. “Leave us.”

The student scurries out, muttering that he wasn’t here to be a nursemaid. By the time I’ve closed and bolted the door as instructed, Maia is shaking the girl gently. Her swollen eyelids struggle to open.

“There you are.” The haema’s voice is kinder than I’ve ever heard. “Bad dreams, little one?”

Eva starts to nod, then whimpers at the pain.

“We’ll take care of that.” Maia motions for me to join her on the other side of the table. “No child deserves what you’ve been through.”

The haema straightens her arm to reveal a pair of smooth stones in her hand—a bloodstone ... and a memory stone.

That’s why she wanted Hespera.

“Despite what I told her mother, this child is old enough that she won’t easily forget what happened,” Maia says, taking the rainbow-faceted oval with her right forefinger and thumb. “And in sleep, memories become entrenched, which is why he was supposed to keep her awake. I’ll be reporting him.”

She gently places the memory stone in Eva’s palm. “Can you hold this for me, love?” she asks. “It’s a treasure stone.”

The stone’s inner colors gleam as Eva’s small fingers curl around it.

Maia glances up at me. “I don’t do this lightly. If she were older, it would be better to help her work through the trauma, but she’s young and her mind shallow. We can relieve her of this burden without damage.”

I frown. “Does that mean using a memory stone damages the mind?”

“Not when it’s one of many similar memories that’s taken,” she replies, holding out the bloodstone with her thinner arm. “Take this and feel its power.”

I obey. The *maagnetis* is intense but confined within a radius of about an inch. My fingers tingle after the haema takes it back with her stronger hand.

She continues like she’s lecturing, “When transferring an image like the one of your parents you showed me, many were left behind, and the loss was not felt. Taking all of a person or event becomes riskier, especially with age and memories that have worn deep paths in the mind.”

Haema Maia places the stone over Eva’s fist. “The mind will find ways to fill in the gaps, and the more intelligent the person, the more they will struggle to make sense of the pieces. They can fall into delusions in that overcompensation.”

My mouth is completely dry. “Madness.”

“Of a sort,” Maia replies. “It can happen to a person under normal circumstances, though.”

Like Simon’s cousin Juliane, like her mother and his father. Like his mentor Altum Ferris. A fate Simon feared awaited him.

Maia turns her attention to Eva, smiling gently. “We’ll start with something adjacent. Did your papa ever hurt your mama?”

The little girl’s eyes fill with tears. “Yes. He...”

Her voice trails off and her eyes glaze over.

“That’s it,” the surgeon coos, holding the bloodstone to Eva’s fingers by clasping her larger fist over the small one. Keeping it within an inch of the memory stone. “You only need to think about it one more time.” Her lips tighten. “How did he hurt you?”

Again, emotion flashes on Eva’s face before going blank. This time, however, Maia flinches.

“Do you see what she’s remembering?” I ask.

Maia nods. “It can’t be helped, but it’s a small price to pay.” She peers into the girl’s face. “That’s probably enough. Her memories of him are all together in one place, like a deep well.”

The haema releases her grip, and the bloodstone slips out and falls to the floor. I bend down to retrieve it while Maia pries the small fingers open to release the glittering stone. She has trouble doing it with one hand, but she manages. Then she quickly sets it in a marble bowl for grinding herbs and medicines and backs away. “Destroy that for me, please.”

I pick up the stone pestle as Maia wipes sweat and what might be tears from her face with a clean cloth. “Is that all you had to do?” I ask. “Have her think about it and the bloodstone draws it out?”

She folds the linen twice before answering. “It’s similar to putting it in the stone yourself. Like voiding a sense, you have to push it into the *maegnetis*, though you do have to concentrate to make sure only that one leaves.” Maia stares at the cloth for a few seconds. “Drawing another person’s memories out is more complicated because you must force back anything that you want them to keep. It takes a great deal of effort if the person is older. And the memories don’t belong to you, so they’re like ... poison in your own blood.”

The haema pauses. “I haven’t done it in years, which is why I’d hoped for Hespera’s help. Last time I was sick for days, but this wasn’t as bad as I expected. Maybe because her memories were much like my own.” She’s rubbing her weak arm as she speaks.

I still haven’t destroyed Eva’s stone, but I have one more question. “May I ask what happened to your arm, Haema?”

She looks to the little girl who’s dozed off, her dreams much more

peaceful. “Similar to her, but it was my stepmother, and I wasn’t so lucky. My arm was broken, and several tendons and ligaments torn. The surgeons at the time did the best they could. I was seven.”

There’s no need to ask if she still has that memory. I don’t know what to say, so I smash the rainbow stone in the bowl, and it shatters with a small crack. At the haema’s nod, I continue grinding and crushing until all that’s left is glimmering powder. “Is that why you chose surgery as a specialty?”

“Yes.” She smiles slightly as she stretches out the atrophied arm. “I was actually excused from medical training because of this, but I refused. My challenges don’t define me. Only I can do that.”

And now she’s the most respected surgeon in Brinsulli and probably the continent as well. I’m still holding the bloodstone, and I offer it back to her. “Will you teach me to do this?”

“For simple memories you wish to preserve, yes, I can do that.” Maia takes the stone. “But for anything more, like this, you’ll need Haema Hespera’s guidance. She’s the expert.”

I’m sure she is.

CHAPTER 32

I feel as exhausted as Haema Maia looks, but she promises to teach me how to use memory stones tomorrow if I'll go into town and buy a couple inexpensive ones. Those in her medical stock can't be wasted on practice. She gives me directions to several shops that deal in gems and useful stones. One is near Philippa's home, so I can pass by to see if she's returned from visiting her mother. Before leaving, I change into clothes that will blend in with the locals.

As I pass through the gate, the guard calls out, "She came back."

I turn around to face him. "What?"

"Haema Hespera," he replies with a yawn. Moonset is approaching and his day was as long as mine. "She returned not long ago, then left again, but I told her you were looking for her."

Which apparently didn't mean enough for her to find out what I wanted, but she's the teacher and I'm the student. It doesn't matter, though, because I don't want to talk to her. She hides too much.

I don't understand why Hespera would suddenly deny that the killer is Selenae and forbid my investigating. Remembering her reaction last night, I have to wonder if she's afraid of something or someone. Does that mean she actually knows who he is? I can't imagine there are many Selenae with a fixation on martyrs of another religion. And when it's put that way, it does seem odd. Maybe she's right. In which case the killer could be anyone on the street.

On our first day in Londunium, Simon had read a man's intentions, seen his hunting nature. He'd speculated it was possible to spot the same in the killer. Now that I understand what our hunter is drawn to, would I know him if I saw him? My eyes dart from person to person along every street,

searching for some sign, trying to recall how Simon had described the killer. Intelligent. Methodical. Wronged in some way. Now I think that last might be incorrect. This isn't about revenge.

It's because I'm studying every face that I recognize the archaemon. He's not wearing black, nor does kohl line his eyes, though he has a wide-brimmed hat to keep his face in shadow. Caerus's appearance is so abnormal that for a moment I'm not sure it is him, but then he straightens his hat, and I see his strange ring.

The only reason for dressing like a Hadrian is to not be recognized, and the last thing I want is trouble with the archaemon. I quickly duck into a storefront, pretending to examine whatever it is they're selling until he passes.

Once he's out of sight, I step back into the street to reorient myself, wondering where he came from. Right away I see the sign with a crescent moon whose points appear to hold a cut gemstone between them. That image, Haema Maia had said, was used by those who deal in stones Selenae value.

I hurry across the street. The owner is a wiry man of Tauran descent, whose eyes are as dark as the polished walnut of his display cases.

"Can I assist you?" he asks. His eyes take in my moonstone necklace and glance at my hand before settling on my face as delicate fingers press together in front of his chin. "Something for your bonding?"

The question catches me completely off guard. "For my what?"

"Your bonding," he repeats patiently. The man lowers his hands but keeps them together as he points to the mark on the back of my wrist. "Perhaps a gift for your intended or his mother?"

I lift my hand to the light coming from the open window. "You know what this means?"

"Of course. I have served the needs of many Selenae in my twenty years as a trader of jewels and stones." He raises black eyebrows that are only beginning to show gray. "And you are not the first even today to visit my shop."

Caerus must have been here. "What did your earlier patron buy?" I ask.

"That I cannot reveal. My discretion is what guarantees the continued patronage of your community." He smiles, broad lips parting over a gap between his two front teeth. "After all, most of what I sell is to be gifted. We wouldn't want to spoil a surprise."

I'm getting very tired of Selenae and their secrets. Maia had told me not to act like I knew exactly what I wanted, as that would mean a higher price. "Very well, what do you have that might interest me?"

"This way, please." He gestures to a darker corner of the store and a case of silver chains. When I'm standing where he wants, he lifts the top to reveal several rows of stones dancing with all the colors of light. "These are particularly popular as bonding gifts. Precious opals from the Kilamon Mountain in Tauria, mined by my home village and individually selected by my sister and mother for their brilliance and beauty."

Opals. Well, I suppose if we referred to them as memory stones it would reveal what we used them for. From the empty spaces on the cushion, he's sold three medium-size ones recently. The jeweler quickly rearranges the rows to make them even, and I pretend not to notice. I start by asking the price of the largest stone, and his answer tells me Haema Hespera wears on her finger more money than I've ever held in one hand. Caerus could have bought a small house with what he spent on the missing three. Everything the gem dealer has, however, is far higher quality than I would need.

I finger the moonstone at my throat, then recall perhaps there is something else he could do. The extra piece of chain is in my purse, and I pull it out, asking if it can be repaired. He holds it up to the light and frowns at the broken links, then shakes his head. "This is damaged too much; it would be better to melt down and remake. While I can do that, it would be less expensive to replace the whole necklace."

I'd expected as much, but if I'm going to leave Londunium soon, I need to save as much money as possible. Unfortunately, my necklace is too short to take off easily, and I'll need to refill the moonstone at some point soon. "How about a clasp?" I ask, pointing to the chain I wear. "Could one be added to this?"

"Absolutely," he answers. "I can do it right now if you have the time."

"How much will it cost?"

He holds up the broken piece. "I'll trade for this. It weighs slightly more than the clasp I would use."

That sounds perfect to me. I lift my braid off my neck so he can pry apart a link and remove the chain. Then he calls his apprentice from the back to do the work for him. I take the moonstone off and hold on to it to keep my magick as the teenager lays the necklace on the counter and uses tweezers to

clamp the new parts on. The jeweler turns to me, rubbing his hands. “Is there anything you’d like to view while you wait? Something even rarer than opals?”

My interest is piqued. “Like what?”

There’s a gleam in his dark eyes as he turns to unlock a cabinet behind him, removing a mahogany box inset with moonstones. He places it on the counter, then takes a miniature key from a steel chain around his neck to unlock the case. I have the feeling what he’s about to show me is probably worth the entirety of his other stock. He opens the box with a flourish and rotates it around. “The rarest sapphires in the world.”

I can scarcely breathe at what I see. Three polished oval stones lie on the cream-colored velvet, but unlike the sapphires I’ve seen that are clear and faceted as diamonds, only blue, these are almost cloudy, opaque. What has to make them so unique is the white lines that cross their surfaces, intersecting in the centers to create stars. As I move my head to study them, they shift with me, almost hovering over the surface, as they hum with silent power.

“May I hold one?” I ask.

The jeweler picks the largest up with a pair of tweezers and sets it in my outstretched palm. I expect a sensation similar to holding a bloodstone, a buzzing, intense magick, but instead I feel the power in my veins drawn to my hand. Unlike a voidstone, which pulls magick into its bottomless depths, never to be recovered, this concentration doesn’t feel stagnant or diminished. It’s like focusing a beam of light with a curved piece of glass, which, when done right, can ignite a blaze from a distance. Holding it makes me feel like I’m standing on the edge of a cliff, but with one step I wouldn’t fall—I would fly.

“Do you like it?” the jeweler asks.

Like it? Stars above, what could I do—*what couldn’t I do*—with such a stone? With it in my hand, I can feel the tug of the iron in his door latch, almost see the lines of *maagnetis* coming from it and other sources of metal throughout the room. The moonstones on the case have been out of moonlight so long they appeared completely dim before, but now they glow as brightly as full moons.

I force myself to exhale. “Blue has never been my favorite color. Do you have any others?”

The man laughs, the deep sound shaking his slight frame as he takes the

stone back. “Never can please some.” He carefully replaces it between the two others. “Yes, they are also occasionally red. I know where they can be acquired, but it will take substantial time and money.”

“What about black?”

“I’ve only ever seen one of those in my life.” He closes the box and relocks it. “And I sold it over ten years ago.”

To the very man who was in here fifteen minutes earlier. “How is that star created?”

“Striations at the smallest level.” The jeweler replaces the case in the cabinet and removes the key before turning around. He pantomimes roundness with one hand over the other. “The curved shape reveals the star. If it’s cut flat, it appears golden.”

The apprentice is finished with the chain, and I slide the moonstone back onto it and clasp it around my neck in a daze before thanking the owner and his apprentice and stepping back outside. The next shop on my list is near Philippa’s, so I take a route past her house. It’s both a relief and a disappointment to find she hasn’t returned yet.

With a sigh, I continue, but when I reach the next gem dealer, the building is shuttered. In fact, merchants up and down the street are in the process of closing up though it’s only midafternoon. It’s Sun Day, which reminds me Simon’s last day is tomorrow. The earliest we could flee Londunium is the day after that.

But what about Philippa? She’s in danger. I can’t leave without telling her who took the purple scarf—and why.

Meanwhile I have no desire to return to the akademium. Despite what I said to Hespera the other night, it’s not home. Not if Simon’s not there.

From the Sanctum not too far away comes the chants of the afternoon hour, tugging my soul with an invisible string. When I was young and sleeping in my bed next to Marguerite in Solis Abbey, the night songs from the Selenae Quarter used to call to me in the same way. If I ever heard them at the same time, it would probably tear me in half.

My clothes are definitely not Sun Day best, but at least they aren’t Selenae black. I wouldn’t be stared at or barred from entering the holy building this time. I head for the Square, passing through the artists’ district, where shops entice travelers to buy candles, prayer cards, and miniature versions of the statues that adorn the Sanctum roof like the ranks of a stone army. Two

handcarts bearing trinkets have collided in the intersection ahead, their owners bellowing rather unholy insults at each other, and I turn down a side street for a block to avoid them. The storefronts on this avenue are a little different. Cleaner, better kept, and the goods are of higher quality. A bakery on one corner reminds me I haven't eaten since dawn, and I pause to buy a fluffy yeast roll, paying extra for a pat of sweet butter spread on the inside. I slow my pace as I eat, knowing food is not welcome in the Sanctum.

One block from the Square, I have to step out into the busy street to go around a table under a wide awning extending from the wall to display all the shop has to offer. On the corner, one of the wood carvings stands in partial sunlight, winking bits of embedded metal catching my attention. I shove the last bit of bread into my mouth and move closer, drawn by the exquisite detail and dynamic shape. This is Sant Etienne, who died in the earliest years of the Hadrian Empire, when exactly how to venerate the Sun and Its Creator were violently debated. It's said archers fired over three dozen arrows at him, though most depictions show fewer. Rather than the peaceful expression I'm used to seeing, the martyr's face is contorted in agony. His eyes plead to the sky for the Blessed Sun to bring him the relief of death, but it hasn't come yet.

Mesmerized, I step into the shade and walk between tables laden with other carvings, all of martyrs' violent deaths. One face stands out as serene—Santa Dimah, who cradles her own severed head in her hands as her insane father falls on his sword at her feet in self-punishment for what he'd done to her. The rest are like Sant Etienne—simultaneously beautiful and horrifying.

A glance in the open window of the shop shows a piece in progress, a holy martyr being torn apart by beasts. Above, on the back wall, is a shelf holding a half dozen bleached animal skulls, most of which I can't identify. A sign hangs nearby, saying a carving of any martyr's death can be made to order, and will confer a holy blessing on the Sanctum or home it resides in. What a talent to have, to render such things.

And in the marrow of my bones, I know with absolute certainty who created them.

A prickling feeling starts in my scalp and spreads down my neck and shoulders to my fingertips. Suddenly the agonized faces and wounded bodies around me aren't those of martyrs, they're the victims from all the pages, each one crying out as they did in their last hours. The air becomes so thick I

can't breathe, and my small meal begins to rise from where it had only begun to rest.

I spin around and rush toward the open air and sunshine, covering my ears against silent screams that surround me until a man steps into my path, blocking my escape.

“Can I help you find an item worthy of your coin?”

My hands drop back to my sides. He's shorter than me, his face vaguely familiar. His head is covered with a yellowish-green cap, but the stubble on his cheeks and the shade of his eyebrows indicate his hair is naturally dark. It's his eyes that I can't look away from, though. They're hazel—a brown interspersed with flecks of blue, much like mine, but instead of having a silver cast, the rings around his irises are black. Obsidian. Seeming to absorb the light around them like bottomless pits.

It's him.

CHAPTER 33

He stands in front of me with a long, beveled chisel in his hands, waiting for me to speak. I'm hypnotized, unable to form words, caught in the same trap as the light drawn into his eyes, unable to escape. After several seconds he speaks again, this time with some exasperation.

"Did you wish for something specific? I am well read in legends and the passions of our holy martyrs."

"No," I finally manage to gasp. "I don't have anything in mind. But your work is ... extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it."

The compliment thaws his icy manner, and he smiles. "I've never been one for watering down or obscuring the truth of our history. It does no honor to diminish what others have suffered for our sake."

I nod, hoping the movement will disguise how I'm forcing bile back down my throat. "I couldn't agree more."

He absently runs his thumb along the blunt edge of the metal in his hands. "Are you an artist as well?"

"No, not at all. But such things have always intrigued me."

"Then, please, allow me to show you the tools of my trade." The man steps back to set the chisel he's holding alongside a row of wood-handled instruments on the window ledge—longer and wider metal pieces, single-edged knives with curved blades, and gouges in a variety of shapes. All those are commonly used by stone carvers, but I've never seen the steel rods with flattened, textured ends—one pointed and one rounded.

"What are those for?" I ask, trying and failing not to mentally compare them to Hespera's surgical autopsy tools.

He picks one up. "These are rifflers, used to grind away wood or stone rather than scrape or chisel. The details they allow separate the common

carvers from the masters.”

“And you are a master?”

The man raises his eyebrows and sweeps his arm out to indicate his work. “Need you ask?”

“Of course not.” My mind scrambles for something that will take the sting out of the perceived slight. “What I meant to ask was, do you have an apprentice?”

“Are you seeking employment?”

“No, not at the moment.”

The carver searches my face like he thinks it’s familiar. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t, but it’s Catrin.” I offer my hand, hoping it’s not trembling. “And you are?”

“Alastor.” He glances down, and I’m suddenly glad I’m holding it at an angle that hides the half circle inked around my knuckles. “Forgive me for not shaking hands.” The strain in his smile creeps into his voice. “No offense, of course.”

I drop my hand, embarrassed, but also grateful not to have touched him. “None taken.” I gesture to the carving of Sant Etienne. “What drew me in here was that you work in wood rather than stone. I’ve never seen anything bigger than toys whittled for children. These must require large trees.”

Alastor stays an arm’s length away as he comes around to face me across the agonized expression of the martyr. “Not as large as you might think. The trick is in the grain of the wood.” He draws a calloused finger down the statue’s contorted arm. “See how the subject’s limb follows the natural bend?”

“I don’t know much about wood, but I can see what you’re talking about.” I look around like I’m studying his other works, but I’m really searching for an escape. “How long do you typically have to search for a tree with branches that are just right?”

“It requires patience.” He continues to stroke the barely visible grain lines along the wooden body. “Not just to find but to create.”

“You bend it yourself?”

“Yes, I begin shaping trees when they’re young and pliable. When they’re ready, I carve them while they’re still green.”

The twisted sapling by the burned corpse that seemed to have the man’s

soul trapped inside. And the trees that had been cut down and carried away from the places Hugh Bolton and Alan Pounce had been tortured. Stumps were common in the forest, but there would be one next to every place a man died. Alastor had carved the trees as he watched their lives drain away. *That's it. I'm nearly finished. It's beautiful.*

"That must take years," I gasp.

"It does, but my brother and I started the process when we were children." A shadow briefly falls across his face as he gestures at his finished works. "Those trees are now here while others are yet growing."

Hell Beyond, does he have a partner other than the woman? Out loud, I ask, "Is your brother also a carver, then?"

The shadow returns. "No, he has moved on to other things. I've only ever wanted to be an artist, though."

"I would say you've achieved that." I clear my throat as I back away. "But I'm late for meeting ... a friend. Maybe I'll bring him by another day."

Alastor smiles, and it takes all my self-control not to run away screaming. "Please do," he says. "There is nothing I love more than sharing my art."

For once, the sunlight feels welcome and cleansing as it hits my skin, and I stay in it as much as I can as I head blindly east, toward the citadel. Toward Simon.

CHAPTER 34

Londunium streets are rarely straight for more than a few blocks, and I'm forced to change direction often as I run, heading east as best I can, until a road finally spits me out at the moat surrounding the high walls. From there I sprint north to the fortress's main gate, the one Hespera entered with Edward the morning after Simon was arrested.

I've seen the killer. Talked to him.

All I can think of now is telling Simon. He'll know what to do. Thank the Moon it's Sun Day and prisoners are allowed visitors, Hespera's orders to stay away from him be damned.

But as I reach the drawbridge, the coroner herself comes walking out, leaning heavily on Edward. I halt in shock—both from seeing her there and at how she hangs on the shire reeve's arm. She's never touched him before.

The haema is pale and sweating, a combination that also doesn't make sense, unless she's on the edge of fainting. She catches sight of me and manages to stand straighter, a frown deepening the lines around her mouth as she stops. "What are you doing here, Catrin?"

I struggle to find an excuse. "Searching for you, Haema. Haema Maia sent me to find you."

"Is that so?" She looks up at Edward. "My assistant can help me from here, thank you."

The shire reeve withdraws his support reluctantly. "If you're sure, Haema."

"I am. Good afternoon."

Hespera shuffles forward and loops her arm in mine. Without waiting for his response, the coroner drags me away from the citadel. "What are you really doing here, Catrin?" she hisses. "Trying to see that boy when I told you it was dangerous for all of us if you did?"

“I need to talk to him.”

She makes a noise of disgust. It’s not long before her burst of strength is spent and I’m supporting her as Edward did. “What’s wrong with you?” I ask. “Are you sick?”

“I’ll be fine.”

I’m not sure she will be. And despite her needing my help to walk in a straight line, she directs our path slightly away from the akademium. “Where are we going?”

“To see Martin.”

“Why?”

“I have business with him. Stop asking questions.”

We’re silent for the next three blocks but for her heavy breathing, until the reeve’s home comes into view. Like many Londunium houses, it’s half a story above the city’s filthy street, and Martin sits on the stoop, bouncing a towheaded child of about two years on his knee. Without the braid on his sleeve he looks odd, less. He spies us the instant we come around the corner and rises to his feet. Before coming down to meet us, he sets the toddler in the doorway, kisses her on the cheek, and straightens her dress, then adds a pat on the rear to encourage her to continue inside.

“Haema,” he says with a solemn nod as he reaches the bottom of the steps. “Catrin. How are you?”

Hespera doesn’t waste time with pleasantries. “May I speak with you in private, Martin?”

“Of course.” Martin moves aside and gestures for her to go up to the house.

“Wait here, Catrin,” she says wearily, like she doesn’t have the energy to be snappish.

I obey as they disappear into the house, so rooted to the spot that at least one cart traveling the avenue is forced to go around me, the driver clicking his tongue in annoyance. When the coroner finally steps outside again, her skin is an even paler shade of gray, now tinged with green. Martin is at her elbow, helping her down the steps, saying something about how she needs to get rest, and he’ll escort her home.

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary,” Hespera says as she reaches the packed dirt of the street. “I have my new assistant to help me.”

Martin extends his free hand to me. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Martin, the reeve of this neighborhood.” He pauses, his forehead creasing in

confusion. “At least I was until the other night.”

“And hopefully again soon.” Hespera’s words are for Martin, but her silver-ringed eyes bore into me. “Shake his hand, Catrin.”

I raise my arm, stiff as one on the clock tower designating the next moonset, and my hand disappears into his huge, freckled knuckles. “It’s quite an honor to be chosen as the haema’s assistant,” he says. “I offer you my congratulations.”

He doesn’t remember me at all.



My face is probably as green as Hespera’s as we pass through the akademium gate, my arm around the coroner’s waist to keep her upright. I wait in a daze as she takes one of the guards aside, only half aware that he glances pointedly at me before bowing and turning away to do whatever she’s ordered. She lurches back to my side, eyes bloodshot, rasping one word.

“Penthaemon.”

Reluctantly, I lead her to the council chamber, which is empty. Hespera slumps in her chair as soon as we reach it, then weakly motions for me to stand off to the side. All I can think of is Martin shaking my hand, his impersonal politeness. The coroner had drawn every memory of me out of his mind. If the haema had extracted all Edward’s recollection of whatever relationship they’d had years ago, she must know how terrible it is to do to someone, but I would sacrifice Martin’s friendship a thousand times to keep Simon.

Other members of the Penthaemon make their way into the chamber, Haema Maia smelling of the astringent soap she cleans her surgical tools with. The guard must have been sent to fetch them from their classrooms or the hospital. It’s near the end of their workday, and all look weary. Caerus arrives last and stands before his chair to glare at everyone until they rise, sighing audibly. Hespera is last to her feet, some of her color restored by her brief rest.

The archaemon lowers himself onto the stone-studded chair with a satisfied air. “You may make your report, Hespera.”

Everyone but the coroner sits again.

“I’ve done as you ordered,” she says. “I can confirm Simon has revealed

nothing that would compromise the Selenae community.”

Four spines relax visibly, but I clench my fists. I told them he could be trusted. Maybe now they’ll believe it.

The archaemon shifts in his seat with a glance at me. “When will the Hadrian be released?”

“The day after tomorrow,” Hespera answers. “Sometime before noon is typical.”

Caerus’s eyes dart to me again and back to Hespera. “What is the status of the Hadrians’ investigation?”

Hespera’s hands tremble with fatigue as she reaches into her pocket. “The killer has been caught, so that inquiry is over, and Simon has been cleared of suspicion in the two murders at the citadel. Catrin was never identified that night, but there was some risk of questions extending to others involved in the original investigation; therefore the simplest solution was to erase any knowledge of her connection to it.”

Though I already know what she did to Martin, I’m queasy as she opens her hand to reveal a pair of smooth, opaque stones that gleam with faint rainbows. “Neither the shire reeve nor his younger brother remember her now.”

Zosima rises from her chair, holding a marble mortar in one hand and a matching pestle in the other. Without a word, she extends the bowl to Hespera, and the coroner drops the stones inside. The chamber echoes with a pair of cracks as the older haema shatters both memory stones with two direct blows, and then rhythmic grinding sounds as she rotates the pestle, crushing them into tinier and tinier pieces. When she’s finished, Zosima pours the sparkling dust onto the floor, like it’s worthless.

There is no longer evidence I ever existed in Edward’s mind. I barely exist in Martin’s.

Two stones. But there were three missing from the jeweler’s display this afternoon.

“And what of the Hadrian himself?” asks Maia as the door behind me opens and another person steps into the room. A guard, from the sound of his light armor.

Hespera gestures to the newcomer to give his report. He clears his throat. “I have collected everything I believe belonged to the Hadrian. There wasn’t much beyond a few items of clothing. Some money.”

I spin around in shock. He's talking about Simon's possessions. Those things had been in my room. Our room.

"Thank you." The coroner waves his dismissal, and the door closes as I turn to stare at her again. She ignores me and addresses the rest of the Penthaemon. "When the Hadrian Simon is released, he will be given his personal items and told during his time in gaol he lost his lodging and has to find a new place to live. He'll also need new employment, and, given his failure and poor decisions, his assistance in future investigations will not be requested."

My knees almost give out as Hespera pulls a third stone from her pocket and raises it to the light. "It took considerable effort, but I managed to extract all memories of Catrin and the akademium from his mind."

"No!" I scream. "You promised you wouldn't do that!"

Her eyes are as flat as her tone as she looks at me. "I promised not to harm him, and he suffered no injury at my hand."

"Liar!" I lunge at Hespera but Maia catches me with one arm from behind. Zosima quickly joins her from the other side, and between the two of them and my exhaustion from several days of hard work and little sleep, I can't reach the haema who holds everything Simon's ever thought about me between her thumb and forefinger.

"Calm yourself," Maia says as I struggle. "What's done is done."

What a memory stone holds, it keeps forever.

She's right. I moan and sag in their arms like a wet blanket.

The archaemon reaches for the stone from behind, but Hespera is so fixed on me she doesn't see him as she lowers her hand and takes a few steps closer, crunching over the sparkling grit on the floor. "I warned you, Catrin," she says before glaring at every other face in the room. "I warned all of you what permitting the Hadrian to stay would lead to."

Caerus makes another subtle move to get close to the memory stone, but he's too late. Hespera drops the pebble in Zosima's bowl and takes it and the pestle in her own hands as the other haema holds on to me.

"Wait!" I stretch my arms toward her as far as I can. "Let me have it. I'm bonded to Simon—what's his is mine."

Hespera glances pointedly at my reaching hands, only one of which is marked. "A bonding that thankfully was not completed and means nothing."

"Those memories can't be used for anything bad," I plead. "There's no

harm in me keeping them.”

“And no need, either,” she says, even as she grips the pestle with the hand whose ring bears memories she’s kept for herself.

“Please!” I collapse to my knees with hands clasped, desperate. “Please give it to me. It’s all I have left of him.”

If I expected any sympathy from her, I was doubly foolish. Hespera shakes her head. “There are some things we’re not meant to have.”

I don’t even have time to take a breath before she slams the pestle down on the stone with a *crack* that snaps through my mind like a whip, and I faint.

CHAPTER 35

I wake in my bed, blinking against the red-gold sunlight leaking through the cracks in the shutters. The room is like an oven, but I reach across the covers, hoping to find Simon. Lingering emotions from my nightmare have me wanting the comfort he always offers.

But the bed is empty.

It all comes rushing back to me, and I remember Simon will never lie beside me again, and I pull his pillow to my face with a sob that is followed by another and another. I cry until the cover is soaked with tears and my sorrow turns into something else, and then I scream.

I unleash my rage, screaming over and over into the pillow until all that remains is despair and I'm hoarse and choking on tiny bits of down. When I finally sit up, face raw and burning, I can see they took everything of his from the room. All that's left is his scent and a few crescent blond hairs on the sheets and floor. Still, I stumble out of the bed and throw open the wardrobe. His side completely bare.

Hespera. She did this.

My feet are unsteady and my hands even more so as I fumble with the latch and yank the door wide. I run down the passage and outside, my limbs moving slowly, like the air is water. The sun is sinking beneath the high walls, and the courtyard is full of shadows. I head for Hespera's office, intending to smash everything I can get my hands on while she sleeps soundly in her bed, but when I reach the door it's open, and the coroner is sitting at her desk, studying a parchment.

"You!" I screech, though the sound is more like a croak.

Hespera looks up calmly. "You're finally awake."

The room begins spinning as she stands, and I lose my balance and fall

against the doorframe. Hespera catches my shoulders before my head hits the floor, and she drags me into the room, muttering, “Hell Beyond, you stink.”

The door closes and latches as I struggle to sit up. After a moment, the coroner squats beside me and holds a cup to my lips. I choke and sputter as liquid is poured into my mouth. “What is this?”

“Water, mostly. And honey with some salt.”

The concoction doesn’t seem like anything I would normally like, but nothing has ever tasted better. I swallow everything in one gulp, and Hespera hands me a second cup. “Slow down,” she chides as she refills the first from a pitcher. “Or you’ll vomit.”

I manage to drink the contents in two swallows rather than one. The cups are swapped again but she keeps a grip on it to prevent my drinking too fast. “When was your last meal?”

“Just some bread this afternoon.” My stomach cramps and I groan, clutching my middle.

“It will pass,” Hespera says. “Wait a minute and let everything settle.” She stands and pours more liquid into the cups before setting them on the edge of her desk, within my reach. “And you mean yesterday afternoon. You’ve been asleep for a full day.”

Time she has apparently used to recover from the fatigue caused by ruining my life. “Where is Simon?”

“Does it matter? He doesn’t know or care where you are.”

“It matters to *me*. And I’m not stupid. I’m willing to bet what you did to him is at least as imprecise as determining the hour in which someone died. You’ll watch him for a while to make certain you rooted out every trace of me.”

Hespera huffs out her nose. “You are correct that we’re keeping an eye on him, but not for that reason. I know I got everything. The question is, did I take too much?” She goes back to her desk and indicates I should sit in the chair across from her, by the two full cups. “Like the liver, some excised areas of the mind can grow back. Other losses can be accommodated for, like a person with no arms can learn to use their feet as hands or how one kidney can perform the work of two.”

She has the temerity to look briefly ashamed. “But, as in surgery on occasion, areas are unintentionally cut off from necessary support—nerves, muscles, tendons—and they atrophy, withering away to nothing.”

I haul myself painfully into the seat but ignore the drinks. “That’s if they don’t become necrotic and rot.” I narrow my eyes at her surprise. “See? I do pay attention to your lectures and all the extra attention you’ve lavished on me.”

“And consequently you’ve learned more than any other student in their first two weeks.”

“Forgive my ingratitude,” I reply flatly.

Guilt flashes across her face again. “As for Simon—”

“How long before you know if some kind of damage is done?” I interrupt.

“A few weeks, but we have bigger problems.”

“There are no bigger problems to me. *How* will you know? What will happen to him?”

Hespera sighs. “Most Hadrians will be fine. It’s the more intelligent ones you have to worry about. Their minds create hallucinations and false memories and make absurd connections between unrelated events to explain gaps.”

That was what Haema Maia had said, an affliction that sounds much like what Simon’s cousin Juliane suffered from, as well as his own father. He’d watched both deteriorate into madness and feared the same condition manifesting in his own mind. Hespera had set the stage for his worst nightmare coming true.

“Take another drink, Catrin.” She gestures to the metal cups.

I slap both across the desk, spilling their sticky contents over her parchments, but most of the liquid hits her squarely, as well as one of the cups, which impacts her chin. Then I smile.

She barely reacts, except to wipe her face on her sleeve. “You’ll regret that.”

I already do, but only because I’m so thirsty. I should have drunk one and thrown the other.

The coroner pulls a towel from a drawer and dabs the wet pages with it. “These are Simon’s notes from the investigation, by the way. I was going to give them to you.”

A pathetic substitute for crushed memories and the warmth of his body and the feel of his mouth on mine. For how he shared everything he knew and valued my opinion. The way he depended on me and I on him. I hold out my hand. “Then give them to me and I’ll leave.”

Hespera sweeps them into a stack. “I saved his life, you know. Caerus has been known to eliminate those between him and what he wants or is desperate to keep.”

My arm lowers. “How was Simon in his way?”

“Other than keeping our secrets, isn’t it obvious? Caerus wants to study you, your power. That’s the reason he agreed to let you stay in the first place.”

“And you’ve been lying to him about my abilities? To ‘protect’ me?” My mouth twists up in a sarcastic smile. “Yet another thing I should be thanking you for. I seem to owe you a lot.”

“You do,” she replies coolly. “And you are still in danger. More so if you leave the akademium. Simon, too.”

“And you care so much about him.”

The coroner stiffens. “I swore to do no harm, and I have kept that vow.”

“You just told me your actions may send him into a spiral of madness.”

“If a patient will die unless his arm is amputated, but he may perish of shock or complications later, does that mean nothing should be done? No. I chose the path of least risk. To everyone.”

I gape at her. “Are you saying Caerus would’ve killed him?”

“Yes. And Martin.”

“I never saw any indication he intended to do such a thing.”

“You’ve known him for two weeks. I’ve known him two decades.”

She can justify everything, except ... “There was no need to destroy the stone.”

Hespera’s shoulders slump. “I’m truly sorry for the pain that caused. But Simon is gone, and it’s better for you to move on.”

“Like you did with Edward?”

She blinks. “What?”

I nod to the ring she’s unconsciously twisting with the thumb on the same hand. “I know you used to be more than friends with him.” Actually I don’t know for certain, but nothing I’ve seen contradicts that theory. “Until one day he didn’t remember you anymore. Three stones for three years’ worth of memories?”

That’s a flat-out guess, but she curls her ring hand into a fist. “Who told you about him?”

“Why? So you can pay them a visit?” I retort.

“So I can *protect* him.” Her blanched skin pulls tight across her cheekbones. “Who knows?”

I can't help taunting her. “You'd actually be surprised how many.”

“Tell me. Now.”

She quivers with anger as I sit there, enjoying it. “How does it feel, Haema?”

Hespera lunges across the desk to yank me off my chair by my collar, screaming in my face. “*Who, Catrin?*”

I silently count to ten before answering. “No one. Just me.”

She releases my shirt and backs away, eyes wary. “How did you know?”

“Several different scraps of knowledge and observation.”

“Did you tell Simon?”

I wrinkle my forehead in confusion. Why should that matter if she's sponged everything of me from his brain? “No, actually.”

Hespera slouches in her chair, some color returning to her cheeks. “Thank you.”

I remain standing, though I grip the front of the desk to stay steady. “When should I expect that memory to be extracted?”

She ignores my insolence. “I will leave you intact if you promise to never tell anyone.”

“I promise.” I hold out my hand again. “And now that our business is concluded and I have nothing left to say to you, I'll take those pages and pack my bags.”

Rather than hand them to me, Hespera sweeps them to her chest. “You can't leave, Catrin.”

“I can and I will.” I won't even stay the night in that empty bed.

“There are matters which must be explained, and I need your abilities.”

“*You*,” I say. “*You dare* to ask for my help.”

Hespera breathes deeply twice. “Would you stay if I told you it's possible for Simon to recover his memories of you?”

I flinch. “Haema Maia told me what a memory stone takes, it keeps forever.”

Even if it didn't, the stone is gone.

“And that is correct,” answers Hespera. “But pulling a memory out requires the subject to think about it, and that creates ... echoes that can remain for a short time.”

My mouth falls open as the extended hand drops back to my side. “How long?”

“It’s difficult to say. Every memory, every person is different.”

“Make your best guess.” I eye her ring to remind her what information I hold.

“A month for a strong, deep memory.”

I only make it two steps toward the door before she calls out, “But you can’t try too soon, either!”

I pivot back, grabbing a shelf to ride the wave of dizziness from the movement. “Explain.”

Hespera sighs, her gaze darting to the cabinet of jars to her left. “Other, small echoes can get in the way. You have to approach after the chaos of the extraction has died down, and at a quieter moment when there are no distractions.” Her chin twitches. “It’s complicated and very few understand it. I barely do. It may not succeed, either.” She raises her eyes to mine. “But you need to be prudent in your actions if you want to keep him safe. The killer is still out there.”

I cross my arms and raise my chin. “I know who he is. I met him.”

“Yes,” Hespera replies. “Alastor Carver. An artist of extraordinary talent.” She pauses as I gape at her. “I realized it the day you told me the killer was re-creating the deaths of Hadrian martyrs. That was when I knew I had to protect everyone on his trail, even at the cost of their memories.”

“But ... why?” I gasp. “He’s just a Hadrian—”

“No, he’s not.” Her whisper cuts through my protest. “He was once one of us.”

CHAPTER 36

I stare at the coroner. She can only mean Alastor was born Selenae but severed from his magick and cast out of the community, a fate worse than death. The hair rises on the back of my neck as I remember his eyes ... rather than silver around the iris, they'd been black as the stones put under his skin to absorb his power.

Voided Selenae typically succumb to madness or *skonia* addiction within a few years. When taken, the distilled moonflower essence can restore their magick for a few seconds before it's leached away, and overdosing becomes easy. I know the signs of those who use the drug, however, and Alastor had none of them. "So he's mad, then?" I ask.

Hespera snorts. "Wouldn't you call what he's doing insane?"

"Why was he voided?" I demand. "What crime did he commit?"

Had the Selenae *known* they were placing a murderer among Hadrians, and not cared?

"No crime, not before voiding," she answers as she gestures to the seat. "Please, before you collapse."

I obey without thinking, still in shock.

"Now," Hespera begins. "Most of this is common knowledge among the older of us, but it is not to be discussed." She waits and then accepts my silence as assent. "Alastor had the strongest blood magick of any Selenae in generations. Everyone knew he was destined to sit in the archaemon's chair, but he didn't want it."

"He only wanted to be an artist," I murmur, recalling his words.

"Yes. But by our laws anyone with blood magick must use it. Alastor enrolled here, at the akademium, and, as he expected, he hated it. He finished the course of study, however."

“Then what?”

“When Nestor pressured him to take the chair as was his right, he refused.”

I raise my eyebrows. “As you say you did?”

She sees less irony in the comparison. “That was three years later. In fact, it was Alastor voiding himself that allowed me to postpone my acceptance. He may as well have committed suicide, and they were afraid I might do the same.”

I frown. “Where does Caerus come into all of this?”

“He doesn’t.” Hespera makes a sweeping motion with her hand. “He arrived two years after me, several months after Alastor left.”

There’s something evasive in her manner at the mention of the archaemon, and I don’t like it. “No, I mean right now. You said he would’ve killed anyone who stumbled onto Alastor’s trail.”

“Yes,” Hespera says impatiently. “Surely you’ve noticed how obsessed he is with keeping Selenae secrets.”

“I’ve noticed how you seem to be the only one who’s been erasing memories.”

The coroner grits her teeth and clenches her ringed hand. “Just because I do the dirty work doesn’t mean I’m happy about it. But you saw how the archaemon reacted when Simon was put in prison. If Alastor was arrested and began spilling everything he knows to stay alive a little longer, we’d have no chance of stopping the chaos that would follow. Imagine how many of us would die at the hands of fearful Hadrians. Imagine our powers being made to serve the very people who have despised us for centuries. None of us anywhere would be safe.”

My thoughts on what would happen run faster than her words. “The solution is obvious,” I say. “Alastor has to be eliminated. Surely Caerus would agree.”

“That he will never do, nor would the council vote to allow it,” Hespera replies. “You weren’t raised Selenae, so you don’t understand how much we value each other, even those we’ve expelled.” She appears to pick her next words carefully. “It’s also my belief that, having voided himself voluntarily, some cling to the hope he will one day undo it.”

“Thus bringing back the most powerful among you,” I say dryly. “And the hopes that had been pinned on him.”

“Those hopes are perhaps a large reason he chose to leave.” Hespera tilts

her head to the side and arches an eyebrow. “A pressure not many could bear, if their potential became known.”

She means me. If she expects me to express gratitude for shielding me on that account, she’ll wait a long time.

“And I think Caerus already knows what Alastor is doing,” Hespera continues. “He just doesn’t care as long as Hadrians are the ones who die.”

That seems extremely cruel for a man who was the most sympathetic member of the council on several occasions. It did, however, explain the archaemon’s earlier interest in the cases and what we thought the killer was like. Intelligent. Methodical. Patient. Knowledgeable of anatomy. Simon had even gotten the age right.

The sudden thought of Simon rips a hole in my chest. I have to take a deep breath to keep from collapsing inward, and my eyes burn with the effort of damming the tears welling behind them.

“I understand how it feels,” Hespera says quietly, interpreting where my thoughts have gone. “But even if Simon never recovers, there is something of you left in him, just as there will always be something of me in Edward.” She looks down at her hand, caressing the stones with her forefingers. “I also know the pain of not being able to let go. Sometimes I think I kept these to punish myself for what I’d done.”

“Why did you do it?” I whisper. “Did he stumble upon too many secrets?”

Hespera switches to clasping her hands. “Our world was thrown into uproar when Alastor voided himself. That had never been done, let alone by someone with so much power. With so few Selenae possessing any blood magick, many felt our fate was sealed. My magick wasn’t as strong as his, but it was more than Nestor’s. And unlike Alastor, I *wanted* to be a physician. So I sacrificed Edward to fulfill what everyone said was now my destiny as archaema.”

“But you never got to sit in that chair.” I want to revel in her misery yet am having a difficult time. “Because Caerus was revealed to have greater power. I bet that hurt.”

She locks her jaw and speaks through gritted teeth. “He wasn’t even a very good physician, but his blood magick was a little stronger. The council at the time theorized his limited medical skills were because he hadn’t learned to harness all his power. He’d manifested late, as some do, and they believed in time he would improve. I argued that his lack of control negated the

advantage of having more, but that measure was all that mattered to them.” Her mouth twists in bitterness. “Like making a man king simply because he is slightly taller.”

It’s clear Hespera resented that more than she acted. Now I understand she hid my abilities from Caerus in the hopes that I would unseat him, the one who she never believed deserved the chair anyway. But she also despises me and what I represent.

“And then I came along,” I say.

“Yes.” Hespera’s silver glare hardens. “Then you came along. Eight years ago I acted on the belief that I had a responsibility to use and preserve our magick. You not only reminded me that my sacrifice had been for nothing, you proved it was unnecessary.”

“And yet you forced me into the same miserable fate.”

“There is no possibility of Simon being accepted as long as Caerus is archaemon,” she insists. “I’d hoped you could replace Caerus, but you needed time and training. I also wanted to find your limits—which I’ve not been able to do yet. Meanwhile, you were halfway to voiding yourself over that boy.”

“You didn’t explain any of this,” I spit. “You didn’t even give me the choice.”

The coroner takes a deep breath. “I’ll admit I panicked on learning about Alastor. My first thought was to protect Edward, Martin, and even Simon while I still could. And there was some free will in this, just not yours. Don’t let his sacrifice be in vain, Catrin.”

“What do you mean?” I demand. “Did Simon know what you were going to do to his memory?”

“Yes. And he did not resist. He knew it was the only way to save himself.”

“No, because it was the only way to save *me*.”

Hespera’s lips twitch. “Yes,” she says softly. “He did it for you.”

Of course he did. Because there was no other way left to tell me he loved me.

★ ★ ★

Hespera insists that I drink another two cups of her sweet concoction before leaving, and, truthfully, it does wonders for my precarious physical state,

including a pounding headache from over a day without food.

“Eat these and only these over the next few hours,” she instructs, handing me a tin box of dry, salted biscuits. “And drink lots of water, until your urine is barely yellow anymore. Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is the new moon, which is conveniently the best day to test the limits of one’s magick.”

When Moon is present but gives no light, it is usually a day of rest for everyone—the opposite of full-moon nights, which are celebrations.

“Here is your cloak. I took the liberty of washing it again after our forest walk.” She lays the heavy fabric over my arm and turns back to the cabinet to retrieve a deep blue-violet shirt and skirt. “I noticed you also only have one appropriate outfit, so take these clothes I bought in the Quarter this morning. I had to guess on the size, but you’re bigger than me, and I went off that.”

I wait as she sets the clothes over the cloak. “You’ve been busy—shopping, laundry, stealing memories...”

“Take a bath, too,” she adds, unflappable.

“Is that all?”

“Until morning, yes. Find me in the dining hall at breakfast.”

“Do you intend to direct what I eat then, too, Mother?”

“As the physician helping you recover from what was mere hours from organ failure, yes.”

Nothing but the subject of Edward has ever earned a reaction, but I’ll keep trying. I’ll also never forget how Hespera didn’t tell me Simon could recover his memories until it was the only way to keep me here. That makes me doubt she’s being truthful, but as long as there’s the tiniest chance, I have to take it.

★ ★ ★

I hate how Hespera insists on filling my plate herself, but I hate even more how much better I feel after eating everything. The coroner only sips tea as she watches every bite. We garner more than a few stares from the students, including a few non-Selenae who are grabbing a quick meal before the one full day they’re allowed to work in the hospital.

Caerus approaches as I’m finishing. “How are you feeling, Schola Catrin?”

Hespera has warned me not to speak until we’re alone, but I figure this is an exception. “I’ve been better.”

He motions to my bondmarked hand. “You should remove that. Maia has a solution that will dissolve the ink without damage to the skin.”

I pull my arm to my body and cover the half circle with my other hand. “No.”

“I’ve already recommended that,” says Hespera. “But as you can see, she’s refused. It will fade in time, however, like her need for the Hadrian.”

Her words have to be for show. Why exactly does she hide so much from the archaemon?

Caerus rests a hand on my shoulder. There’s a strange sensation where he touches me, similar to a bloodstone that can push or pull on another without making contact. The invisible force pulses with his heartbeat, and I glance at his ring, the black stone’s golden six-pointed star floating over the curved surface. I now understand how the gem draws and focuses magick, but I don’t think I could wear one all the time as he does, any more than I could eat only the richest foods for every meal. It would make me sick.

But, in comparison to what Hespera said last night, I’ve known of my magick for a brief time, whereas the two of them have decades of experience.

I want you to know, Caerus’s voice whispers in my mind. I wouldn’t have ordered that memory stone destroyed. It was done before I could stop her.

My eyes dart to Hespera, whose jaw is clenched behind her teacup. The pressure on my shoulder shifts, and Caerus’s words become louder. *Can you hear me?*

I can’t help jumping. His hand retracts at the movement, and I look up, feigning confusion. “Did you say something, Archaemon?”

He shakes his head, disappointment in his eyes. “No, I didn’t.” Caerus turns his attention to the coroner. “I know today is the new moon, but I want you to visit the Hadrian before his release and make sure he’s not damaged by what you did.” Sympathy creases his brow as he glances at me. “And take Catrin with you.”

Hespera purses her lips, plainly disliking the idea. “As you wish, Archaemon.”

Caerus pats my shoulder again. “I hope you feel better soon, Catrin.”

He called me Catrin. Three times, actually. No Selenae has done that but Hespera. Was it sympathy or has he come to think of me as not belonging, as the coroner initially did?

When the archaemon is gone, I push my plate aside, suddenly queasy.

“Will seeing me so soon ruin the chance of Simon recovering?”

“I doubt it.” Hespera’s already sour expression transforms into disgust. “But Caerus is working very hard to make you hate me, telling me to take you to see for yourself what ‘I did.’ On his orders, he neglected to mention.”

I realize I’m a chess piece being fought over by two powerful players.

Except I’m more powerful than them both.

CHAPTER 37

“You’re not to speak to him,” Hespera says as we walk past shops opening up and merchants setting out their displays. I’m carrying her bag as usual, but this time there aren’t any extras in it. “Creating substantial memories with you in them right now could undermine the chances of breaking through later.”

It makes some sense. “Because then I’d be established enough that his mind wouldn’t look deeper for who I am?”

The coroner blinks at me. “What?”

I repeat my words, and she nods, saying, “Yes, yes. Exactly,” but I get the feeling she wasn’t really listening. She’s always agitated when there’s a chance of running into Edward. I wonder if she’s worried about damage she may have done to him, too. A piece of parchment can only be scraped clean or had holes poked in it so many times.

The shire reeve is just inside the gate, writing in some kind of ledger. When we get closer, I can see well enough to discern it’s a record of labors and those in gaol. He’s noting that Simon has completed his sentence and is free to go. Edward’s semi-vacant expression brightens when he notices Hespera, and he signs his name before closing the book and facing her fully. “Good morning, Haema. Is there something I can assist you with?”

She smiles tightly. “My apologies I couldn’t come yesterday. I’m here to examine a few of the prisoners you were concerned about.”

Edward’s forehead wrinkles. “Did I say that? I don’t remember.”

“It was on your Sun Day, and you asked me to look in on two men in particular,” Hespera lies smoothly. “You didn’t actually say I needed to return, but we physicians like to make sure our patients are improving.”

“Yes, of course. I probably don’t recall that as I was busy supervising

visitors.” Some of the puzzlement eases and becomes concern. “You were also not feeling well that day, and I was worried. How are you now?”

“Much better, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. May I escort you to the cells, Haema?”

The coroner shakes her head in a jerky motion. “It’s not necessary once the guards are aware I have your permission. I know you were here all night. You should go home to your wife.”

“I would, but I’m not married,” he replies.

I knew that from Martin, but apparently Hespera didn’t. Her mouth drops open before she can stop it. “But ... I’ve seen you with children.”

“If you have, they weren’t mine. Probably my niece and nephew.”

“Oh.” So much spills out of that syllable—relief and despair and frustration and embarrassment.

Edward’s eyes spark, the blue becoming almost lighter though we’re in the shade. “I feel like I’ve seen a lot of you lately. More in the past week than in the last year or two.”

Hespera realizes I’m watching their exchange with great interest, and the emotion is wiped from her face, though two red splotches remain on her cheeks. “Yes, well. Even so, your presence isn’t necessary. I know my way.”

With that she turns and walks in what must be the direction of the gaol—I’ve never been there. Every step is stiff and her back is so straight she could have a broomstick up her rear and you wouldn’t be able to tell. “Not a damn word,” she mutters, but I don’t think it’s a reminder not to speak to Simon when we see him.

The heightened vigilance after the two murders has waned, and it’s broad daylight, so we have no trouble getting through the guards outside the cellblock.

“Where is Simon?” I whisper to Hespera, craning my neck to peer down the torchlit passage. “Which is his door?”

“He’s not here, he’s in another section.”

My voice rises. “Then why didn’t we go there?”

“Because he will be released within the hour,” she answers with ill-concealed impatience. “And this is the only way out. He will have to pass us.”

“What do we do until then?”

The coroner walks to the first cell. “What we said we were here for.

Examine some of the prisoners.”

Which I shortly learn means I will be bandaging oozing wounds and sores and listening to the rattling coughs of men who haven't seen the sun in years. The guards don't know Hespera told Edward she was only here to check on two men and allow her to look at everyone. Some of the prisoners won't let us touch them, but most are eager to interact with anyone, even Selenae, and especially women. I learn early to roll my sleeves above my elbows to prevent lice from hitching a ride on my shirt. And the smell ... ugh. But the heightened sense comes in handy when I notice the early signs of gangrene in one man's toe. I suppose I can feel glad I saved a man's foot, if not his life.

Somewhere around an hour into all this, the door at the end opens and a familiar shape appears. I quickly refocus on cleaning what has to be a rat bite, but I notice when Simon's footsteps halt once he can see us. “Did someone die?” he asks.

Hespera moves to stand between me and him. “No,” she says brusquely. “This is merely a medical check. Do you have any wounds or symptoms that need treatment?”

“No, I'm fine, thank you. I've actually just been told I can leave.” Simon's voice has the same blank quality of the night I first saw him, when he was also somewhere he didn't want to be.

“What about your hands?” asks Hespera. “They're wrapped and bloody.”

I tie the linen bandage on my patient's finger and begin putting things in the coroner's bag, keeping my back to Simon and Hespera but listening with all my might.

“It's nothing,” Simon is saying. “Only blisters from grave-digging. I'm not worth your trouble.”

My heart squeezes painfully at how he's withdrawn into his previous, defeated self.

“I will judge that.” There's a pause as Hespera unwraps the filthy bandages I put on him days ago. I can smell the dirt and also the pus. The coroner clicks her tongue. “There's an infection starting, but that's easily taken care of.”

She reaches over me and pulls a jar of salve out of the bag. “Since you're being released, you can do all this yourself when you get home. Wash your hands thoroughly with clean water and soap, apply this, and cover with some of this gauze until the worst oozing stops.”

I peek over my shoulder and am dismayed by the blistered and torn skin of his palms and fingers. Digging must have been excruciating yesterday.

“Thank you.” Simon winces as he takes the bandage and jar, almost dropping them. Blood already dots the clean roll of linen he holds. I bite my lip and turn away.

Hespera exhales heavily, then reaches into the bag again and pulls out two flat, coin-size bloodstones. “Here, take these. Tuck them into the wrappings on your hands before you go to bed. They’ll keep you from clenching your fists in your sleep, and the skin will be properly stretched as it heals.”

That’s not why the wounds will improve twice as fast, but I’m both amazed at her giving the stones to him and making up what sounds like a logical reason to use them. Usually they aren’t wasted on Hadrians unless bones are broken, and often not even then.

“I’ll do that, thank you.”

“Simon of Gallia!” calls a guard from the end. “You have a friend here with some of your things. Apparently you lost your lodging.”

He sighs. “I guess I have to find somewhere to stay. If you’ll excuse me ... Haema? Is that what you’re called?”

“Yes, that’s my title. My name is Hespera.”

I can’t stand it anymore. Rising from my crouch, I turn around to face him. He’s already pivoting away, but the movement attracts his attention, and he jumps, looking straight at me. His heartbeat leaps into a gallop as he fumbles with the stones. “Blazing skies! I didn’t realize there was another person behind you.”

Hespera grabs me with one hand behind her back. “Just my assistant.”

Simon searches the floor in the dim torchlight to make sure he didn’t drop anything, and his pulse returns to normal. His expression is once again empty, resigned. Like the night we met. “Startled me is all. Thank you again.”

Then he’s gone.

Hespera keeps her grip on my lower arm as she twists around to face me. “What did I tell you *not* to do?”

“I *didn’t* speak to him.” I squirm against her hold and the sick feeling in my stomach. “It’s dark in here, I don’t imagine he actually saw me well, either, but I had to see him.”

The coroner releases me with a snort. “You’re a fool, but at least you’re a

predictable one.”

I rub my wrist where it’s turning pink. “Do you think I ruined his chance of recovery?”

“Doubtful. The odds are slim already.” She begins gathering the remaining items not in her bag.

I have to hold on to the hope that there’s some echo of me in his mind. Edward doesn’t remember anything of his relationship with Hespera, but he trusts her, even when what she says contradicts his memory. Surely Simon will have something similar I could rebuild on, but I don’t see that happening under the watchful eye of the archaemon.

Unless I leave them as Alastor did. To hell with their power squabble.

“Let’s go.” Hespera’s voice cuts through my thoughts. The bag is thrust into my arms, and I follow her obediently out of the gaol and through the citadel, my mind racing.

We exit the gate, and I see Simon and Martin walking away, talking about where they can find a room. Simon is refusing to impose on his friend, and Martin reluctantly agrees to take him to an inn. Hespera turns back to where I’ve stopped to listen to them. “Stop staring, Catrin.”

If Caerus was trying to make me hate her, he should’ve realized he didn’t have to try that hard. I shove the medical bag at her and step away. “I’m not going with you.”

The coroner pales. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I’ll see you later.” I move in the direction of the pair.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Catrin. We have work to do.”

I don’t bother arguing and just leave her standing there.

★ ★ ★

I trail both men at a distance, as I’m wearing the clothes Hespera bought, and I even have kohl around my eyes, because she’d pointed out it would be stranger if I didn’t. Other Selenae are out and about on the one day Sun and Moon align, but I avoid them. Simon and Martin walk halfway across the city, back to Martin’s neighborhood and the people who know him. The first inn they try has a room for Simon, though I know it’s not for free. Given his low funds, I imagine Simon would’ve chosen somewhere a little cheaper, but this place has a large washroom, which he needs after several days of labor

and sleeping on a rotting straw mattress.

Once Martin leaves, I slip in the door by the kitchen and up the back stairs. The passage between the rooms is dim, but I have no problem navigating it. I press my ear to every door in turn. Snores or silence from most, though one has a couple arguing loudly. I don't bother to get close to that one. He's not in any of these.

I ascend to the third story, where only half the rooms are occupied. Shadows move across the light coming out from under one door, and as it opens I jump into the empty room next to it. I hold my breath as I watch from the space between the hinges as Simon steps out, clean clothes tucked under one arm. He doesn't even look in my direction as he heads down the main stairs to the bath on the first floor.

All I wanted to know was where he would be, yet I can't help going to the room as his footsteps drop away. Everything he owns is spread out on the bed, but it doesn't even cover one half of the blanket. I run my hands over his few possessions, fingering the loose button on one shirt that I never found time to fix for him. The only trace of me I can find is one long dark hair curled up into less than half its length on the sleeve of his nightshirt. I leave it there, wondering if he'll even notice it, or whether he'll assume it was from whoever last slept in this room.

I have no idea how long Simon will take downstairs, so I force myself to leave, but not before tucking a few extra coins in his purse, then two more in the bottom of his bag, where it would be easy to assume they were stuck when he dumped it out.

Back on the street, I rub tears from my eyes, trying to tell myself that as long as Simon is alive and well, that's what's important. Even if he never remembers me, I might manage to force my way into his life, and if he never knows about my magick, then he can't be upset if I give it up for him. And, I think with a bitter chuckle, if I went mad like Alastor, Simon would take care of me.

The thought of the carver makes me suddenly realize where I'd seen him before. It was in the graveyard, where he'd helped carry the man everyone believed was killed by a wolf. Did that mean he knew the carpenter somehow?

Hespera had seen him that night, too. He'd nodded to her, but she'd refused to acknowledge. That didn't seem terribly odd, given their history, but it was

interesting. When he'd voided himself, he likely expected her to be the one who would benefit.

More worrisome is another time our paths crossed. Earlier that day, he'd been on the street in front of Philippa's house, putting a coin in the box by her door the afternoon she'd thrown me out. How long had he been watching her—or me? Did that mean he knows about Simon, too?

There's an inn across the street, and I go inside, asking for a room on the third floor, facing front, prepared to pay extra to move someone out, but the one I want is available. I give the owner enough for a week and tell him I expect to be coming and going at Selenae hours, so I'm not to be disturbed. Then I go upstairs and sit by the window with my eyes and ears trained on the one opposite mine.

It's a good hour before Simon returns from the bath, much cleaner. The clothes he was wearing earlier are now under his arm, but he was less successful at getting all the dirt and grime out of them. He hangs them on the window ledge to dry, then applies the salve and wraps his hands as Hespera instructed, his movements becoming slower and his eyelids drooping. I don't imagine he slept well in the gaol, so I'm not surprised when he pushes all his things aside and lies down to take a nap. Just before he drifts off, he remembers the bloodstones and slides them between the layers of bandages across his palm.

I don't actually imagine Simon is in danger right now, but I stay nonetheless, watching his shirt rise and fall. Contemplating how much I'd be willing to give up to rest my head on his chest again and listen to his heart beating.

The cynical thought from before returns. Could I live without my magick? I haven't known it that long, so its loss might not hit me as it does other Selenae. Yet it makes me sick to remember what it was like to be voided. And what if I gave up my powers and Simon still wasn't interested in me? He was reluctant to pursue his feelings for me back in Collis when we were working together, at least until I was in danger. Then he realized just how much he cared.

But before that was the spark of attraction, the moment he said he first truly saw me, sitting in the architect's workroom as I pieced the Sanctum model back together. That was where it all started.

I'll have to find a way to re-create that first spark. Then I can go from

there.

CHAPTER 38

As sunset approaches, I'm arguing with myself over whether I should go back to the akademium and get my things to stay the night here, or if someone—Hespera—will try to stop me from leaving. Martin comes by and wakes Simon up, telling him to come have dinner at his house, which Simon of course tries to refuse. It's hard to argue with a man as large as Martin, however, especially when he tells Simon a plate is already set for him at their table.

Simon pulls the stones out of his bandages and flexes his hand with a sigh before giving in. They leave, and I stand for the first time in hours and stretch the stiffness out of my limbs. I should probably go downstairs myself and eat.

My hearing suddenly picks up a familiar voice, and I fly to the window to look down. A wagon is moving west, unladen except for a young woman sitting on the back, dangling her feet over the dusty road. She's waving to someone who greeted her, saying they should come by tomorrow.

Philippa.

I race down two flights of stairs and out onto the street, quickly catching up enough to follow at a discreet distance. About a block from her home, Philippa hops down from the cart and calls her thanks to the driver for giving her a ride before he turns toward the river. She walks from there, carrying a travel bag on her shoulder.

From her light steps, she's in a good mood, but she also hasn't seen me yet.

After unlocking her front door, Philippa stops on the threshold, taking in the mess that is her shop. I hope no more stray cats got in, and that the one in the attic got out. She slowly moves inside, leaving the door open, and I watch from a few houses away. I have to tell her what happened and that she's in danger, but I'm worried she won't even let me speak.

Suddenly Philippa steps back out and pulls down the mourning banner hanging over the frame as it's several days past the time it should have been removed. She folds it up and starts to turn back inside when she sees me and stops. My chest tightens, waiting for her reaction.

She smiles.

When I hesitate, she motions for me to come closer. I swallow nervously and do as invited.

"I was worried," I say. "You just left and when I came by your shop..."

Philippa sighs. "Yes, I saw what happened."

"It was only that front room," I tell her. "The latch on the back door is open but I closed up as best I could."

"Thank you for that." She hugs the banner to her chest. "Will you come in?"

"Do you want me to?"

She smiles again. "It will save the trouble of writing you a letter tonight as I planned."

"Telling me what a horrible person I am?"

She laughs and pushes the door wider, moving to make room for me to go past her. "No, to apologize."

I remain rooted to the step. "You have nothing to be sorry for. What I did was unforgivable."

"Well, perhaps it wasn't the most prudent course of action," she admits, then pauses. "Please come in."

Finally, I step inside. The room is as I left it, with the chest wide open and empty.

Philippa sees what I'm looking at and sighs. "It's a mess, but the only thing that appears to have been taken was my uncle's scarf, so I've lost it again." She frowns. "And they broke the chest and left a bloody handprint on the lid. I'll probably just throw the whole thing out."

I close and lock the door behind me, wondering how I'm going to explain what happened. "Can I help you put things away?"

"That would be kind of you."

We pick up the first bolt of fabric, a buttery shade of satin, and I hold it tight while she rewraps it around the board. "Your neighbor said you went to see your mother."

"I did. After mulling all night after you left, it occurred to me that though

you had intruded on my private matters, you had never lied to me, but she had. I wanted an explanation.” She pins the end down and carries it to the shelf. One down, three dozen to go.

“What did your mother say?”

Philippa tips her head side to side as we work on a dun-colored linen. “A lot of half-truths and excuses at first, which emphasized to me how your honesty was to be preferred. It took three days to wear her down, but once I got the full story, we both felt better. Cleaner. I never realized how much her years of silence on him had poisoned the well, so to speak.”

I brush loose hair from my eyes as she puts the linen in its place. “And have you decided what to do? If you wish, I’ll write to him and tell him not to come. He’s probably receiving the letter right about now, but I doubt he’d be able to leave for Londunium immediately. There’s time to prevent it.”

“I want to meet him,” Philippa says decisively.

“And your mother?”

“She wants to see him, too.”

I nearly drop the next bolt. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“When?”

Philippa takes the fabric from my hands and replaces it with a large spool of snow-white lace to rewind. “She has several matters to take care of before leaving, but she’ll be here in a few days. I could’ve waited for her, but I wanted to come back sooner to tell you. Her neighbors—a spice merchant and his wife—are coming for a wedding, and she’ll travel with them.”

“That assumes your father will come. I can’t be certain.”

She smiles. “I think he will, given what the letter said.”

It must have contained promises along those lines. “Then I’m very happy for you both, but still sorry for my part in this.”

Philippa brushes dust off a yard of velvet. “If you’d told me only that you had a letter for my mother, I think it would still be sitting in the other room. And when she finally read it, who knows how long it would’ve been before she wrote to him or explained anything to me.”

“Are you saying I’m forgiven?”

She chuckles softly. “Yes, you’re forgiven, though I may want you here when he comes.”

“Absolutely.” I pause. “You smile just like him, you know. The day we

met I couldn't help thinking that I knew you, but I couldn't figure out why."

Philippa laughs outright. "Mother said that, too."

We lapse into silence, steadily restoring order to the shop, pausing only when Philippa leaves to get a pair of candles as the room has grown quite dark. My relief at healing the rift and focusing on the work has allowed me to forget everything that's happened the last few awful days, until Philippa asks, "How is Simon?"

I struggle to find an explanation. "I think he's come to believe I don't care for him."

A worried line forms in the center of her brow. "Did you argue?"

"Not exactly, but I haven't spoken to him in a week."

"That's a shame." Philippa picks up a candle. "I think that's good enough for tonight, though I may rearrange the colors in the morning. I'd offer you something to eat, but some animals got into my pantry while the back door was open. We could go to a tavern I know, or do you have to go home now?"

Now that she's back, I need to keep her safe. An idea has formed on how to do that. "Do you feel comfortable staying here tonight?"

"Not really," she admits. "I'll have to find a way to bar the back door, but even then I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep well."

I explain that I have a place at an inn not too far from here, though not why. "If you'll loan me a nightdress, you can stay with me. We can even have some dinner brought to the room."

Philippa breathes a sigh of relief. "That sounds wonderful, thank you." She hesitates, biting her lip. "Do you think we could talk about my father? What he's like?"

"Of course. But there's also a lot of other things I need to tell you, about the scarf and who took it."

★ ★ ★

Philippa stares at the flickering flame of the candle between our plates, now empty of our meal, her face blanched. "Do you think the killer will come back for me?"

"Honestly, I don't know, but you can stay with me here as long as you like. I've paid for the week."

She smiles shakily. "I would appreciate that."

I stand and gather the dishes and utensils, then set them on the floor of the passage outside to be collected by the kitchen boy. When I reclose the door, Philippa asks, “So why is it you’re here and not at the akademium?”

This was a question I’d anticipated. “It’s a matter of disagreement about the investigation. The Selenae don’t want to be involved, but I can’t just leave it.”

Philippa frowns. “That reminds me, I thought I saw Simon and Martin in the northeast graveyard when I left last week, but I didn’t stop. I was so intent on getting to my mother.”

I wince. “You did see them.” She’d only heard rumors before she left, so I briefly explain how the murders at the citadel led to Martin losing his position and Simon being punished, leaving out how I was involved. “And now the investigation is considered closed.”

“Because everyone blames the woman.”

“Yes, and now also the two of them have to do whatever they can to earn money—Simon for his debt and Martin for his family.”

A little more color has come into her cheeks. “Do either of them know the killer is still out there?”

I hesitate. Do they? Hespera said the only things she took were memories of me. “They might, but they can’t prove it. Neither do they have the authority—or time—to investigate.”

Philippa nods resolutely. “Then it is up to us to do so.”

“I already know who he is.”

“What? Who? How?” Her mouth hangs open in a perfect O.

“It’s a long story, but he’s a carver living in the city.” I describe how I realized the murders imitated the deaths of martyrs, even the woman who died with Hugh Bolton’s scarf over her face. “When I saw his work, I just knew.”

Philippa sets her jaw. “That should make it easy, then.”

“I think you mean dangerous.”

“I’m already in danger,” she points out. “And we only need to piece together enough evidence to present to the shire reeves. They can make the arrest.”

I’ve been struggling with what to say and how to say it, finally deciding Philippa needs to know some of what we’re up against. “It’s much more complicated than that. This man, Alastor Carver, actually used to be Selenae.

He left the community, which makes him subject to outside punishment, but the relationship between our world and yours is a delicate balance, only maintained because they don't mix."

"Like you and Simon?" she asks.

A lump rises in my throat. "Yes, like us."

"I'm sorry."

I brush her sympathy aside, conscious that I'm using the exact same gesture as Haema Hespera when she really doesn't want to talk about something. "I'll worry about Simon later. But the point is I don't know how to stop Alastor without upsetting that balance. I'm told he wasn't violent when he left, but I'm not sure the city will believe it. And if they think the Selenae knowingly cast a murderer into their midst without caring, I don't want to even imagine what would happen."

Philippa nods sagely. "My mother told me stories of your people being blamed for crimes or strange events." Then her eyes turn slightly fearful. "Does he have ... any kind of ... advantage?"

"He knows who we both are, but I think we have the advantage in that he's not aware we know he's the killer."

"No." She crosses her arms as she avoids my eyes. "I meant Selenae advantages." When I don't answer, she stamps her foot. "Like magick. People say Selenae can do ... things."

I think she expects me to laugh or be insulted, but I only shake my head. "No, Alastor has nothing like that."

She looks at the floor, embarrassed. "Sorry. It was a silly question."

I'm just glad she didn't ask about me; then I would have had to lie outright. "No, it's not. Selenae don't deny rumors on purpose. They prefer to be somewhat feared, which can come back to bite them."

Philippa chuckles. "I can see that." She takes a deep breath and meets my eyes. "So, I think the best thing to do is gather as much information as possible. Maybe the way forward will become obvious when we put enough pieces together."

It's about all we *can* do right now. I agree and Philippa stifles a yawn. "Tomorrow, though."

"First thing," I agree.

We put on our nightclothes and settle down for the evening, sharing the one bed and feeling the security of having someone trustworthy close by. I

was aware when Simon returned to his room earlier, and a peek across the street when I closed our shutters assured me he was all right. He's getting some much-needed rest, and I should, too, but I lie awake long after Philippa's breathing is shallow and steady.

I don't have any of Simon and Martin's notes. Even if I did, the physical details would only take us so far. Simon always said the key to stopping killers was uncovering what drove them.

I rub my temples against a wave of despair. Understanding these matters was Simon's gift, not mine. I can't do this without him, yet I must.

What would he say now? I squeeze the bridge of my nose, concentrating. A vision of him rises in my mind, his blue eyes serious, encouraging. *Think, Cat. What is the void in the killer's soul? What has he lost? Power, though he'd given it up willingly.*

Power.

Simon nods approvingly. *Good. Now think about his actions. How do they attempt to fill that hole, even just temporarily?*

Typically, voided Selenae resort to *skonia* for even the briefest taste of the magick they lost, but Hespera said Alastor had never touched the drug. And from what I've gathered, he never liked the magick itself; the feeling of power is what he misses.

It's killing the way he does—controlled, deliberate—that gives him that sense of power. And when he carves those moments into wood, he creates both an object of terrible beauty and something that allows him to relive that, at least somewhat. They are his *skonia*.

The image of Simon smiles at me. *Perfect.*

But it also means he'll never stop.

CHAPTER 39

Despite my difficulty sleeping, I'm awake shortly after dawn because the moon is back, though just a sliver of a crescent. Simon sleeps later; I would assume there's no word on how many graves need to be dug until a few hours into the day. I dress and leave the room quietly, returning with a simple breakfast. Philippa rouses as I struggle to open the door with a fully laden tray on one arm, and she climbs out of bed to help me.

I set everything on the table. "I thought maybe our discussion wouldn't be something we'd want overheard downstairs."

Philippa nods in agreement as she tugs the leather tie off her braid. The smooth texture caused half of her light brown hair to come loose in the night, unlike mine, whose coarse curls only stay confined when bound tightly enough. I sigh with a bit of envy as she combs knots out with her fingers—something I could never do.

"Get dressed or eat first?" she asks.

"Eat," I reply. "Unless you like your porridge cold."

She plops down on one of the chairs and begins spooning the thick gruel into one of the smaller bowls, then hands it to me. "So, you'll have to start at the very beginning with me. How many murders have there been?"

"Your uncle was the forty-third that we know about." I sit and drop a handful of raisins and dried berries in my bowl, then push the container toward her. "And three since then, plus two in the citadel to hide his trail."

Philippa stops with the serving spoon in mid-dollop and stares at me. "*Forty-eight?*"

"That we know of."

A blob of porridge misses the bowl to land on the table, and Philippa sets the spoon down to wipe up the mess with shaking fingers. "I had no idea

there were so many. I heard somewhere the woman was blamed for just over a dozen.”

“That’s because they weren’t able to identify most of them, even after going through everything she’d kept,” I say. “Some items of clothing were several years old, and they couldn’t be matched to known victims.”

“Why would she have kept all those things?”

“A couple reasons, maybe.” I pour us both some water from the pitcher. “Killers like this do it for the feelings it gives them. Things that belonged to the victim help them remember and relive those moments, but I don’t think that’s the case here.” I briefly describe how I concluded the carvings serve that purpose. “I think he told her to hang on to those items so if the reeves ever caught onto his scent, everything could be blamed on her. Of course, it meant he had to kill her before she could tell anyone about him. It’s possible he never intended to let her be taken alive.”

Philippa brightens. “If he went to the citadel that night, perhaps someone saw him leave or return home.”

That evidence could easily be dismissed as circumstantial, but I won’t ignore anything that could get the reeves to ask the right questions. “We can look into that, but it will have to be discreet.”

“And he must have been absent from his home for those days he was in the woods,” she adds, and then her eyes widen. “If he’s killed four people out there in just the last month, do you think there are many more victims waiting to be found?”

I add a little honey to my porridge and pass that to her, too, now that she’s finished filling her bowl. “Not necessarily. For one thing, the man in the fire was a failure—while he died, Alastor didn’t get what he needed from him, hence the immediate wolf victim. The woman in the scarf was more of a warning than anything else, though he took advantage of it, given the martyr imitation. So if his pace has increased, it’s because things went wrong. And I think there’s another reason so many have occurred recently.”

“Which is?”

“When I spoke to him, he talked about having taken years to bend trees into the shapes he wanted. I imagine many of them are ready now.”

Philippa replaces the lid on the pot and stirs her steaming bowl. “How was the woman involved?”

After my thoughts last night on what drove Alastor to murder, I’d turned

my mind to how he'd gone about it. "You said your uncle would've helped anyone in trouble. Her part could've been mostly to lure victims to where the killer was waiting, using whatever worked for each man."

Philippa nods. "Sounds logical."

I swallow a spoonful. "His art was going well until he decided to burn a man at the stake. Everything was wet from two days of rain, so he poured oil on the pyre in an effort to get the fire going, but it got out of control." I pause for a minute, thinking. "Actually she might have been the one to do that, given how badly she was burned. Maybe she was trying to please or impress Alastor."

"That's easy to imagine," Philippa murmurs. She still hasn't eaten anything. "The woman had to have been enthralled with him to do everything he told her."

"Or afraid," I point out. "When they both ran from the fire, she didn't make it very far, and he left her there, quite possibly thinking she was dead or soon would be." She'd been enough of a distance away to have remained undiscovered, too, until I'd heard her while I was staring at the strange, twisted tree. "That's where he'll go," I whisper.

"What was that?" Philippa's finally taken a bite and has to ask around it.

"All those trees he's bent into shape. If we can find them, we'll know where he'll be."

Philippa frowns. "How many of them are there?"

"I have no idea."

"Could it be dozens?"

"Possibly. We'll have to search for them."

She eyes me skeptically. "Cat, do you have any idea how large that forest is? It goes on a week in some directions."

"Yes, but he probably works within a day's walk at most."

Philippa shakes her head. "That's still miles and miles with *thousands* of trees, and you can't see very far in most places."

Seeing how close we came to not even finding the woman proves her point. I sigh. "Well, scratch that idea." A thought occurs to me and I sit up straighter. "Maybe if we asked the forest reeves if they know of them? Roger said they came across them on occasion."

"But have they seen them all, and could they find them again?" she asks. "How long would it take to gather what dozens of men have seen? How

would we locate them all? Most maps of the woods are vague and contradictory, except where roads are concerned.”

“Fine.” I cross my arms and slouch in the chair. “I guess I don’t know anything about forests.”

Philippa smiles. “Only because you’ve never spent time in them. You know plenty about Sanctums.”

“But that’s not helpful in this case.”

“It led you to realize what he’s doing.”

I just wish it helped me figure out what he’s going to do next. My fingers tap the edge of the table as I gaze out the window to Simon’s. He’s opened the shutters, and though it’s bright enough outside that Philippa can’t see in, I have no trouble watching him get ready to leave for the graveyard with Martin. They won’t be back until after the funerals at dusk. At least I can tell his hands are much improved thanks to a day off and Hespera’s bloodstones. I grind my teeth at the thought of the haema, descending into a dark pool of anger until I realize Philippa said something. “What?”

“I said, how does Alastor remember where his trees are? Does he have a map or a ledger, do you think?”

The idea makes me sit bolt upright. Why didn’t I think of that? Probably because I’m so miserable about Simon and disgusted with Hespera it’s clouding my ability to reason. “He must if there’s that many,” I say. “It would be at his house.”

We could break in or I could climb in an upper window. People seldom lock those. Unfortunately, that would require him being gone sufficiently long enough, and that might mean he’s in the woods carving a new statue. I tell Philippa all this, and she pales.

“It just occurred to me that he often preys on travelers,” she says. “Do you think that means my mother is in danger?”

“Not if she’s traveling with friends,” I assure her. “He’s only ever gone after one person at a time.”

Except that Simon said he would seek new and greater challenges, possibly multiple victims at once. But Eleanor will be with two friends. Alastor has been meticulous in his methods, and three seems risky without two first, especially considering he’s lost his partner. “His last two haven’t been travelers, either,” I say. “If we’re right about how the woman lured people into the forest, once she was gone, he had to change how he chose his

victims.”

Philippa nudges her bowl aside and leans forward. “Which could help us predict who he’ll target next.”

So how was that? Alastor was at the funeral of the man killed by the false wolf attack—he *knew* him. “Do you happen to know of a carpenter named Alan Pounce?”

“I know his wife,” Philippa answers. “She’s been in the shop a few times. Uncle Hugh put an extra panel of fabric in her Sun Day dress last month, to accommodate.” She holds her hands out over her stomach to indicate pregnancy. “Why?”

“He was the man killed while you were gone.”

“Oh no!” She covers her mouth with her hand. “Poor Anna! Those poor fatherless babies!”

“Where do they live?”

“Whitheart Avenue, why?”

“That’s the street Alastor lives on.”

Philippa is horror-struck. “He killed his own neighbor?”

“Who else would go willingly into the woods with him? He probably returned claiming they got separated or that his companion went home early.”

“And the woman ... in the scarf?”

I left the autopsy before finding out who she was, but she’d had blisters on her lips that implied what she did for a living. “I think she was a prostitute.”

Philippa sighs. “I suppose it’s easy to assume why she went with him.”

“He’s not likely to kill too many more acquaintances, though. Maybe prostitutes will be his target for a while.” And if Londunium is anything like Collis, few people will care about them. He could go through quite a number before anyone noticed. Unless we warned them somehow. Simon had at least tried in Collis. “Maybe we should visit a few ... pleasure houses and tell them to be wary of men wanting to meet them in the woods.”

Philippa clucks her tongue and rolls her eyes. “Cat, that’s probably half their patrons. Many of those women go into the forest *looking* for men. It’s even called ‘gathering wood.’”

I throw my hands up in the air. “This is so frustrating!”

She stands up and walks around the table to me. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s go visit Anna Pounce. Maybe she knows something helpful. And I’d like to see this Alastor Carver myself. From a distance.”

I eye her warily. “Are you sure you can handle that, knowing what he did to your uncle?”

“I think it might be worse to make up details about him.”

My gaze drifts to the inn across the street. There’s no reason to stay and watch over an empty room.

“You can get a look at Alastor’s windows.” Philippa’s voice has a singing quality. “See which is best to climb in.”

I roll my eyes. “Very well. It’ll be too hot to sit up here all day anyway.”

CHAPTER 40

Anna Pounce props her swollen feet on a stool as she sits back in a cushioned chair, fanning herself against the heat of the day. “Alan made this for me,” she says. Her voice is devoid of emotion except perhaps tiredness. “He called it my throne.”

From the woodwork, it’s easy to surmise her husband was a talented carpenter. Philippa holds Anna’s younger child in her arms, having rocked the toddler to sleep within minutes of picking her up. The older plays quietly with a set of carved wooden animals.

Before leaving the inn, we went to Philippa’s house so I could borrow a dress from her, knowing my black outfit would attract unwanted attention. I let her do most of the talking, however—I’m only a friend who happens to be with her.

“Did he go into the woods alone?” she asks.

Anna nods. “He wasn’t planning to go far, just picking out some fallen branches for embellishments.” She fingers a vine on the arm of her chair, and I realize it’s actually a thin piece of wood nailed onto it rather than carved. A coin clinks into the box outside her door, and she shudders. “I hate that sound.”

My heart goes out to the widow. I’m sure she’d rather have her husband back than a hundred boxes full of coins.

“The neighbors have been so generous,” she says, rubbing a hand over her round stomach. “Alastor, especially. He blames himself for what happened.”

Philippa’s ears perk up. “Alastor who?”

“Carver. He lives several houses to the east.”

“Was he supposed to go with Alan or meet him somewhere?”

“No, but he’d given him directions to a place with a lot of the kind of wood

Alan wanted. Black birch or something—it’s hard to find. Alastor carves in silver poplar but said he stumbled on a birch grove last week during one of his wood-hunting trips.” Anna sighs. “Of course, it wasn’t his fault that Alan ran into a wolf, and I told him that.”

I grimace. Alastor was smart enough to send his victim out there without any notion of meeting with him. And, even more clever, nobody knew the carpenter’s death was a murder.

“He’s carving a statue as a tribute to Alan,” Anna continues. “It’s already almost finished, and he wants to give me the profits when he sells it. I offered him some of my husband’s carving tools, seeing as I have no use for them now. I’ll sell the rest, eventually, when I need the money.”

There were a lot of martyrs torn apart by beasts. Alastor could use this method of killing for a long time and create a whole line of statues, as long as none of them are revealed before the bodies are found.

“Was he good friends with Alan, then?” Philippa asks.

Anna frowns. “No, not really. Alastor mostly keeps to himself. He actually always struck me as cold.” Her older child clamors for attention, and she shrugs as she pulls him onto her lap. “I guess that goes to show how mistaken you can be about someone.”

★ ★ ★

I wait outside the door as Philippa says her goodbyes. While I’m glad we made this visit, I’m frustrated we got nothing useful out of it. Alastor may have picked someone he knew this time, but he’d covered his tracks well. The choice also made sense—Simon told me killers like this usually start with someone familiar, and, in a way, Alastor was beginning fresh, without his partner. That makes it likely he knew his very first victim, too, though. Someone who would trust him enough to go deep into the woods with him.

My brother and I started the process when we were children.

Is your brother also a carver, then?

No, he has moved on to other things.

Had he killed his own brother? Hespera said Caerus wouldn’t care as long as Hadrians were the ones dying, but if I can connect him to the murder of a Selenae man, it might not only give the archaemon reason to care, it could also give the Selenae the legal right to arrest and punish him themselves.

After all, he's one of us, or was.

Philippa gives Anna one final hug and comes to meet me. "Why are you smiling, Cat?"

"Because I may have just figured out how to stop him."

"Really?" she says eagerly. "How?"

"That will take some explaining when we're alone. And some research." I don't recall any Selenae in the known victims, but several of the older ones were still unidentified. Of course, I don't have any of Simon and Martin's notes to help me.

Maybe no one knew who those first men were *because* they were Selenae. The reeves wouldn't have asked them if anyone was missing, I'm sure. But if I want to go to the Quarter to investigate that possibility, I'll have to change clothes first.

Before we set off, though, I give Philippa a serious look. "Are you sure about this?"

Her face turns a little green, but she nods. "I'm sure."

"All right. It's this way."

Philippa clutches my arm as we walk, and truthfully, I'm as nervous as she is. We stayed at Anna's long enough that it's past midday and many of the shops are closing up for an hour or two while it's hottest and there are few out shopping. Alastor's is no exception, and I'm both relieved and disappointed when we come into sight of his home just as he pulls the shutters down. Philippa sags against me when she realizes.

I pat her shoulder. "I don't think you were as ready as you thought."

"Maybe you're right." She stares at the building, which is no different than any others on the street. "It's so strange to think a monster like him lives among us."

I tug her in the direction of her home. "Not for much longer, I promise."

★ ★ ★

After I change back into my black clothes, Philippa says she'll clean up her house a little and gather some more of her things to take back to the inn. I'd wiped most of the kohl off my eyes earlier, and now, in the bright afternoon, I miss it. Maybe I should return to the akademium and get my own possessions, but that will have to be after I visit the Selenae Quarter, which

I've never been to yet. My plan is to start by asking around about Alastor's brother and find out if he's missing.

Except no one will talk to me about Alastor.

At first I thought perhaps it was because he wasn't from Londunium originally, but I get enough of a reaction to know most if not everyone old enough to remember him knows exactly who he is.

The tenth door closes in my face, and it feels like the time Simon and I tried to talk to people in the neighborhood Perrete was murdered in back in Collis. No one wanted to answer our questions, believing—from experience—that a crime like that would likely never be solved, and it was better not to get involved. Here it's different, though. No one will admit they knew him, let alone that he was once Selenae, though one older man spits on the front step as though to get the taste of the name out of his mouth after he accidentally repeats it. I can't even get anyone to tell me his original family name. Carver had to have been the one he took to reflect his new occupation.

"You never do as you're told." A voice behind me makes my back stiffen.

I turn around slowly to face Haema Hespera. Her glare is molten silver. "Didn't I say Alastor Carver was *not* to be spoken of?"

"No one will talk about him."

"With good reason," she replies, coming closer. "There's nothing worse to Selenae than someone who turns their back on us, on their Moon-given gifts."

"Not even murder?" I ask defiantly.

She ignores that. "Where have you been?" Then she waves her own question aside like a buzzing fly. "Wait, forget I asked. I can guess you're watching over Simon. Why are you here now?"

"I think at least one of Alastor's earliest victims was Selenae, which is why they weren't identified. The first might have been his own brother." There's no discernible response to my hypothesis, so I continue, "If so, that would give *us* the right to arrest and punish him, wouldn't it, as he was once Selenae? If we presented our evidence to the judicare, they wouldn't interfere."

"That's ... actually quite clever," Hespera admits. "I'm impressed."

"Thank you."

"It's also wrong. Alastor's brother is alive and well, but he doesn't live in the Londunium Quarter."

That doesn't bother me. "One of them could still have been Selenae," I say. "I just need to find out if anyone from the community has gone missing in the last few years."

"I doubt you'll find that's the case." Hespera shakes her head. "We keep a close watch on each other. It's how we survive in a world that mistrusts us."

"That's funny," I retort. "I seem to recall a couple of reeves and an investigator who had a great deal of faith in us, at least until a few days ago."

"And what happened is a clear example of why we should not mix." Her mouth twists to the side. "As for that investigator, have you tried to speak to him?"

My heart threatens to crack open. "No."

"Do you plan to?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"That's a question I should ask you." When she doesn't answer, I take a step closer, my fingernails digging into my palms. "You promised to help."

"How long has it been?"

"Three days." The three longest of my life.

Hespera presses her lips between her teeth before answering. "Though I would recommend waiting a bit more, the echoes have probably died down enough to try."

My chest is suddenly so tight I can barely breathe. "Do you have any recommendations for how to go about doing that?"

"Not in public," she says. "Best in a time and place where his attention will not be divided. But remember you may not succeed."

"How many tries will I get?"

The coroner shrugs. "I honestly have no idea." She straightens her back and draws herself taller. "But now you must leave. Just because no one speaks of Alastor doesn't mean no one speaks *to* him."

Like his brother? How long would it take word of my asking questions to get to him? "Fine, but I want Simon and Martin's notes on all the murders."

"Then come and ask for them properly." Hespera's voice is almost taunting as she turns and walks away. "You know when my hours are."

Yes, I do.

I also know where a spare key to her office is.

★ ★ ★

The innkeeper's wife looks at me oddly when Philippa and I sit down to dinner in the first-floor dining room. "I can still tell," she says as she sets servings of bread and stew in front of us.

I blink at her, confused. "Can still tell what?"

"What you are." The woman gestures to my face, making a circle with her forefinger. "Them eyes give you away."

Oh, I'd changed into Philippa's spare dress again and wasn't wearing the Selenae black the woman was used to seeing me in. I shrug. "Maybe I don't like being stared at all the time."

She chuckles. "Honey, every man in this room is staring at the both of you right now. Enjoy it while you can. One day you'll look like me." The woman straightens her apron over her thick waist with a gap-toothed grin. "But then, if pretty is all they want, they ain't worth more than a night of fun. Take it from me."

Philippa's face is flaming as the woman leaves. "Sun and skies, that was embarrassing."

"She's right, though." Simon had admired me more for my mind than anything else. I stare at chunks of meat and vegetables in my bowl, my appetite gone. The coroner wasn't encouraging and had lied about so many things that I have little hope that Simon can actually remember me. There was always the possibility of starting over, but how could I get close enough for him to know me again? I poke a carrot down into the thick broth. Damn Hespera. I wanted to take her ring of memory stones and smash it and grind the rainbow gems into dust right in front of her. Then I would blow the grit in her face and let her choke on it.

"Do you know where Simon lives?" Philippa asks, jolting me out of my vision of revenge.

I have to swallow the lump in my throat before I can answer. "I know where he's staying, yes."

"Why don't you go see him tonight?"

"He won't be back for a few more hours," I say.

Philippa grins. "That's perfect. You'll have enough time to take a bath and brush out your hair first."

There's nothing more I can lose at this point, and if Simon can't recover his

memories of me, it would be better to face that truth than dangle by a thread of hope for even one more day.

I raise my eyebrows at my friend. “I think you underestimate how much time my hair will require.”

★ ★ ★

A warm bath calms my nerves somewhat, but my apprehension rises with every step back up to the third floor. When I enter our room, dark curls dripping, Philippa looks up from fussing with something on the bed. “Oh my. You weren’t exaggerating about your hair.”

The dry summer night air is already having an effect on it, but my attention is caught by the bright red dress laid out next to her. My mouth falls open, and Philippa grins. “I brought it for you. I think tonight would be the perfect time to wear it.”

I step closer and trace the subtle vines etched into the fabric. Once more I’m awed by Philippa’s talent. “Yes.” My whisper is as scratchy as my throat. “It’s more than perfect. Thank you.”

If anything can shock Simon into remembering me, it will be this.

CHAPTER 41

I stand outside Simon's room, listening to the restless cadence within as he paces the floor. The faint candlelight coming from under the door is momentarily blocked when he passes. He's anxious, I can hear it in the way he walks. Does he feel lost, like something is missing? Will he recognize it as me?

We weren't truly married, nor did we know each other as long as we'd claimed. What if the roots of our feelings didn't go deep enough? My courage falters. Until I knock on this door, I can hold on to the idea that something of me remains in his mind. Facing him may shatter that fragile hope.

But not knowing is much worse.

I smooth the front of my dress. Philippa had to tie the back for me. At the time I thought she laced it too tight, but now it's the only thing holding me upright. My thick hair hangs loose to my waist, not quite dry. That will take all night. I finally raise my trembling hand and rap my knuckles on the wood. The footsteps inside pause, then come toward me. His voice is muffled by the door. "Who is it?"

"Catrin," I answer, my breath straining against the bodice. "We met yesterday."

The bolt slides back and suddenly I'm facing him. His hair is still damp from the bath, and he wears a loose linen shirt and lightweight breeches tucked into his boots. A flash of shock in his eyes elates me until it dissolves into confusion. "I'm sorry," he says. "I don't actually remember you."

I step more into the light, clutching my hands to keep them steady. The room looks the same as before, though his things are now put away and the shutters are closed for the night. "I'm Haema Hespera's assistant."

“Oh yes. I’d thought you were Selenae.”

“I am,” I say without thinking, then realize I need to explain my clothes. “This outfit is for ... a special occasion.”

My heart leaps as something sparks in his gaze as it travels to my feet and back up, lingering on the moonstone that hangs above the low neckline. Then he smiles faintly, blankly. “And it’s a very pretty dress, Mistress Catrin.”

His admiration was impassive, nothing like the way those men in the tavern looked at me a few hours ago. More like the appreciation one has for a lovely painting. “Thank you.”

“I hadn’t realized your hair was so long.”

The statement is like a knife between my ribs. “I very rarely let it down like this.”

There’s a hint of an urge to respond, then Simon checks himself and only nods, all reservation and politeness, like he was when we met. He’d admired me then, but said nothing, which means this moment is no different, except now I’m Selenae, and therefore not anyone he could imagine a future with.

After a long moment of silence, he clears his throat. “Was there something you needed, Mistress Catrin?”

“No, nothing specific. I mean...” This wasn’t going well. “Haema Hespera wanted me to check on your hands, since she didn’t treat them herself.”

“That’s very kind of you. Of her.” Simon holds out his hands, palms up, and I’m relieved to see the bloodstones have healed the skin almost completely.

Which gives me a better excuse to be here. “Are you done using those flat stones, then? The haema would like to have them back.”

“Oh yes, of course.” The bloodstones are on the tiny table next to the bed, and he picks them up. “I was surprised how well they worked. Kept me from clenching my hands as she said.” He holds them out, and I take them, deliberately drawing my forefinger along his as he pulls his hand back, straining to catch a whisper of his thoughts.

Why the hell is she here like this?

I suppose I’d be wondering that, too, if I were in his boots. The stones buzz against my fingers, and I shove them into one of the skirt pockets as I take a reluctant step backward. I have to clear my throat to counter the despair that’s threatening to cut off my air. “Well, please let me know if there’s anything I can help you with. I should get back to ... to the akademium.”

Simon frowns. "Surely you didn't come all the way here to check on me."

"I was in the area," I answer distractedly.

He shifts to peer behind me. "Who did you come with? Haema Hespera?"

"No, it's just me." I continue backing away, into the dark passage, ready to run as soon as he closes the door. In another few seconds I'll be crying.

His frown deepens. "It's not safe for a woman to walk the streets alone this late. Is someone waiting for you downstairs?"

I wish he wasn't so damn kind. "No, no one. But I'll be fine, really."

Physically, at least.

"Good night," I manage. "It was nice to meet you."

Instead of closing the door, Simon suddenly seizes my arm and yanks me into the room. I whirl around to face him as the door slams shut and the bolt slides across it. "What—"

But his hands are framing my face, and his mouth is on mine. I'm too shocked to do anything but let it happen as the kiss that started aggressively tapers into something softer and sweeter, until finally, agonizingly, Simon pulls away. His blue eyes search mine, the brown flaw drawing my attention like the first time. Gone is the blank politeness. "Hell Beyond, I missed you," he whispers.

"Simon?" I'm still reeling from the last few seconds. "Do you remember me?"

"I never forgot you in the first place." He runs one thumb along my jaw before leaning in to kiss me again.

I pull out of reach. "But ... how? Hespera took everyone's memories of me."

"Not mine. Not a second of them." Simon tilts his head to the side a little. "Though she did say if I didn't make it believable, she would."

She'd lied. To the Penthaemon. To Caerus. To me. The memory stone she'd crushed so cruelly was empty.

Simon's mind was untouched. Completely whole.

I bury my face in his shirt, sobbing in relief and joy. Simon wraps his arms around me and holds my head to his shoulder as I weep. "I'm sorry," he murmurs into my hair. "She said it was the only way to keep us both safe while she figured this out."

Three days of agony wring themselves from my eyes before I can look at him again. My face has to be splotchy and my eyes red and puffy, but Simon

brushes the last of the wetness from my cheeks and lashes, smiling like I'm the best thing he's ever seen. "I was ready to go mad, not being able to tell you I was all right," he says softly. "I probably shouldn't have tonight, but I don't care."

My arms go around his neck, and I tell him without words how glad I am that this nightmare is over. Simon reassures me in the same way, but he draws back again before I'm ready, sighing and shaking his head. "The worst of it was knowing I had the chance to tell you I loved you that night, but I didn't take it," he says. "I didn't even leave you that."

"I knew, I knew." My fingers grip the hair on the back of his head. "And I understood you wanted to wait until the time was right."

"There's never a bad time to say such a thing. I know that now."

I smile. "Then say it."

He bends down to nudge my nose with his. "I love you, Catrin."

My eyes close as I shiver. "And I love you, Simon."

He kisses me gently, perfectly, and finally the sour taste of the last few days is gone. "I have one honest question, though." Simon draws his hand around my shoulder, bringing part of the messy curls from the back around with it. "Was your hair truly always this long?"

I laugh. "Yes."

He tucks a few strands behind my ear before letting his eyes travel lower. "And this dress ... I almost lost my wits when I opened the door and saw you in it."

"I was hoping to shock you into remembering something about me."

Simon chuckles. "It probably would have worked." He kisses me again. And again and again, each time longer and deeper until my back is pressed against the door and his hands are sliding over my waist. "I feel like there's designs built into this," he murmurs in a break for air. "I keep wanting to follow them all over."

"You're right. Philippa was trying to imitate Selenae clothes." I relax my arms to make it easier for him to explore. "And go ahead, I won't stop you."

"Maybe you ought to." Simon traces a finger down the silver chain from my neck to the stone resting above my breasts. "Given what I want."

"And what is that?"

"I want you to stay here. With me. Tonight."

The words hang in the air for several seconds. "That's ... direct," I say.

“I’m done being otherwise.” Simon raises my right hand to his mouth and kisses the fading marks on the knuckles. “I’ve wanted this to be real since that night. It *was* real for me, even if it was too soon for you.”

“I wanted it to be real, too, but I was afraid neither of us was really ready.”

Simon turns my hand over and presses his lips to my palm. “Maybe we weren’t. Everything was out of our control.”

“Yes,” I agree. “But it was only when I was with you that the world felt solid.”

“And it was exactly the same for me,” Simon whispers. “This past week without you has been hell on earth, until you knocked on my door and suddenly I was grounded again.” He lowers my hand to press it to his chest, and his heart pounds like it wants to burst through his ribs and into my palm. “So I’m asking you to stay. Make this real.”

His pulse echoes up my arm and mine rises to match its pace as I search his eyes. Everything I ever wanted from him is there, laid bare, mine for the taking. I take a deep breath and push him back.

“I’m—I’m sorry—” he stammers as I turn toward the door. “That’s asking too much. But please don’t go yet.”

“I don’t want to leave, Simon.” I sweep my tangled curls to my front, exposing the back of my dress. “It’s just much easier if you unlace me.”

Simon hesitates, his fingers brushing down the crisscross leather tie. “Are you sure?”

I eye him over my shoulder. “Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then so am I.”

His hands are shaking so much he can barely untie the knot, but I’m trembling all over, too. When the pressure of the bodice eases, I still struggle to breathe.

“What now?” he asks.

My nerves are stretched so tight I nearly burst out laughing. “Just make it loose enough to pull down.”

“You have something underneath, right?”

“Of course.”

He pulls the laces wider, muttering, “Thank the Sun.”

I turn around to face him again, sliding my arms out of the sleeves. “You do realize at some point in this we’ll both be naked.”

Simon's already flushed cheeks darken as the crimson fabric lowers to reveal the creamy silk chemise underneath. "I'm not ready for that yet. I'm still fully dressed."

"I know how to fix that." The dress sags at my waist as I reach for his belt. Unfortunately, I'm as nervous and clumsy as he is, and it takes several seconds for me to get it undone.

His breeches drop to his knees, and Simon bends over, cursing, as he struggles to remove the pants, but they're caught on his boots. "This is not going well."

I can't help giggling as he wrestles his boots off, one sock staying on as he kicks his pants away. "I think it's going just fine."

Simon takes two tries to yank the sock off before throwing it across the room, then braces his arms against the door on either side of me and stops my laughter with a long kiss. "Your turn to take something off," he says huskily.

"I thought I'd let you do it."

"Lazy." One hand pushes the dress down over my hips. "Or maybe considerate." As it falls to the floor, he slides his hands around my rear to lift me out of the puddle of velvet and satin. I leave my borrowed slippers behind as Simon half carries me backward, tripping on his discarded breeches as he whirls me around to brace my back against the wooden column at the foot of the bed.

"My turn again." I tug his shirt up over his shoulders and head, then bite back a silly grin as he struggles to free his arms one at a time. He flings the tangled linen aside and presses his lean form against me, one arm around my waist and the other gripping the bedpost. There's so little left between us now that there's no doubt how much he wants this, wants me. A gasp escapes despite my effort to hold it back. "Simon..."

He relaxes his arm to let me rest against the support, concern on his flushed face. "What's wrong?"

"I ... I don't know how to do this. I mean, I know *how*, but..."

Simon raises his eyebrows. "You think I know more?"

"No, of course not." I shake my head. "I'm just worried I'll be bad at it."

"Cat, I'm the one falling all over myself like a drunkard."

I smile shakily. "That's only because I've had something to lean on the whole time."

"Do you want to stop?"

“Moon and stars, *no*.”

Simon’s fingers skim up my underdress to caress the moonstone necklace again, his voice as soft as his touch. “Just tell me what you need. I can’t read you like you can read me.”

I slowly reach up and undo the clasp of the silver chain, letting the stone’s weight pull it down. “I don’t need this.”

He catches the glowing stone in his palm, frowning slightly. “I didn’t mean to imply your magick comes between us.”

“I know you didn’t, and it doesn’t,” I assure him. Darkness and quiet close around me as the chain loses contact with my skin. “But right now the only thing I want is you.”

The moonstone slides down the bedcover to land on the floorboards, and all that’s left in my world is soft candlelight on skin and the sound of our breathing and the feel of Simon’s body against mine.

And it’s more than enough.

★ ★ ★

The candle has less than an hour of life left, and its tall, crooked wick sends wavering shadows across the walls. Simon curls around me from behind, tracing the faint bondmark on the back of my hand with his thumb. “I’m still surprised they didn’t make you scrub this off.”

“They tried. I refused.”

“I hated removing mine. We’ll have to redo it, finish the ceremony, even if it’s on our own.”

I shrug. I’ve about had it with Selenae rules and traditions. “If it matters that much to you.”

“You matter that much to me.” Simon buries his face in my neck.

I’m surprised he can breathe. “Did you really not know how long my hair was?”

“You never did let it down completely around me for more than a couple minutes, at least not like this.”

“Surely now you can understand why.”

“I like it.”

I roll over to face him, sweeping the dark mass of curls behind me. “It’s forever in the way. I’ve always hated it.”

“That’s because you have no idea how attractive it is when it hangs over your shoulders and down to your—” His eyes finish his sentence.

“No one’s ever told me that before.”

“Is it wrong to say I’m glad to hear that?”

“No. Hard to envision, though.” I sit up in the bed next to him, letting the sheet drop to my waist and dividing my hair to hang completely over my shoulders on either side. “Like this?”

He smiles drowsily. “Little much.”

I pull half of it to my back, exposing some of the curves beneath. “Better?”

Simon props himself up on one elbow and uses the other hand to push everything off my chest except two long spirals on each side. All traces of the earlier sleepiness are gone as he lies back down to admire me. “There. You are ... a work of art.”

I giggle. “I have my doubts a window or sculpture of me like this would be appreciated in the Sanctum.”

“That’s a shame; it would convert me.”

“Blasphemy.”

Simon raises his eyebrows. “Not at all. I feel quite religious at the moment.”

I lean over him, letting my hair tickle his chest. “Explain yourself, sinner.”

“Because until tonight I didn’t believe heaven was real. But now I’ve been there with you.”

A familiar warmth uncurls in my lower stomach. “Do you want to go there again?”

“Do you?”

I use one finger to follow the faint line of blond hair down his chest to where it thickens below his navel. “I could be persuaded.”

Simon suddenly grabs my wrists and sits up, flipping me over to my back and pinning me down on the mattress. Then he holds himself over me with a sly smile. “First I need to kiss you.”

I bite my lower lip in teasing refusal, but Simon ducks his head to nose the loose hair off my shoulder and very deliberately presses his mouth along every inch of my collarbone from one side to the other. Then he continues lower, trailing his lips along curves and peaks with maddening, exhilarating slowness.

“Where all do you intend to go with this?” I can barely manage the air for

so many words.

He rises up to kiss my mouth, savoring it for a few seconds, and whispers, “Everywhere.”

Then he goes back to where he left off, and I shiver despite the heat of his breath on my skin. “Everywhere?”

“Everywhere.”

CHAPTER 42

The morning comes too early, but at least Simon makes me glad I woke up. I stretch out beside him under the blanket, enjoying the feel of his bare skin against mine as he sighs into my neck. “Did I tell you enough times that I love you?” he says softly.

“You certainly showed me.”

He levers onto one elbow to look me in the eye. “I love you, Catrin. Promise me you’ll never doubt that, no matter what happens.”

I frown. “I won’t, but what do you think is going to happen?”

Simon shrugs with one shoulder. “I don’t know, but this whole memory thing scared me more than I can tell you. Martin doesn’t remember you at all, and all I can think is one day they’ll do the same—”

“Shhhh...” I put my thumb over his lips to stop what’s almost rambling. “I’ll take care of it, I promise. Hespera is never going to come between us again. We’re leaving this city. I just have to figure something out first.”

“What’s that?”

“How to hold Alastor Carver accountable.”

Simon sits up, confused. “Alastor who? Accountable for what?”

I’d really rather not discuss this in bed; it should only be a place for pleasant things. With a groan I push the covers aside and roll away. My feet on the floor are a little unsteady, and I’m sore in places I’m not used to, but it’s not too bad.

Simon swings his legs over the side and watches me collect my underclothes. “What are you talking about Cat?”

“I know who the killer is. I met him.”

Simon’s eyes widen, and he jumps down to stand in front of me, catching my hand to make me stop what I’m doing and look at him. “Are you sure?”

How did you figure that out?”

“It’s a long story, but can we please put some clothes on first? The way we are now is very distracting.” I glance down to emphasize my meaning.

He sighs and picks up his tangled breeches. “I suppose you have a point.”

★ ★ ★

Because she’s such a big part of this now, I start by telling him about Philippa and who her father is, our argument, and how she left but returned and was currently staying at the inn across the street.

“That’s wonderful, and not just because she gave you this dress.” Simon finishes retying my bodice from behind, then slides an arm around my waist and pulls me against him. “I love the way you look in it almost as much as out of it.”

My fingers find their way up to his curls as he presses his lips to my exposed shoulder. “How long before Martin shows up?”

“The number of graves to be dug doesn’t come until midmorning, so probably another hour, unless he shows up early to drag me to his house for breakfast.”

We’ll probably need every minute. I peek out the window and through the shutters Philippa left open all night to verify she’s still asleep before handing Simon his comb. “Then get to work till that time, since you like this mess so much.”

Simon takes it with a chuckle and kisses me. “With pleasure.”

It’s good to hear his laughter and see him moving around with confidence. In some ways having him back like this is better than what happened last night. Simon sits on the edge of the bed, straddling my seat on a stool as he works through my tangles. I hold sections he finishes and braid them when ready as I tell him everything else, including the murdered woman in Philippa’s scarf, watching a memory stone being used, and meeting Alastor. Then I go on to Hespera having realized who he was, my idea to tie him to Selenae victims, and everything Philippa and I discussed and did yesterday.

A glance across the street tells me my friend is just beginning to stir, so I need to get moving. She’s probably worried about me, and I feel a bit guilty for having left her alone, even if she was safer there than at home.

“I’m so proud of you.” Simon lays a quick kiss on my ear. “I told Hespera

you were more than capable in carrying on the investigation without me.”

I wind a leather tie on the end of the first braid. “Except she didn’t tell me you said that. She took your notes and refused to let me continue.”

“Not exactly,” he says. “It sounds like she planned to work with you, but you left. Hence the invitation to come get them.”

The doubt in his voice frustrates me. He’s not had to deal with her as much as I have. “It wasn’t an invitation so much as a taunt.” I don’t mention how I plan to get them without her there, nor have I said anything about Edward—because she *will* erase Simon if he learns about their history. “She can’t get over the fact that I care about you. Sometimes I feel like her actions are designed to get me to give up my magick as Alastor did.”

Simon is quiet as he drags the comb through my hair. “I’m not sure I agree,” he says finally. “Haema Hespera has been on our side—reluctantly, I’ll admit—from the beginning.”

I turn on the stool to gape at him. “Have you completely forgotten that she argued to void me and erase your memory on that first day?”

“That’s her nature, Cat. She’s the type of person to present an alternative just to balance the discussion. Had all the other opinions been against us, she would’ve argued the other way. What she saw was four people too dazzled to consider the risks you—*we*—presented. Their blind consensus worried her more than anything else.”

I sit forward again, not wanting to admit she’d said almost exactly the same thing that night in the woods. “I didn’t realize you were such an admirer of hers.”

He sighs. “Maybe she wasn’t on our side in the way you define it, but she was on the side of finding the truth, finding the best way to deal with us.” He hands me another handful of strands. “And, over time, she changed her opinion—against her will, I might add. Not many people can do that.”

“If you say so.”

“Doesn’t the fact that she left my memory intact—at great risk to her and the Selenae as a whole—mean anything to you?”

I clench my teeth. “It means she’s willing to take those risks to get what she wants. And what she wants is Caerus out of that stupid chair, even if I’m the one who ultimately unseats him.”

Simon is silent for a dozen heartbeats before speaking again. “I suppose none of it matters really, if we’re leaving. They can play their politics without

us.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” And with that, I’m glad what was almost an argument is over. It would have ruined my day to part with disagreement hanging over us.

“What will you do today?” he asks, finishing the last rat’s nest.

My fingers work the final section into a braid as I pivot to face him. All the pins are in the room across the street, so I’ll leave them down for now. “I want to see if I can identify the first victim. Hespera told me it wasn’t Alastor’s brother, but it could be someone else Selenae.”

Simon hands me a leather tie. “And if so, it gives Caerus the legal right to arrest and punish him.”

I nod as I wrap the end. “Though they’d have to admit he was one of them.”

Simon gives me an odd look. “One of *you*,” he emphasizes. “Why do you keep referring to the Selenae as though you aren’t part of their community?”

I avoid his eyes. “No reason, other than that they’ve not fully accepted me—or you.”

With every revelation, I have new reason to sever my connection with the Selenae permanently. Simon would definitely try to stop me from giving up my magick, but now that I know he’s all right, I’m leaning more toward leaving that part of me completely behind. First, however, we have to deal with Alastor.

“Cat.” Simon turns and lifts my chin to make me meet his eyes. “You’re something new. It just takes time. In some ways you’re overly hostile, too.”

“If I’m hostile, it’s because of the way they’ve treated you.”

He drops his fingers. “Please promise me you won’t do anything foolish. Especially over me.”

Rather than answer, I put my arms around his neck and pull his mouth to mine.

Our definitions of foolish have never aligned. Simon knows that.

★ ★ ★

Philippa barely glances up from a dress she’s sketching as I enter our room. “I suppose it’s obvious that outfit did what you wanted it to.”

My cheeks are likely as bright as the fabric of the low neckline. “It did,

thank you.” I dig in her bag for the box of hairpins. “I hope you weren’t worried.”

“I was, though I know you can take care of yourself.”

I twist the braids around each other and weave the first pin into them. “I’m really sorry. I was ... distracted.”

“I’ll bet you were. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Then change out of that dress so we can go downstairs and eat.”

Philippa has to help me with the back as Simon did. She clicks her tongue at the apparently messy knot he made. I’m starting to feel self-conscious about what she must think of me, but I can’t explain we were technically already bonded if not fully wed. “He asked me to marry him,” I tell her.

She pauses in loosening the laces. “Really?” She goes back to pulling on the leather cord. “I didn’t realize my design was *that* good.”

“You’re a genius, Philippa. Just like your father.”

“Except he creates magnificent buildings for the glory of the Sun, and I piece together pretty fabric.”

“True.” I turn around to face her with the dress sagging. “And yet Simon has never looked at a Sanctum the way he looked at me last night.”

Her cheeks flush to a deep shade of pink. “Oh, hush.”

★ ★ ★

“Mother should be here sometime this evening,” Philippa says, nibbling an apple. I’m glad to see her appetite back—she ate almost nothing yesterday. “She and the couple she’s coming with were supposed to stay at Uncle Hugh’s—my—house. Do you think it would be safe if they did?”

“Three people, one being a man?” I nod. “Very likely.”

“Four, if I stay with them.”

“Even better.”

“And it’s not like you’ll be sleeping alone, either,” she teases.

I throw a sweet roll at her. “Stop it.”

“You stop smiling. It’s positively unnatural how happy you are.”

How can I be otherwise? Everything is finally going right. “Today I’ll go to the akademium and get some of my belongings and Simon and Martin’s notes.” I count those as being among things that are mine. “Unfortunately,

that's not a place I can really take you, even in daylight."

"That's all right," Philippa says. "Because I really ought to get the house ready for guests. The kitchen is a mess, and I think something is living in the attic." She takes a deep breath and exhales heavily. "And I should put away Uncle Hugh's things. At least most of them."

I reach for her hand. "Do you want my help with that?"

She squeezes my fingers back. "No, I'd rather you do as you planned. The sooner we get justice for him, the better."

CHAPTER 43

The sliver of crescent moon that rose a few hours after dawn means a full day of classes, and Haema Hespera will be teaching several. Since I'm in my black clothes and have some traces of kohl still around my eyes, the guards at the gate are less openly hostile. One of them even politely informs me the coroner has been looking for me, which isn't a surprise.

In my room, I shove everything from the wardrobe into my travel bag, including the moonweave cloak and stolen lunar caustic. There's a note on the table from Hespera, practically commanding that I come see her as soon as I return, but that I leave without touching. The spare key to her office that I kept in a drawer, however, I take.

I've remembered her schedule correctly and find the haema's office empty. She's extraordinarily tidy, which will hopefully make this search easier, but I don't see Simon's notes on her desk or shelves, nor in any of the cabinets. Maybe she destroyed them. There's a small furnace pot in the corner for a bit of heat in the winter, but it shows no sign of being used recently. Of course, there are a dozen other ways she could've gotten rid of them. Or maybe she keeps them with her, bundled with her lecture notes.

I sit in her chair, trying to think like the owner of the room, looking around for what would be the most obvious place. The desk has several drawers, all of which are large enough to hold the stack—and also locked. I try the door key on the slim chance it will work on those, but it doesn't. There are seven drawers total, and I could easily break into the wrong ones on the first, second, or third try, if not the sixth, and that assumes the notes are in there. I slouch back, huffing in frustration.

The caustic mix of chemical scents from all the jars above me burns the inside of my nose. If only I could smell the pages, but the room is full of

parchment and there'd be no way to distinguish the ones I want.

I jerk upright with a sudden memory. I *can* smell them. The other day I'd splashed the cups of honeyed liquid across the desk and all over the pages. I drop to my knees and press my nose to the keyhole of the drawer on the lower right. No. They're also not in any of the others on that side. I move to the middle, and there it is. Not even the humming of a bloodstone inside can hide the scent from me.

Hespera's medical bag is underneath the desk, and it's easy to select a slender, hooked knife from there to pry the lock apart enough to get it to release. The wide, shallow drawer pops out with a loud, splintering sound I doubt even the coroner would hear if she was standing outside the room. That's what she gets for lining her door with iron.

All the pages are there, intact, including Hespera's notes on Alan Pounce and the woman in the scarf. A name for her has been added: *Margery Arnold*.

Resolutely, I stack the sheets of parchment neatly together and look around for a way to carry them other than my travel bag. A large anatomy book on a nearby shelf is perfect and will also be handy. I place the pages inside and close the cover over them. For a few seconds I debate whether to put the drawer back, even if it will be obvious what happened when she opens it later. Part of me wants to leave it out carelessly as a message of defiance. It's not empty, though. There are two smaller books inside, one of them appearing positively ancient.

Why had she locked those up, too?

I pick up the older one and open the pages with a light touch. It's written in the archaic Selenae language, which has a different alphabet. Hespera might be able read it, but there's no chance I can. I flip to a bookmarked page and every muscle in my body tenses.

The faded words are unintelligible, but the illustration is not. Two people are looking Moonward, drawn as though they're at a great distance from each other. Arrows from the eyes of one figure clearly show a path to the head of the other via the moon. Smaller images depict that both people see the same thing. It's a description of using Moon's light to cross into the mind of another, the conditions needed.

Moon and stars, she knows.

That night in the woods I'd accidentally bridged into her thoughts, and thankfully back out a few seconds later. She's figured out what happened,

and now my greatest secret is known by the person I trust least.

I'm tempted to burn the book, but the damage is already done. Plus this is plainly a book about what Selenae could do at the height of their empire. It may be the one resource that could help me learn to use my magick. Even if I can't read it now, I might find a way in the future. Into my bag it goes.

The other book is more recent, but still at least a century old. Thankfully it's written in Gallian, and I'm familiar with older forms of the language from my days using the Sanctum's original plans to do inspections. The pages near the beginning have descriptions of bloodstones and how to use them to channel and focus magick for medical and other purposes. I read they can also carry thought messages, but like memory stones, what they hold, they keep forever unless erased by a special process that destroys its *maegnetis*. It's not a very efficient use when there are memory stones or even blood to do the same. Interesting to know, however. Next are various gemstones, including memory stones. Even though Simon is intact, just the thought of them makes me sick.

What I'm more interested in knowing about is near the back. Sapphires like the one I'd held in the jeweler's shop are indeed known to focus magick, the reason being the tiny metallic striations that conduct it across the stone and form the star shape on the surface. When a pair cut from the same larger stone are held by two people, they can speak to each other over a great distance—much like bridging, though strong blood magick is needed. Unrelated ones can do the same, but only when close. Black ones are the rarest, as the gem dealer told me, but what gives them their unusual color is that the imperfections are iron, making them the most powerful of all. If I had to guess, wearing one was a privilege reserved for the archaemon, like how a king has the largest diamond in his crown. The difference is one declares wealth while the other bestows actual power.

If I unseated Caerus like Hespera wanted, what couldn't I do with that stone? As strong as the blue one felt, with the black one, I could probably listen to the ocean from Londunium, watch events from miles away—or even through walls.

I have to admit, it's tempting to imagine.

In the back of my mind, I recall my uncle Gregor's warning that the craving for magick is something all Selenae must master. That's the ugly side of the abilities we have, and the reason many non-magickal people become

addicted to the euphoria they get from *skonia*. To have tasted such extraordinary power only to have it taken away must have been painful for Hespera.

I feel a slight sympathy for her until I turn the page. There are other uses for the stones. One can “borrow” the magick of another for their own use. In the early days of the Selenae realizing the strength of their powers was waning, there had been an effort to consolidate blood magick, particularly in some people. The movement didn’t last very long, however, as those forced to give up their power were left with nothing, which was not only agonizing, it made them second-class citizens in their own secluded societies. After an epidemic of suicides, the practice was outlawed.

I set the book down in the drawer. I’ll have to leave this here. There’s no way I can risk Philippa coming across it if I take it back with me. She’d be erased without mercy, and the coroner would crush her memories of me as she did the others.

Suddenly the words on the note Haema Hespera left in my room pop into my mind: *Speak to me before you do anything foolish!*

Foolish like what, voiding myself permanently as Alastor did? She doesn’t even like me. Other than unseating Caerus, why does she care so much about what I do with myself?

Simon’s voice rings in my mind. *Think, Cat. What is the void in her soul? What has she lost?*

Power, like Alastor. She may have even held it in her hand—literally—before it was ripped away.

Good. Now, how might she attempt to fill that void?

Putting me on the chair wouldn’t do that. It was more like petty revenge.

A tingling sensation in my fingertips draws my attention down. Lifting the book, I find a small leather pouch in the corner of the drawer. With increasing dread, I open it and tip what I’d assumed was a bloodstone into my hand, but instead a silvery white star dances across the curved blue surface.

What if Hespera had acted like she’d taken Simon’s memories, not to make me stay, but to make me want to leave? Rather than cast my power into the void as she threatened more than once, she could use this stone to take my magick for her own, finally making her stronger than Caerus.

Making her archaema.

I have the sudden urge to smash everything in the coroner’s office, but that

would accomplish nothing other than create a mess for her to clean up—which she’d probably make someone else do. A better revenge would be to force her to continue on as she always has, answering to Caerus, knowing the power she’d been so close to taking had slipped through her fingers again. I leave the book out on her desk but tuck the drawer roughly back in place. Before walking out, I drop the spare key she gave me on the pages open to descriptions of star sapphires.

I was here, thank you.

The blue stone I take for myself.



The courtyard is empty of students and instructors as I cross the lawn, taking the most direct path. None of the groundskeepers look up as I pass, assuming I belong there. I shift my loaded bag onto my other shoulder as the gate comes into view.

Caerus is waiting there.

My heart jumps into a gallop. Hespera’s stone is in an inner pocket of my skirt, and it’s small enough that if I was searched it’s doubtful it would be found, unless one was looking specifically for it. Or if they were powerful enough to feel its pull.

The archaemon huffs in relief when he sees me, then frowns as he notices I’m carrying a heavy bag. “You aren’t leaving us, Schola Catrin?”

No sense in lying. “I am.”

I expect anger, but sympathy tugs his mouth down. “I can’t say I blame you under the circumstances. You cannot believe I wanted these events to occur. I was actually becoming fond of your Hadrian.”

“Simon,” I say, so sick of them never using his name. He’s a person, a soul, worth as much as anyone without magick.

Caerus smiles. “Yes, Simon. I’m sorry I never called him that.”

Well, that’s something, though I have to admit Hespera used his name quite often.

“Where will you go?” he asks.

“I haven’t decided,” I answer truthfully.

“You know...” Caerus pauses. “You know you would not be the first Selenae to leave our community of their own choice, but you should realize

as archaemon I have a most unpleasant responsibility if you do. One I cannot ignore, even for you.”

“I understand.”

He glances up at the sliver of crescent above. “There are ways to make it a little less painful, as well. The greater the moon, the more difficult the withdrawal.”

“Are you offering to void me yourself?”

The archaemon sighs. “It is not something I would relish, but yes.”

“I’ll think about it. I haven’t decided for certain.”

“Which I understand.” He hesitates. “I also wouldn’t mention this conversation to anyone else.”

“Such as Haema Hespera?”

“To be frank, yes. Surely you’ve noticed how at odds we are.”

I smile dryly. “There were hints of it, yes.”

The bell in the tower rings, announcing a break in classes for the midday meal. “And on that note,” Caerus says, “you’d better go before she comes out. But think about my offer.”

He holds out the hand with the black sapphire ring, and I’m eager to take it, just to get a feel for what it must be like to have it. To my surprise, I notice it’s actually broken—a small piece chipped off—making a sharp edge across the top, and then I’m clasping his fingers. Before I can let go, he closes his other hand over the top, forcing my thumb to brush against the gemstone. The powerful tugging feeling from before is much stronger with the direct contact, almost painful, but it’s much worse for Caerus.

The archaemon yelps and drops my hand, shaking his fingers. My arm feels strangely empty, as though the magick was pulled out, but then it slowly begins to spread back into the limb from the rest of my body. On impulse, I reach into my skirt and finger the stone I took from Hespera’s desk. The return speeds up as the gem draws magick to focus in my hand again.

It seems obvious that the black stone had begun to draw my magick into it, though I’m sure it wasn’t deliberate on Caerus’s part—that’s just what it does. I act like I’m rubbing my hand against my leg as the archaemon is doing, to hide that the other stone is in my fingers.

Crown of fire, she lied to me. That corpse-cutting bitch.

“Are you all right?” Caerus asks.

The two conflicting notions are both in his voice and it takes me a second

to sort them. I release the stone and take my hand out of my pocket. “Yes. What was that?”

He inspects his palm. “Are you familiar with small lightnings that can occur between objects under the right circumstances?”

That was sort of what it felt like. “Who isn’t?”

“Well, we Selenae sometimes have the same thing between blood magicks. Painful, but quite harmless.” There’s a brightness in his eyes as he scrutinizes me. “It means your magick is significant, which in turn means the longer you wait to sever it, the harder it will be.” He waves his hand. “But no matter. Just consider it when weighing your decision.”

With that he turns and walks back into the grounds, flexing his ring hand. I watch him go, then slide my hand back into my pocket.

That woman has a lot to answer for, grumbles Caerus’s voice as soon as I touch the sapphire.

Taking my hand back out, I re-hoist the bag onto my shoulder before passing through the gate for what is likely the last time.

CHAPTER 44

After leaving the akademium I go to Philippa's, hoping her mother has arrived in the city, but she hasn't yet. Her cleaning and visitor preparation finished, Philippa has already started on a new dress. "I'd like to be able to show my father what I do when he gets here," she says shyly. "Mother, too, actually."

I show her the pages I've brought, though I hide the ones about her uncle. Then I offer to stay with her—I *am* excited to meet Eleanor, but Philippa shoos me out the door, saying it was likely to be hours yet, and my mind would be elsewhere.

She's right, but all that's left to do is pace my room as I wait for Simon to return, stewing over what I've learned. There's no point in rubbing his face in Hespera's treachery; in fact, I doubt I'll even tell him about her wanting to take my magick. I'm certain she wouldn't hesitate to erase anyone who knew what she was planning.

If she succeeded in anything, though, it was in making me more determined to leave than ever.

Dusk finally arrives, but Simon is more than two hours behind that. As soon as he enters his room, he waves to me and says, "Let me get cleaned up."

I don't wait for his return from the downstairs bath before going over, nor do I waste time before closing his shutters and climbing into the bed. Simon grins when he sees where I am and my clothes on the floor. "Will you always be this eager?" he asks, shedding his own shirt and dropping it on my pile.

"That depends on you," I reply, lifting the blanket so he can join me. "Will you make it worth my while?"

"I'll do my best." Simon slides in beside me and kisses me long and hard.

“The hours have never passed as slowly as they did today, knowing you would be at the end of them.”

“Mine too.”

He notices the only thing I’m still wearing and lifts the silver chain off my neck. “Adding this tonight?”

“Just out of curiosity.” I’m already dizzy with the sensation of his body against mine. This may be something I give up, but it doesn’t mean I can’t experience it once or twice. “I’ll take it off if you want.”

Simon lowers the moonstone back down thoughtfully, then traces his forefinger lightly across my shoulder, making me inhale sharply. Then he moves lower with his gentle touch and the air escapes with a soft moan.

He smiles. “No, I think you should keep it on, don’t you?”

I wouldn’t be able to answer him if I tried.

★ ★ ★

Philippa nearly scares the life out of me when I walk into my room the next morning and she sits up in the bed. “Sorry,” she mumbles, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Once I realized it was too late for them to be arriving last night, I came here. Didn’t want to be alone in that house, considering.”

I exhale, palm pressed over my galloping heart. “That’s perfectly fine, I just wasn’t expecting you to be here.” Then I drop my hand. “Is it worrisome that they didn’t arrive?”

“Not necessarily.” She stretches. “The wedding they’re coming to isn’t until Sun Day, so they probably decided to wait another day to leave.” Then she frowns. “Unless Mother changed her mind and they came without her. How was your night?”

“None of the details are appropriate for innocent ears like yours.”

She laughs and hops down from the bed. “Let’s eat.”

The tavern below is buzzing with some kind of somber news. We don’t have to ask, however, as the server delivers a plate of sausage with a side of gossip.

“Have you heard?” She doesn’t wait for our negative before continuing. “Another wolf attack in the forest yesterday. That’s two in a week.”

Philippa and I exchange glances. “Who was he?” I ask.

She shrugs and wipes some spilled grease with her apron. “Some lone

traveler. They found him yesterday evening on the side of the road, just over a league from the city.”

I frown as she walks away. The killer has never left a body where it was easily found. Why would he suddenly do that?

All the blood has drained from Philippa’s face. “You don’t think...?” she whispers.

I shake my head, though my stomach feels like it’s dropped toward the floor. “She said a lone traveler.”

“And what if his is the only body that they’ve found so far?”

There is no way either of us will be able to eat. I push back from the table. “Do you know the family they were coming to visit?”

“Yes.” Philippa is much less steady on her feet, and she leans on me heavily as we make our way to the door.

Outside, the sunny morning almost mocks our fears. Simon is on the street with Martin, peering at a scrap of parchment—their day’s assignment. I wave to him, and he comes over, asking if I’ve heard the news.

“Of the wolf attack?” I ask.

He nods. “This one might actually be legitimate, though. Martin saw the body when he got this list. Said the man had a few defensive wounds, but otherwise just his throat torn open, like Roger said wolves do.”

Philippa has turned a sickly shade of green. “Do you have his name?”

Simon squints down at his page. “Ralph Pepyr of Stepny, spice merchant.”

I don’t have to ask if that’s the name Philippa dreaded. She’s fainted before he finishes speaking.

★ ★ ★

Martin is quick to scoop Philippa up and carry her to our room. Though he doesn’t seem to recall me, he remembers her as Hugh Bolton’s niece, but he’s also the type of man who would’ve helped her had she been a complete stranger.

Simon comes up shortly with a pitcher of water and a towel, and I tell them both how Ralph Pepyr had been traveling with two companions who were now missing. Surely someone had realized that his wife was with him even if the rumors downstairs hadn’t caught up to that fact, but no one had known about Eleanor Bolton, Philippa’s mother. Both had vanished without a trace,

certainly by design.

Something risky but rewarding, Simon had described the killer's future moves two weeks ago. *Multiple victims at once, maybe.*

Just once, in Moon's name, I wish he could be wrong.

Martin notices the pages on the table and frowns at me. "Where did you get these?"

"Haema Hespera," I answer simply. "She had them when you and Simon were arrested, and she gave them to me."

His blue eyes light up with some recognition. "That's where I've seen you," he says. "You're her new assistant. We met a few days ago."

I'm glad Philippa is unconscious at the moment, as that would be rather awkward to explain. "Yes, the coroner wanted me to look into some of the things that didn't make sense, especially in light of the two latest murders."

Martin has been flipping through them and reaches the last, the woman he hadn't heard about. "Are you sure this one is connected? They've all been men."

"I'm absolutely certain and would explain, but time is of the essence. As soon as Philippa here wakes up, we'll need to fetch something." I turn to Simon, who knows about our idea that Alastor must have a record of where his trees are. "Can you meet us outside town, preferably with horses?"

"To search for the missing women?" Martin asks. "You think we can find them?"

"If we hurry."

He glances at Simon, who nods. "I'll explain everything while we wait for them."

The thought of redeeming himself by stopping the real killer helps Martin put aside any reservations. They leave to acquire the horses, planning to meet us at the graveyard, which is where they're supposed to be anyway. Martin goes downstairs as Simon lingers for a moment, concern knitting his brow.

"Be careful," he whispers.

I lay a quick kiss on his worried mouth. "I will."

When they're gone, it takes several minutes to bring Philippa around. As soon as she remembers what happened, she starts crying. "My mother is dead!" she wails. "He's taken her into the woods and killed them both!"

Not if this is Alastor at work. Chances are they're still alive for at least today and probably tomorrow or longer. Two statues will take more time to

carve. I'm prepared to put the damp towel over her mouth as Hespera did the day I started breathing too fast and too much. "I need you to calm down, Philippa. There's a good chance we can save them."

She looks up at me with watery eyes. "Do you really think so, or are you just saying that?"

"I truly believe it. None of his victims have died quickly. It's all about capturing the agony, remember?"

That probably wasn't the most tactful way to explain it. Philippa groans and closes her eyes. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"No you're not," I tell her. "You can't waste time in self-pity and fear if we're going to find them."

"How?"

"What we talked about. Find Alastor's map. The tree can't be that far from where Ralph's body was left, just a league or so."

Philippa puts her face in her hands and shudders several times. Finally, she sits up, her blue-gray eyes hard as steel. "All right. Let's go break into his house."

★ ★ ★

Alastor's home and shop are locked up tight. I walk around the back as Philippa waits out front, watching for trouble. Unfortunately, he's better at securing his upper windows than most people. The only possibility is on the third story, where a shutter sags at an angle due to a broken hinge. It's also more difficult to manage in a skirt. I have to tie it up between my legs before I start climbing. Then, once I'm level with the window, I have to kick the shutter several times to bend the good hinge to make an opening wide enough to slither through. It probably would've been a good idea to change out of my Selenae clothes because anyone who sees me will remember that for sure. Too late now.

I navigate my way downstairs to his shop and peer out a crack in the door. Philippa stands nearby, shifting from one foot to another as her eyes dart around. Quickly I unbolt the door and call to her. With one last scan of the area, she slips inside, immediately tripping over a carving.

"How can you see anything in here?" she whispers, rubbing her shin.

"I had time to adjust."

“Well, I’m going to need some light to find anything.”

We can’t risk opening windows, and it’s sweltering in here, but I locate some candles and a tinderbox. It’s almost worse for me once they’re lit, as the shadows from the carvings scatter twisted shapes all over the walls. The shelf that held the fierce animal skulls is empty.

“What should we look for?” asks Philippa.

“Maps, diaries, ledgers...,” I answer. “Anything written in.”

There’s not much other than the carvings in the front room, which are set on display when the shop is open, so we move quickly to the room behind. There we find a large, slanted table much like Magister Thomas uses. The only difference is the kind of drawings. Many are sketches of bodies contorted in positions, some of which were represented in the carvings we passed. I flip through a few of them, but all the faces are blank. “These must be him deciding how to position them,” I murmur.

“Do you think they’re based on the trees he’s bent into shapes?” Philippa asks.

“Probably, which means hopefully...” I bend down to peek under the desk. “Ah!” I pull out a large, leather-bound book and flip it open. In it are sketches of trees in progress with the dates he visited and what he did to bend them as he wanted.

Blazing skies, there were more than the dozen or so I’d feared—over a hundred, and none of them say where they are. How can I ever determine which he’s using for this carving?

“I found a map of the forest with lots of landmarks.” Philippa sets a large, rolled parchment on top of the book and spreads it out, frowning. “With numbers scattered around.”

“Wait.” I pull the book out from under and scan the open page until I find what I’m looking for—a number in the top corner. Each corresponds to one on the map.

But there are one hundred and twelve, all seemingly random in location. Philippa exhales in despair. “How under the Sun can we know which of these it is?”

I feel the same way, but I refuse to show it. “Which is the road to Stepny?”

“Here.” Philippa traces a line going northeast from the city.

“And the server at the tavern said they found him slightly more than a league from the city,” I murmur, measuring the distance with my fingers.

Philippa shakes her head. “That could be wildly inaccurate, though.”

“Agreed, but it’s all we’ve got.”

I know a lot of the drawing tools in the box at the top of the table, and I root through them until I find one that’s a stick of charcoal and a pointed metal rod, attached by a hinge set in a quarter circle. After estimating distances on the map’s scale, I open the hinge until the points are that far apart and draw a circle centered on the spot about a league from the city. Only eight trees are inside. We’ll start there.

“Tell me the numbers one at a time,” I say, flipping the book back to the first I focus on, which is fifteen. It’s not what I’m looking for, but I fold down the corner of the page to mark it.

Philippa feeds me the next to check, and I mark it, too. “Are you searching for something specific?” she asks as I leaf to the third.

“I am. I just don’t know if I’ll find it.”

None of them are what I hoped for, though. There are four more not far outside my drawn circle, though, and I try one of those.

Yes.

“Here!” I push the open book where we can both see it. Number ninety-nine: not one tree, but a pair intertwined like lovers leaning on each other for support.

“Two trees,” I say. “For two women, martyred together.”

“Felicia and Petuna,” Philippa whispers. Their story is one of the most well known, with their names even mentioned in prayers of the early evening hour. The two holies had been dear friends, refusing to leave each other’s sides as they were cast into a pit of lions.

They are who Eleanor and her friend will become.

CHAPTER 45

We take the map and book with us as we leave out the back door, moving through the streets as fast as our wind and legs will allow.

“Should we tell the reeves?” Philippa asks between panting breaths.

I shade my eyes from the noon sunshine. The kohl helps but not enough at this time of day. “There’s no way we can explain this evidence in a way that won’t get us arrested for theft.”

“Couldn’t we just say we know my mother and her friend are still out there and ask for their help in searching for them?”

For a moment I consider, comparing it to the four of us taking on a killer by ourselves. Simon and Martin had made short work of restraining the man in the alley, but out in the woods there are more places for Alastor to run. My hand finds its way into the pocket with the blue gemstone. The power that gathers in my hand seems to straighten out my thoughts. “If we go to the reeves, it could take hours for them to organize a search, and it might be difficult to get them to go in the right direction. We know exactly where your mother and her friend are, and the fastest way to get to them is with Martin and Simon, who are already waiting for us at the graveyard, hopefully with horses.”

Of course, it takes us almost a full hour to get across the city, out the north gate, and to the cemetery. My black clothes are drenched in sweat, but at least it’s less visible than on Philippa’s much lighter dress. Simon and Martin are working as they wait for us, with a pair of horses they managed to acquire tied near the gate. From the eagerness with which Martin drops his shovel to meet us, it’s obvious whatever Simon told him was enough. Every minute is precious, but Philippa and I are exhausted and take a moment to sit in the shade while the two men study the map and the book.

Martin shakes his head as he goes through the pages, muttering how he felt foolish for not realizing the fresh tree stumps actually mattered. Simon reminds him most bodies were dumped over a hundred paces from where they were killed, so it wasn't something he could've noticed. He also finds three other double trees in the pages, but all are much farther away. The proud smile he gives me when Martin isn't looking is exactly like the one I'd imagined.

"Do I want to know how you two got these?" Martin asks when he switches to studying the map.

"Not really," I answer.

He sets his mouth at a determined angle. "We'll worry how to explain them later."

"We won't necessarily have to," Simon points out. "We're only concerned citizens, looking for Mistress Philippa's mother."

I push up against the smooth tree trunk to stand and gesture down the road at the horses I can hear. The red hair on the lead rider is instantly recognizable. "You'll want to hide everything, though, if you don't want to explain it now. The shire reeve is coming."

Martin folds the map up and shoves it in the book and hands them both to me as he turns around. I hold it partially hidden in my dark skirt. Nothing wrong with a person having a book, but I don't want to bring attention to it.

"That's Roger with him," Martin says as he moves to meet them, raising his hand in casual greeting, as one would with a brother and a friend. "Why does he have two extra horses?"

Edward approaches so fast I half expect him to continue past us, but he reins his horse and the one he has on a lead right in front of his younger brother. Roger does the same right behind the reeve, like this is where he expected to stop.

"I need your help, Brother," the shire reeve says by way of greeting. Then he sees the horses grazing nearby and frowns. "And Simon's, too. Didn't expect you to have horses here already."

"What for?" asks Martin, ignoring the implied question about the animals.

"You've heard about the wolf attack yesterday?" Edward asks. "I've just learned that the man had two traveling companions. Women, both. They're missing."

"My mother!" Philippa blurts out. "She's one of them."

He looks at her with regretful eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that. I wish we’d known sooner.” Edward glances back at Martin. “I wanted to go to where the man was found and see if I can find clues to where they went. Hopefully they just ran off when the wolf attacked and then got lost in the woods.” He flicks his wrist back at the forest reeve. “I brought Roger since he’s best at tracking and knows the area well.”

Roger nods once, a man of few words, as usual.

Martin is doing a poor job of hiding his excitement at being asked to participate in the very thing he was planning to do. “I’m more than happy to help. Simon, too.”

“Excellent. No time to waste.” Then I’m startled when Edward turns to address me. “I’m glad to see you here, too, Mistress Catrin, as you’re Haema Hespera’s assistant, though I hope not to need you. Since it appears we have enough horses, would you be willing to come along? You need not be afraid of wolves if you stay close to us.”

I don’t fear meeting a wolf at all, of course. “May Philippa come, too?”

She’s already untying the horses brought by Simon and Martin, and I doubt anyone could stop her following without using a great deal of physical restraint. Edward nods his consent, then leans down and lowers his voice. “Though, should we come across the worst, may I count on your assistance in shielding her from it?”

“Absolutely.”

Within a few minutes, we’re all mounted and heading up the road. I’m so happy to have extra help that I brush away the nagging sense that Edward and Roger’s arrival is almost absurdly convenient.

★ ★ ★

With the sun washing out my senses, I’m even gladder to have Edward with us to point out where Ralph Pepyr’s body was found. On the way, I’d come to the conclusion that using the map wouldn’t seem overly suspicious. The trees are marked with numbers, and I’d only drawn a circle radiating out from where we thought the attack occurred—which was completely reasonable if we’d gone to Martin and Simon for help searching. When we stop, I pull the map out and leave the book tucked in the saddle as I dismount.

The body was carried away when other travelers came across it, so all

that's left is an area of matted weeds and wildflowers with a dark spot where blood soaked into the ground. It's near the trees, and once in the shade I can smell the blood and other evidence of where he lay. I spread the map out for all to see. The first thing Edward does is ask about the numbers.

I shrug. "No idea. I bought it this morning from a man who had several used ones."

Edward accepts the explanation and taps the line of the road. "Your circle is off. We're closer to this point here."

If the circle had been drawn from there, tree ninety-nine would be inside. "It was my best guess."

Two wide paths lead into the forest going in opposite directions. Martin and Simon—and Philippa—are itching to take the one going west, but Edward immediately leans toward the other. "If the body was found on the west side of the road," he reasons, "then the wolf likely appeared on that side. The women would have run in the opposite direction."

His logic is sound, and we can't explain why we know it's wrong, but Edward agrees to split up, seeing as we have enough people to effectively do so. Philippa and I go with Simon and Martin, leading our horses into the gloom. I can smell urine somewhere off to the side. I drop the reins and follow my nose to the source of the stale scent, which is on a tree about a dozen paces off the path. Simon is right behind me when I stop. Whether or not he can also smell it, his attention is drawn to a spot not far away that's been swept clear of leaves. Curls of wood litter the area on either side.

"Someone sat here a while," he murmurs. "Whittling."

We both turn around and gaze out at the road, which we can see clearly for quite a distance in both directions. Roger and Edward have already disappeared down their chosen path. "This is where he waited, watching, for what he wanted," I whisper.

Simon nods. "He may not have even been set on two women this time, but when they came by, all he had to do was get rid of their companion."

"Which is why his death was quick and even looked like a real wolf attack," I agree quietly.

We return to the path and tell the others what we found. Philippa shudders but keeps a grip on her panic. It is, after all, good news to have evidence that Alastor was here. The path is wide enough for the horses, but we're forced to continue on foot rather than ride due to the low hanging branches. Our best

estimate is that the pair of twisted trees is about a league and a half away, so after an hour of walking, we tie the horses to some sturdy limbs and continue without them, wanting to be able to approach quieter. Following the path continues to seem like the best option; Alastor probably used it over the years in modifying his trees.

Martin insists on walking out front, carrying the map and referring to it when the path divides or we cross streams. Philippa clutches my arm, which makes it difficult for me to hear anything. When I whisper that to Simon, he begins to insist on pausing every few minutes to listen.

Except the first noises I hear come from behind us.

CHAPTER 46

I grab Simon's elbow. "Someone's following us."

Martin immediately stops and turns around, his hands going to the hilt of his common dagger—the only weapon he has. "He heard us coming?"

I shake my head now that I've had a chance to focus on listening. There are two bodies moving along the path, two male voices, but one rarely speaks. "It's Edward and Roger."

"On horses?"

"No, I think they left them with ours so they could move faster." The four of us aren't trying to stay hidden, and even though the trail has split several times, we're easy to follow.

"What do we do?" Simon keeps his eyes on me but directs the question at Martin.

He exhales heavily as he debates. "We wait for him. Don't want him shouting for us." Martin moves past me to meet his brother when he comes in sight, which is barely two minutes later.

"Where under the blazing Sun are you going, Brother?" Edward calls.

"I could ask you that," Martin replies. "We're following the same path we were when we left you. Why are you here?"

"Our trail ended at a wide stream with no sign of anyone being there in the last couple days, so we doubled back, then came looking for you." He puts his fists on his hips. "Were you planning on stopping at some point? Why did you leave your horses behind? And what"—he gestures to Roger, who's holding Alastor's book—"is this?"

I'd left it tucked into the saddle. When Martin glances back at me, I shrug apologetically. It didn't seem necessary to bring along.

"Roger says he's seen some of these trees—one of them was near the body

in the fire,” Edward continues, his tone scolding. “And that he believes the numbers on the map you have actually mark those, which then makes me think they are what you’re really searching for out here, but that doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does if you’ll let me get a word in edgewise,” says Martin. Then he sighs and pulls out the map. Philippa clutches my hand as he explains with Simon’s occasional input.

Edward listens, asking a few questions and turning back to Roger once for confirmation there was a stump where the first supposed wolf victim was found. The sun is getting lower in the sky, taking precious daylight with it. I won’t need it to see by, but they will, and we surely have half an hour yet to go.

“So this is actually the carver’s map and book?” Edward asks, and all of us nod. “How did *you* get them?”

When Martin hesitates, his brother grunts. “Don’t answer that if you can’t. Put the map away. If it’s stolen, we can’t use it as evidence, so we’ll have to catch him in the act. Let’s get moving.”

★ ★ ★

We continue as a group of six, Edward and Martin out front and Roger bringing up the rear. As I strain to hear or smell signs of Alastor and the women, I suddenly remember the blue stone in my pocket. The moment it’s in my hand, my range expands, and I hear the tapping and scraping of a hammer striking a chisel to chip away bark and wood. We’re close and going in the right direction, but the sculpting has begun.

It’s maddening to follow along like I can’t hear. Even the scent of fear begins to reach me, drifting on the breeze, as well as whimpers and moans. I want to tell Philippa her mother is alive—both women are—but it’s not something I should know. Simon, however, glances back at me with the question in his eyes, and I nod. At long last, Martin halts, holding up a hand for everyone to also stop and listen.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Pause.

Tap-tap.

They finally hear what I do.

Roger moves past Philippa and me and Simon, his finger on his lips. When he gets to Edward, he signals with his hands that he'll go ahead and scout while we wait here. I close my eyes and listen as he creeps toward the noise. He's able to move through the forest so quietly even I have trouble keeping track of him. After what feels like an hour, the forester returns, looking grimly satisfied.

"It's him," he whispers. "Just as you said."

"And the women?" Martin asks.

"Alive, but bloodied up. Gagged and bound together."

Philippa seizes me in a hug from the side, trying only half successfully to suppress a sob of relief.

Roger motions for everyone to squat down as he does so, brushing dead leaves aside to expose an area of dirt on the path. Using the tip of his dagger, he draws marks to represent where they are in relationship to us and each other. "Path goes in like this," he says, scratching a line. "I think we should come in from all sides."

"Surround him so he can't run," Edward agrees. "Does he have any weapons?"

"Not that I saw, other than a dagger on his belt," Roger replies. "His tools didn't look too friendly, though."

"All right." The shire reeve nods to his brother. "We're here thanks to your work. Do you want to make the plan?"

Martin's eyes dart to Simon and me with some guilt, as he knows it's us who deserve more credit, but Simon only smiles and gestures for him to go ahead. Philippa and I hang back as the four of them bend their heads over the dirt patch, assigning angles. It doesn't take long.

"What about us?" asks Philippa as Martin scuffs over the marks with his boot. "How can we help?"

For a second, I think Martin's going to tell us to stay out of the way, but instead he says, "You're with me, but stay behind a bit. As soon as we have him, or have him on the run, you get to your mother." He unsheathes his dagger and offers it to her.

Philippa takes it with trembling hands. "Don't you need a weapon?"

"I need one less than you do," he assures her.

I also have a small knife on my belt, more of a tool than anything, but it will cut ropes and whatever is used to gag them.

“Let’s go,” Martin says quietly. “Finish this.”

Roger has been assigned the farthest to go and sets off without a word, while Edward clasps his brother’s arm before following the forester around to the north. Simon takes a little longer, meeting my eyes for several seconds. *Be careful. I love you.*

I smile tightly. *You, too.*

When they’re all gone, Martin counts to one hundred under his breath, then motions for us to follow him, quietly as possible. Philippa clutches the dagger rather than my hand, though she occasionally reaches out to my arm. The tapping of the hammer on the chisel continues, assuring us of where Alastor is, that his attention is occupied. I worry about Simon, who is weaponless—I should have offered him my knife so he would have something. Too late now.

Martin stops and motions for us to freeze. Alastor’s back has come into view. He’s shirtless, skin gleaming with sweat as he labors on the trees before him. He pauses to look off to his right, then bends down to change tools. I can see the face he’s carving in the tree, that of a round-cheeked woman whose jaw is clenched in pain. When he stands again, he holds what I remember he called a riffler.

I reach for Martin’s shoulder and lean to his ear to whisper that what Alastor is using now is for fine work, which means his attention will be even more focused for at least a few minutes. Martin nods his thanks and moves forward again, slower, but it’s difficult for such a big man to move quietly. Simon, who is inexperienced in walking through the woods, isn’t having much more success on our left. Roger is somewhere ahead, beyond the carving trees, but I can’t sense him without the blue stone.

Once it’s in my hand, I can hear even the grinding of the wood as Alastor presses and twists the riffler. Something must have delayed Roger because he’s much farther away than he should be at this point. The sound of flowing water tells me why—he had to cross a stream that cut deep into the hillside.

Martin halts again, this time at the distance they’d agreed on before moving in together. I put my hand on his arm to tell him he needs to wait a bit longer for Roger to catch up, when I realize the grinding noise has stopped. When I refocus on the carving trees, Alastor is staring right at us.

CHAPTER 47

Martin turns his head from searching for Edward on the right and realizes Alastor sees us. Whether it was my black clothing or Martin's red hair that drew his attention, the element of surprise is gone. Rising from his crouch, Martin runs straight at Alastor, shouting for the others to charge in. I'm right behind him, though he quickly outpaces me. Edward has managed to get the closest, and he bursts through the brush. Alastor turns to meet the huge man as he leaps up and off a knee-high boulder with a roar.

They crash to the ground with a crunch of bone and grunts of pain. The two men roll over until Edward's back slams into the trees, and the shire reeve's body goes rigid. Alastor falls away, his fingers covered in scarlet and no longer holding the metal grinding tool. He struggles to his feet as Martin reaches him and realizes the blood on his hand came from Edward's chest. Before Martin can make a decision, Alastor flings a chisel at him like a knife, forcing the bigger man to shield his face with his arm. The beveled metal tool grazes across the top of his head, slicing through the skin. It's not that deep, but scalp wounds bleed a lot, and within a few seconds, Martin can barely see for the blood streaming down the side of his face.

Alastor leaves everything and sprints in the direction between where Edward and Martin came from, either knowing or guessing that no one is out there anymore. I reach the clearing just as he leaves it, with Philippa still a few seconds behind me. Looking around, I see bleached animal skulls in a row, several with bloody fangs, and the two women, stripped to their underdresses and tied back-to-back, so they lean on each other. Streams of drying blood drip down their arms to their wrists, bound together with their hands clasped like the martyrs who had died as one.

Where is Simon?

He stumbles into the clearing, scratched all over from the thick brambles he had to get through. Without stopping, he continues past me, shouting, “Take care of them!” Then he’s gone, chasing after Alastor.

I turn around to face Martin, who’s on his knees with blood raining down his cheeks like crimson tears. Edward clutches his lower rib cage where a rounded piece of metal sticks out from between two ribs, agony written on his face.

No!

With the stone in my hand, wordless suffering screams from all the blood around me, so much I can barely think. If Alastor could disable both big men in a matter of seconds, he’ll kill Simon. I turn and run after him.

No! Go back! Edward!

I ignore the voice in my head as I release the stone into my pocket and scoop up the hammer lying on the ground. They haven’t gotten very far, and I can hear Roger has changed directions to intercept them, but I’m closer. Though Alastor did more damage to Edward, it’s also clear he wasn’t entirely unhurt himself. He limps enough that Simon is able to catch up, tackling him from behind. They both go down, wrestling, punching, biting—a tangle of arms and legs I can’t tell apart until the rolling stops and Alastor is on top with his hands on Simon’s throat.

I scream as I sprint the last few steps, gripping the hammer as I pull it back. Alastor looks up at me with wide, black-ringed eyes just before I swing, striking him across the face.

He tumbles off Simon and onto his back, grabbing at his shattered jaw as though he could put it back together, writhing in pain until it overwhelms him, and his body goes limp.

★ ★ ★

We’re a hobbling bunch as we make our way back to the horses in the twilight. Simon and Roger drag the restrained but still-unconscious Alastor on an A-frame stretcher, using the poles Eleanor and her companion Idonia had been tied to. Both women are weak from lack of food and water, and Philippa concentrates on helping them along. Though Martin’s bandaged head has bled the most, it’s Edward I’m worried about. The riffler is still in his chest, and for now his lung on that side is able to fill with air, but I’m

afraid if I remove it, he'll end up like Hugh Bolton, unable to breathe enough to walk. If he collapses, none of us are strong enough to carry him out. Roger is unharmed, but it becomes my task to lead everyone through the increasing darkness as he helps the shire reeve along.

At the horses, we take Alastor off the stretcher and sling him over the back of one of the animals like a sack of grain. None of us cares if he lives or dies. Eleanor and Idonia are helped onto mounts and lie low against their necks to pass under the tree limbs, with Simon and Philippa alongside to keep them on. Then we can move much faster, though Edward still limits us. I considered trying to get him onto the stretcher at one point, but the way Alastor was jostled puts that out of my mind. Walking is the smoothest way for him to travel. Riding on horseback is out of the question even once we finally reach the road, which means a long night walking back to the city.

It's hours past midnight when I hear the sound of other horses ahead. A wagon sits on the road, as though waiting for us to emerge, and one of two figures in Selenae black hops down from the seat. With the crescent moon long gone, I reach for the stone to see better and hear Hespera's voice: "Thank our Moon and stars."

The coroner runs to meet us, her face going as pale as Edward's when she sees the blood streaming out of his chest. He's near collapse as she guides him back to the road, barking questions at me. Zosima watches from the bench as the shire reeve is helped into the wagon and carefully made to lie down. Hespera cuts away his shirt with scissors from her kit, then lays her head on his chest to listen to his breathing. After several seconds she sits up, mouth grim.

"Is it his lung?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No, but his spleen is punctured. I need Maia for surgery."

"A man can live without a spleen, right?" I ask.

"Yes, but not if he bleeds out before then." Hespera looks at me. "You did well, not removing the object. It may have saved his life." Before I can acknowledge the compliment, she raises her voice to address everyone else. "I'm sorry, but if I'm to save this man, I have to leave all of you here. We'll send help."

Then she pounds on Zosima's bench, shouting, "Go!" The older woman snaps the reins over the horses, and they fly down the road.

★ ★ ★

Dawn is already brightening the sky when several medical students meet us at the hospital north of town. All the physicians who work here are akademium trained, but they're reluctant to let the Selenae in, perhaps because that would be admitting their superiority, even as mere students. They pull Alastor down from the horse's back and carry him in, but not before one of them vomits at the sight of his crushed face. Philippa accompanies the women inside on my recommendation; their injuries aren't life-threatening—what they need more than anything is rest. The Selenae offer treatment to everyone else out on the lawn, which Martin and Simon accept. I don't notice the archaemon among them until he grabs my arm and pulls me aside, demanding to know what happened.

“Has Alastor said anything?” Caerus asks when I've given him enough details to understand that the former Selenae is guilty of murder and caught in the act.

I shake my head. “No, nor will he.”

That's not enough assurance for the archaemon. “Come with me,” he commands.

I follow him to the entrance to the hospital, where he talks his way inside. It probably helps that he was here before when the burned woman was found, and I think the physicians are also at somewhat of a loss as to what to do with Alastor's massive injuries. We're left alone with him in a surgical chamber, I imagine so that if he dies, they can blame us.

Caerus immediately begins sorting through the cutting implements. “We can't risk him giving any of our secrets away,” he tells me. “There's a chance he could regain consciousness and write something out.”

“A very slim chance,” I point out.

“Not one I'm willing to take.”

I swallow. “Does that mean you're going to kill him yourself?”

He selects a knife with a blade half as long as my little finger. “Yes, but in a way that won't implicate us.”

“How exactly?”

Caerus lowers the scalpel to look at me. “We will unvoid him.”

The shock of magick returning after so long will undoubtedly be fatal in his

current condition. I frown. “Isn’t voiding done with multiple pieces of voidstone, so it’s almost impossible to undo?”

“Normally, yes,” the archaemon replies. “But Alastor was voided voluntarily, so only a single piece was used.”

“And you know where that is?”

He nods. “Yes. Lift his left shoulder, please.”

Had voiding him been Caerus’s responsibility? I’d thought that it happened before he assumed the rank of archaemon and that Alastor had done it himself. I do as asked, raising Alastor high enough to expose an inch-wide scar at the top of his back. Caerus moves his ringed hand over the area in a circle twice before making a shallow vertical cut into the skin. Silent blood leaks out of the wound.

Setting down the knife, Caerus reaches for a pair of tweezers and uses them to remove a shard of black stone that reflects the golden candlelight. The archaemon drops it on a piece of gauze and wraps it up as I lower Alastor’s shoulder back to the table.

“Now what?” I ask.

Caerus looks queasy as he backs away to sit heavily in a chair, the wad of linen in his hand. “Wrap his head in bandages.”

I hesitate. This is much more complicated than Martin’s wound. “I’m not sure how to do it properly.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just make it appear we’ve done something to keep his injuries stable.”

I obey, keeping one eye on the archaemon and being careful to avoid touching Alastor’s blood. Conscious or unconscious, I don’t want to know what thoughts are flowing in his veins. Whatever they are, it’s probably what made Caerus react as he did. When I’m finished with Alastor’s face, I wrap a bit more around his shoulder to hide the fresh cut.

Caerus takes a few more minutes to recover, but he says we’re in no rush. We exit the room to a waiting circle of physicians, whom he immediately addresses. “This man is on the edge of death and your facilities are inadequate; I cannot treat him here. Make arrangements to bring him to my hospital.”

The staff rushes to obey, wanting him out of their care before he expires. Caerus and I exit together to where Simon and the others wait. Bruises blossom on the pale skin of Simon’s neck, but otherwise he’s unharmed. As

we wait for Alastor to be brought out, Caerus looks at Simon. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” he says, extending his hand with a side glance to me. “I’m the archaemon of the akademium.”

Simon keeps his face blank as he clasps Caerus’s hand. “I’m Simon,” he says politely. “And I’m sorry, but I don’t know what an archaemon is.”

“He’s the head of the medical school,” hisses Martin. “The best physician in probably the whole world.”

Not according to Hespera, I can’t help thinking.

“Oh, my apologies.” Simon dips his head. “I meant no disrespect, Archaemon. Forgive my ignorance.”

Caerus smiles sadly. “It’s no matter. I thank you both for your help in this unpleasant business. A criminal will face justice, thanks to you.”

Martin understands that as a dismissal and tugs on Simon’s arm. “Come on, let’s go see if we can get some news on my brother.”

Simon can’t help watching me as he lets Martin pull him along. Fortunately, Caerus is focused on the efforts to bring Alastor out of the hospital. Four young men carry him on a stretcher through the doors, and the archaemon turns to lead the way to the akademium, taking the road that goes around the city wall.

We’re halfway there when I feel the moon rise above the treetops behind us. While I and all the Selenae present welcome the touch of its gentle light, Alastor suddenly arches his back and seizes so hard the carriers can’t keep him on the stretcher. They lower him to the ground before he tumbles off, physician students crowding around. I cover my ears in a reflexive—and futile—effort to shut out the mental scream that echoes through my brain, but it’s only a few seconds before it stops and he’s completely still, though the students struggle in vain to revive him for several minutes.

Caerus shakes his head slowly. “Such a shame.”

CHAPTER 48

I wait outside the judicare's chamber as the events and evidence collected over the last three days are reviewed. Ostensibly I'm here as Haema Hespera's assistant, while she's inside, acting as Edward's physician. The only way she'd allow him to leave the hospital to come here today was if she was able to accompany him. He had to ride in a wheeled chair, which he hates, but does so without protest because she insists—with good reason. After all, a portion of his spleen had to be removed, though not all of it, thanks to Maia's surgical skills, and he's lost a dangerous amount of blood.

If I hold the blue stone in my hand, I can hear everything inside quite clearly, however. Eleanor and Idonia testify how Alastor Carver accosted them on the road and killed Idonia's husband, then forced them to follow him deep into the woods. After that, Martin and Simon talk about their search for the two women on Philippa's behalf and lucking into finding them.

Martin describes going to Alastor's home afterward, where a book detailing his strange trees and a map locating all of them were found. There's discomfort in Simon's voice as he tells of how they'd then developed the theory that Alastor had been re-creating the deaths of holies, working with the woman until she was caught. He hates taking credit for my discovery, but I don't mind. It's his and Martin's reputations that were wrongfully ruined and need to be restored. As for my involvement, Edward agreed with Hespera that the participation of a Selenae citizen made things legally complicated, so it would be best if I was never mentioned. Something I also don't mind.

Alastor's death from his injuries on the way to medical treatment also simplifies matters in a way the judicare appreciates. He orders a complete catalog of everything in Alastor's house, however, and an inquiry into other possible victims that may still be undiscovered in the forest. That will take

months. My ears perk up when Martin's request to have Simon's punishment fine canceled is accepted on account of his assistance and bravery. Without that debt hanging over him, Simon is free to leave Londunium, and me with him.

As soon as I take care of one thing.

I'm already on my feet when the doors open, wishing I could hug Simon and kiss him silly in celebration of his freedom, but that will have to come later. For now I solemnly congratulate him before turning to Philippa and her mother. Eleanor and her friend have recovered from their ordeal for the most part, at least physically. Idonia will never get her husband back, and they're both likely to have nightmares for the rest of their lives.

"Will you walk home with us?" Philippa asks. "I think we should visit Anna Pounce and tell her the truth about what happened before she hears it through rumors." She glances at Hespera. "Unless you have to return to classes?"

To my surprise, the haema nods. "You may go, Catrin. I do, however, want to speak with you tomorrow before lessons. We need to discuss your future at the akademium."

With any luck, there won't be anything to discuss by then. I just have to talk to Caerus first.

Edward begins making motions about getting out of his chair and walking home, until the coroner puts her hand firmly on his shoulder and keeps him from rising. I'm glad she has someone else to lecture. Before I pivot to follow Philippa, something odd catches my eye. The ring on Hespera's hand no longer contains three cloudy white memory stones with their fragmented rainbows. Instead, there's a single blue stone with a hovering white star, flanked by two small diamonds.

I stare at the sapphire, bewildered. It's exactly like the one in my pocket—the one I'd stolen. In the last three days, she'd never mentioned it, though I'd assumed that had mostly to do with her being preoccupied with Edward's precarious surgery and healing. She'd hardly left the hospital in that time, and I'd not slept at the akademium. I intended to return it once I had no more use for it.

Thinking I might be going mad, I slip my hand into my pocket. The moment my fingers touch the smooth, round surface, Hespera glances over her shoulder at me.

We'll talk about it tomorrow. Along with your future.

I stumble out the door after Philippa.

Like hell we will.

★ ★ ★

I walk with Philippa and the two women through the streets, my thoughts spiraling out of control like the curls that have escaped my braids. I should've taken that book with me, the one that explained how the star sapphires worked, because I only vaguely remember the text on how they could be used to communicate over short distances. When I swiped the stone from Hespera's desk, I'd thought I was thwarting her plan to use it in taking my magick for her own. Now I realize she'd left it for me to find, knowing I wouldn't be able to resist stealing it, which means I only have myself to blame. She gave me the key to her office, and I'd given her the means to spy on me.

It explains so much: Edward's convenient appearance just before we went looking for Philippa's mother, the scream urging me to go back and tend to Edward after he was stabbed, Hespera waiting for us as we came out of the forest ... What else had she listened in on? How much did she know about what I planned to do?

I shake my head. She couldn't possibly have realized, otherwise she wouldn't have let me go now. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that she couldn't hear my thoughts unless I was in actual contact with the stone, in which case, I would never touch it again.

But it's obvious Hespera has been playing with me from the beginning. First, she set me up to get into trouble by giving me access to her moonweave cloak and "rescued" me from Caerus. Then she threatened to make me choose between my power and Simon before backing down. Lastly, she pretended to erase Simon to save him but ultimately let me realize the truth. That didn't count the dozen small ways she undercut and punished me almost daily, then gave me hope, sometimes only a few minutes later. Her actions continuously kept me off balance, but always brought me back to a position where I should be grateful and indebted to her.

Except I wasn't.

We leave Eleanor and Idonia at Philippa's home and head for Anna's,

deliberately avoiding the route that would take us past Alastor's shuttered shop. "Are you well?" Philippa asks. "You've not said a word since leaving the citadel."

I resist the urge to reach into my pocket, realizing what a habit it's become whenever I felt unsure, believing its focusing power was clearing my thoughts when all it was really doing was letting Hespera drive them. "I'm fine," I say. "Just ready for all of this to be over."

"So you can return to becoming a physician?"

"No," I admit, finally saying it out loud for the first time. "So I can leave Londunium forever."

"When?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow, if Simon agrees."

Philippa stops to gape at me. "But ... you promised to be here when my father arrives."

I did promise that. Magister Thomas would probably be counting on me to be around, too. "I know, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can stand to be here any longer."

"What about Simon?" she asks. "I heard him telling Martin he would help with all the work the judicare assigned him. That could take *months*."

I sigh, feeling a headache grip my temples and squeeze. Simon can't be spoken for, and the work is important. "Maybe not tomorrow, then," I concede. "I'll sleep on it."

Judging from her narrowed eyes, Philippa doesn't quite believe me, but she says nothing more and knocks on Anna's door. The widow answers and invites us in for tea, saying her little ones are playing at her sister's home.

Philippa shoos her into sitting down and puts the water on to boil herself. "How does it feel to have the mourning banner and box down?"

"I'm glad not to have to see and hear them constantly," Anna says. "But it hurts to have everyone acting like nothing happened."

"They just don't know what to say," I tell her.

"That's true." Philippa sits down across from her friend. "People like you and me are in the awkward position of wanting to move on but not wanting to forget, sometimes changing that every day, and people are afraid to say the wrong thing."

"So they say nothing." Anna sighs. "But at least Alan has me to remember him. Did you hear Alastor Carver died? It's all been mysterious as to what

happened to him, but there's no mourning banner up because he has no family, which is so sad."

Philippa leans forward and covers Anna's hand with both of hers. "We actually came here to tell you about him."

Anna brings her brows together in bewilderment. "You came to tell me about Alastor? Or do you mean Alan?"

"Both." Philippa looks helplessly at me.

I clear my throat. "Alastor killed Alan."

"What?" Anna turns her confusion on me. "Alan was attacked by a wolf."

"No." I shake my head. "Alastor made it appear as if a wolf did it, using one of the skulls he had to create bites. That's why he told your husband where to find the wood he wanted, so he would go deep into the forest, where he was waiting."

"But ... why?"

I hesitate to explain how he turned Alan's death into art. "We don't know," I say simply. "Some people just need to hurt others."

Anna leans back in her chair, staring at nothing. "He sat here in this room the night before," she whispers. "Long past midnight on that Sun Day, making sure my husband knew exactly where to go, planning the whole time what he would do to him."

"It was similar with Uncle Hugh," Philippa says. "That woman asked for his help, using his own goodness against him."

A tear slides down Anna's cheek, and she rubs it away. "I don't think I can think of anything more evil than that."

★ ★ ★

Simon is pacing his room like the first night when I arrive. When I knock, he opens the door and sweeps me into his arms. "I was getting worried. Where have you been?"

"Philippa's mostly." He releases me, and I sit on the edge of the bed with a sigh. "We went to talk to Alan Pounce's widow. Thought it would be better if she heard the news about Alastor from a friend rather than through rumors."

He sits next to me. "I bet that was difficult."

I climb into his lap and make an effort to smile. "I've been through worse, especially lately."

“I have some good news, though,” Simon says before I can kiss him.

“What?”

“Martin’s going to be a reeve again.”

My smile becomes much more genuine. “That’s wonderful. Wait. What do you mean ‘going to be’? Can’t his brother just reinstate him?”

“He could, but seeing as the office was stripped from Martin in front of everyone, Edward wants to restore it in the same way.”

“Oh, I like that.”

Simon nods. “So that will be tomorrow at noon. Will you come?”

I bite my lip. “I’m not sure I can. Haema Hespera wants to see me then.”

“You’d better go there, instead.” He nuzzles the spot where my jaw meets my neck. “She wants to see me tomorrow afternoon, too. Said she had a proposal for me, but that it depends on you.”

I’ll bet it does. “Simon, what do you want to do?”

He presses his lips to my throat and slides a hand around my waist. “Is that a trick question?”

“I don’t mean now.” I nudge him back so I can look at him. “What do you want to do with your life? Do you want to stay here?”

Simon shrugs. “I want to be wherever you are.”

“What if I said I don’t want to be a physician?”

“Really?” He tilts his head in bewilderment. “Hespera seems to think you could be a better one than her.”

“I don’t care what Hespera thinks.”

“All right.” Simon catches my mood. “What is this about, Cat?”

“Nothing specific. I just don’t feel like she has my best interests at heart.” I glance away. “And I’m tired of magick, aren’t you?”

“It’s a part of you, Cat. You can’t change it, like your hair.”

“Which I also hate.”

Simon grasps my chin to make me look at him again. “Do you really mean that?”

“It keeps me from you, so yes.”

“You say that, and yet here I am. Here *we* are.”

“For now.”

Simon pulls my face to his. “For always.”

★ ★ ★

I lie with my head on Simon's bare chest, listening to his heart beat. Without the moon up, my only magick comes from the moonstone against my skin. I reach up to the short chain and cup the stone for a few seconds before twisting and yanking it off my neck, breaking the new clasp. Then I hold it up and study its faded glow—it's almost empty of the magick it absorbed over three weeks ago, the night we were bonded. Or did the first part of bonding. It feels like in the time our love grew, my need for magick waned.

Maybe I just wanted a different magick.

I lean away from Simon, feeling an agony at losing contact with him, and set the necklace on the night table next to the bed. As I let go of the jewelry, there's a same sense of loss. I stay there in the middle for a long moment, feeling the invisible tug from both sides.

Then Simon reaches for me in his sleep, and I let him pull me back to his side. I don't need magick to hear his heart as I settle against his chest again.

Yes. This is what I want.

For always.

CHAPTER 49

“What happened here?” Simon holds up the broken necklace the next morning as we dress.

I shrug and step into my black skirt. “It came apart sometime last night. I’ll worry about it later.”

“Don’t you need it?”

“Not today.” When he frowns, I point to the sky outside. “Half-moon today. Rises just past noon.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “That’s several hours from now.”

“I’m sure. It’s almost spent anyway. Doesn’t give me much.”

He tucks it in his jacket. “I’ll try to get it fixed for you sometime today.”

“I thought you and Martin were going to be busy all morning.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t try.” Simon plants a kiss on my cheek. “But you’re right, I do need to go. I’ll see you later in Hespera’s office?”

“Sure.”

Simon pauses halfway out the door, concern in his eyes. “Are you certain nothing’s wrong?”

I put on a dazzling smile. “Absolutely.”

As soon as he’s gone, I lock the door and take off my Selenae outfit, exchanging it for my working clothes from Collis.

★ ★ ★

“Will you make up your mind?” says the Selenae guard with an eye roll at my clothing.

I ignore him and continue under the iron lattice and into the courtyard. The only students about right now are the non-magickal ones—everyone else is still asleep. Probably the archaemon, too, so I feel bad knocking on his door,

but he'd said this was better to do when there was no moon up.

It takes him a few minutes to answer, so I start with an apology that he waves away. He looks rather sickly, though. Dark circles ring his lower eyes and the irises are dull gray. "Are you well?" I ask. "I can come back another time."

That makes me a bit queasy to say, though. I need this over with. "I just wanted ... to take you up on your offer."

The archaemon blinks, still half asleep. "My offer?"

"To take care of my magick. You said it was less painful when the moon was weaker."

His eyes widen. "You mean that?"

"Yes. I don't belong here. I belong with Simon."

"But ... he's forgotten you."

Oops. "Yes, but I'll get him back."

"Of course, of course." Caerus opens the door wider. "Come in before anyone sees you."

I step inside. Several moonstones in candlesticks light up the room, but I instantly feel the hum of bloodstones all around, too. The archaemon latches the door and faces me, rubbing his hands like he's washing them in invisible water. "I need to clean up first."

"Of course."

"Just a minute. Wait here." He goes into a back room and closes the door, leaving me alone. I could sit, but the furniture doesn't look particularly comfortable. Instead I rock back and forth on my heels. His nervousness is a bit contagious, or maybe it's the bloodstones. They're resonating from all four corners of the room in a way that makes my teeth ache.

Fortunately, Caerus doesn't take long, drying his hands on a towel as he returns, working his way around the black sapphire ring. This may be the last chance I have to be near one, and I point to it. "Can I ask about that stone?"

"Family heirloom" is all he says, twisting it straight on his finger. I feel a glimmer of disappointment at not getting a chance to hold it.

"Must be old," I say.

"What?" He's still brushing his lower arms dry, so hard the skin is turning pink. "No, not really. I mean, yes." He tosses the towel aside. "I've had it for years."

"Are you sure you're well?" I ask, realizing he'd never answered the

question earlier. “Your hands are shaking.”

He changes from rubbing to flexing his knuckles. “Just cold.”

Must have been the wash water. Something about his behavior feels familiar, though. “So where do we do this? Right here?”

“What? Oh no. Need to be outside. Away from here.”

I guess I don’t know how this works.

“How long do we have until moonrise?” he asks.

“Maybe six hours.”

“Good, good. Let me get some water and ... a, um...”

“Voidstone?”

“Yes.” Caerus wanders into the back room again, returning a few minutes later with a satchel. A bottle of liquid sloshes inside and bangs against something else solid. “Let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“The forest. Nice and quiet. No one to bother us. There’s a hilltop where you can see the Moon’s rise. Common spot for lovers. Not that that’s us.” He chuckles nervously.

Maybe this isn’t a good idea after all.

A pounding on the door startles us both. “Caerus!” Hespera shouts. “Caerus, wake up!”

I suddenly know she’s here for me, to stop me from doing this. “Do you have a back door?” I ask him. “Is there a way out of the akademium other than the front gate?”

The archaemon seems to wake up from whatever slowed his thoughts. “Yes, this way.”

★ ★ ★

I expect the rusty gate to squeal, but it’s virtually silent as Caerus unlocks and opens it. The tangle of moonflower vines hanging down looks impenetrable until I try to push through, and I realize they’re less woven together than they appear. The archaemon smiles as he recloses the gate just as quietly and ducks out of the leaves into the open. “I come this way often.”

“So it would seem.”

We’re outside the wall around the akademium, which is covered with vines on the north side. Most of the city stretches off to our right. Caerus throws the

satchel over his shoulder and turns his feet to the west. “Come along.”

We make for a part of the forest I’ve not been in, which makes me feel somewhat less nervous. None of Alastor’s trees are over here. In fact, it’s so rocky that calling this area wooded is generous. It’s mostly scrub and spindly trees struggling to grow between cracks and gaps. I actually begin to enjoy the roughening terrain as civilization drops away. It’s not like climbing scaffolds, of course, but it brings an exertion I’ve missed. A challenge, too, as I’m not wearing a moonstone and my senses are comparatively dull to what I’ve become used to.

At last Caerus stops on a bare patch atop the one true earthen hill we’ve come across. There are actual trees here, reaching high above us, bent with the winds they face alone. The city spreads to the southeast, the Tamse River unspooling like a ribbon below it. If I had my magick, I could see where it meets the sea.

“Thirsty?” Caerus offers me the bottle of water he’s pulled from his bag. I take it gratefully and twist the cork out. “Be careful—” he starts to say.

But it’s too late. The mouth is chipped on one side, and I slice the tip of my forefinger. A fat drop of blood appears in the gash.

“Sorry about that,” Caerus mutters.

“No, I should have paid better attention.” Since it’s open and I’m parched, I go ahead and take a long drink before popping the cork back on, then stick my bleeding finger in my mouth. The sharp, metallic flavor shocks my tongue, and I immediately yank it back out, spitting. After a few seconds the blood is gone but the taste lingers as I peer at my finger. “Wouldn’t happen to have a bloodstone, would you?” I ask.

“Yes, I would.” The archaemon digs around in his bag for a few seconds before pulling one out and hands it to me.

I’m acutely aware this is the last time I’ll be able to experience blood magick, and as I take the stone he holds out I think, rather than say, *Thank you*.

Caerus doesn’t react.

I frown. Did he not hear me? With blood magick, particularly as strong as his is, my thought should have been carried to him by the stone. I fumble with it, dropping the bloodstone so it bounces to his foot, where he picks it up and offers it to me again, a faint smile on his thin lips.

I SAID THANK YOU.

Again, no reaction.

I pass the bloodstone to my right hand and clutch my bleeding finger to it, wiping blood all over one side, thinking, *I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW MUCH GRAY IS IN YOUR HAIR, OLD MAN*, as I drop it again. Oddly, it feels truly accidental that it slips through my fingers, like they're too weak to grasp the flat stone. I turn my palm over and stare at the lines arcing across the skin, which blur and come into sharp focus and blur again as blood drips down to follow the deepest groove to my wrist.

"Try again?" Caerus says from my side, holding up the stone streaked with my blood.

My thought is shouting at me over this narrow distance and I can almost see the *maegnetis* streaming out of the stone. The archaemon is touching it. Why doesn't he act like he hears it? I make a clumsy grab for the bloodstone, missing the first time, then smearing my blood across his knuckle when I manage to find it the second try.

ANSWER ME.

Caerus makes a disgusted face and wipes my blood off on his sleeve. My sight is sharp enough to see he doesn't get it all, and yet he still doesn't hear me. That bothers me until I'm distracted by motes of pollen floating in the air between us.

I can see and he can't hear.

I can hear, too. And taste. A metallic flavor not from the blood clings to my tongue. It's strangely familiar. I struggle to remember when I had it before. Simon was there. And Juliane. It tasted more floral then, though it smelled like valerian root, like dirt. Good for relaxing.

What in Sun's Light was in that tea? Remi's voice shouts. Skonia?

I sway on the uneven ground, and Caerus catches my upper arms, peering into my eyes. "Maybe you should sit down, Catrin."

The earth comes up to meet me, and I don't have a choice. Caerus lays me back on the rocky soil until all I can see is sky.

"I didn't even drink tea," I mumble.

"Relax," he tells me. "We have a while yet before we can finish this."

CHAPTER 50

The sky changes when I blink, becomes a brighter blue. All but one wisp of cloud disappears. It's also much hotter, and my clothes are half soaked with sweat.

I struggle to sit up, but my arms won't move. Or rather, when one moves, the other goes with it. My wrists are tied together, as are my ankles.

An indistinct shape off to my side comes into focus as the archaemon. "Perfect timing," he says. "Less than an hour to go."

"Less than an hour till what?" I mumble, but it comes out more like "Lessonower tul wha?"

"Moonrise. Here, I'll prop you up so you can see." Caerus scoots behind me to lift me by my shoulders, then rotates my body to recline against an angled rock. The horizon appears in the distance, a fuzzy line of green treetops and azure sky. The moon isn't visible yet, but I can feel it hanging just out of sight.

"What you doing?" I ask. This time the words are more intelligible.

"Just what you wanted," Caerus answers. "Taking your magick away."

I raise my bound wrists. "Why was this necessary?"

"Yes, well, I couldn't risk you changing your mind at the last minute."

"Why would it matter to you if I did?"

"Because I want it."

The archaemon wants my magick? Why? He already has more than anyone.

Except he doesn't. I turn my hands to look at the crust of dried blood on my finger. As I bend and flex, reddish bits flake off and float away on the breeze, most to land on my lap. He couldn't hear my blood. Not even when he touched it. How was that possible? Caerus was a physician, which meant

he had to have blood magick.

My head feels like it's full of wool, and I shake it in a vain attempt to clear my thoughts. All it does is make me dizzy. Caerus catches me before I tip over, then presses a cup to my lips. I start to drink without thinking, then recall the last liquid he gave me and spit it out. The archaemon makes a noise of exasperation. "It's just water."

"Forgive me for not believing that."

"Suit yourself." He goes back to sitting a few feet away.

My glare doesn't bother him. "I didn't say you could have my magick for yourself."

"I'm only collecting what you're throwing away" is his unconcerned reply. He picks up a piece of wood and begins shaving fragments off with a long, triangular voidstone. "Even Hadrians don't have laws against that."

I find myself craving the honeyed mixture Hespera gave me. One cup to drink, and one to throw on Caerus.

Actually, I'd rather have her here right now than that drink. She'd never let Caerus do this.

How was he going to do this? According to the book in Hespera's desk, one needed two star sapphires. I force the last bit of fog from my mind. No, two pieces of the same stone.

"Whatever you're going to do, I'll undo it," I tell him.

He doesn't even glance up. "No you won't."

"Why not?"

Caerus lowers the blade to look at me. "Because you'll die if you do. And you have so much to live for, remember?"

He means Simon. And he's right. I struggle to swallow the lump in my throat. "How does this work, then? So I don't accidentally undo it?"

"You've seen it. It's just like voiding, which, I'll remind you, is what you came begging at my door for." Caerus pauses in his whittling to drag his fingernails down the insides of his arms, both of which are raw from scratching. Watching him makes my own itch, and I writhe to rub my forearms together, but it gives no relief. In desperation I twist my hands but only succeed in reopening the finger wound.

"When did I see it?"

"With Alastor, of course. The very touch of Moon's light on his blood flooded him with so much magick it killed him in seconds." Caerus pauses.

“Very ugly way to die, though quick.”

Blood drips down onto my skirt from my hand. If only the moon was up, maybe Hespera could hear me. Or if we were both holding the blue stones. Mine is still in my skirt pocket, as I was planning to give it back to her, but there’s no way I could reach inside and touch it now. It’s maddening, too, because I can feel the bump of it under two layers of fabric.

Except magick can pass through fabric in blood. I just pray I can squeeze out enough.

Caerus frowns as I wriggle to push my finger into my skirt in the right place. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to stop the bleeding, seeing as I don’t have a bandage.” I press my messy finger to the lump and will the blood to soak through to the stone. *Hespera, help me.* Out loud, I ask, “What will you do?”

The archaemon shrugs. “First I’ll void you, using this.” He raises the wide, triangular blade. “It won’t be terrible, seeing as there’s no moon and you have no moonstone. You’ve been without the use of magick for several hours, other than what the *skonia* gave you.”

Where are you?

Tears of relief flood my eyes as Hespera’s response echoes back through the wet fabric. Praying to the blessed Sun and Moon she can understand, I send panicky visions of the door we left through, the path we walked, the view we have now of the city.

“That doesn’t make sense, though,” I tell Caerus through clenched teeth. “If my magick is voided, how will there be any for you?”

He gestures to the horizon. “It all comes back with the moon, remember? But the stone under your skin will send your magick to me rather than the void.”

I suddenly realize it wasn’t a voidstone he’d removed from Alastor, it was the chipped-off piece of his black sapphire. He’d used it to possess Alastor’s magick for years.

Caerus didn’t protect Alastor to keep Selenae secrets—he did it because otherwise he would lose the stolen magick. I stare at the obsidian blade in his hands. Yesterday, Anna had said Alastor was at her home past midnight on the evening before her husband disappeared—the night of the murders at the citadel. I’d assumed Alastor had done those, but it must have been Caerus. Like Hespera, he’d overheard Simon and me planning to question Joan

Clopton with blood magick. The coroner, however, had cleared the way for me to help Simon do that, while the archaemon had gone ahead to silence the only other person who knew about Alastor. And the guard, who was in the way.

Like Alastor's victims, they were Hadrians, who didn't matter. Hespera was right that the archaemon would've killed Edward, Martin, or Simon without a second thought, she just didn't know the real reason.

Or did she? The book in Hespera's desk implied she at least had a theory about him, yet I think she must have realized it only recently, once she understood who the murderer was and that Caerus was shielding him.

But how had Caerus convinced Alastor to give him his magick in the first place? Were they friends?

The answer hits me like a bolt of lightning.

Caerus was Alastor's brother. He'd arrived at the akademium as Alastor left, manifesting magick stronger than anyone realized he had. And when Caerus could no longer shield Alastor from the consequences of his actions, he'd eliminated his own flesh and blood without any remorse, except, perhaps, over the power he'd lost.

"It's almost time," Caerus says suddenly. He tosses the half-carved figure aside and stands, stretching. "Remember, this doesn't have to be painful, and we both get what we want."

WHERE ARE YOU?! I scream through my blood to the stone.

We're coming. Stay calm.

Who was "we"? And how was I supposed to stay calm?

Whatever happens, stay out of Moon's light!

But Caerus is squatting next to me, voidstone in hand. In panic, I twist away and fall over, smacking my temple on a sharp rock. My left eye's vision is full of stars as he holds me to the ground and pulls down my shirt collar in the back, exposing the area below my neck. The sharp stone point presses against, then through my skin at a shallow angle.

As little magick as I'd been able to use, it's still in my veins, and being voided is like plunging underwater. The air I pull into my lungs doesn't feel like nearly enough, and the light and clarity of my sight dims so much I think for a moment I'm passing out. When he removes the voidstone, nothing changes. It must have been what he used to kill the woman and guard with. Had he then loaned the knifelike stone to Alastor to use on his next victim, or

had he warned his brother so he could use his own? I suppose it doesn't matter.

Caerus levers me upright as blood leaks down my spine. "There," he says. "You never wanted it anyway, did you?"

A crackling pain down to my jaw from the earlier impact keeps me from responding or resisting as a sliver of stone is pushed deep into the cut, making more blood ooze out. I scream silent obscenities at him through my blood though I know he can't hear them.

"Once the moon is up," Caerus explains as he sets me to recline against the large rock, "I can use a bloodstone to heal the skin. The magick will be so focused by the piece of stone next to it that it will only take a few minutes. Then it will be finished, and you can go back to your Hadrian life."

The sliver in my back must be the one he removed from his brother. I want to be sick all over his feet at the thought, but my stomach is empty. My hand clutches at the lump in my pocket to tell Hespera what happened until I remember that I have no magick now. The star stone is useless. Even if it wasn't, it's over. The moment the moon comes up and shines on my blood, everything becomes Caerus's, unless I'm willing to die taking it back.

He sits on his heels, scratching the insides of his arms again. As I stare at the golden star dancing across the cloudy black stone on his ring, I recognize the itching of someone coming down from *skonia*. After losing his brother's magick, Caerus had resorted to using the drug over the last few days to compensate.

When he notices I'm watching, the archaemon stops, though he merely switches to the earlier hand-washing motions. "I expected you to ask to be voided after Alastor died," he says. "It took longer than I thought, but, praise Moon, once Hadrian matters were settled, you came to me, as I knew you would."

The last thing Hespera said through the stone was to stay out of the moonlight. I have no idea how close she was at the time, and I won't hear her coming. Until he had my magick, however, neither would Caerus. I shift my legs. Though they're tied together, there's enough play that I can slide my feet within my boots.

"How does the surge of stolen magick in your blood not kill you as it would me, as it did Alastor?" I ask, pressing one foot against the other's heel and easing my ankle upward.

Caerus holds up his ringed hand. “It doesn’t go into my blood, just the stone. But then it’s mine to use.”

The council had made him archaemon over Hespera based on how much magick he had, thinking he only needed time to practice effectively wielding that much power. In reality, his lack of control was because the magick wasn’t in his blood—which must have been like trying to manipulate an object covered in a blanket. The bloodstones in his chair and all around his quarters must have been to help him keep his tenuous grip on it.

I turn on my hip to face Caerus and draw my legs up into my skirt, hiding that my left foot is now close to being free. The sock is a little stuck, though, coming partly off in the boot. There isn’t enough time to get both feet out—I’ll have to make a run for it with one still roped. “I think you should know that Haema Hespera already suspects what you did to your brother.”

Caerus shrugs. “She’s easy to silence when there are people she cares about. And if not, there are other ways.”

“You really think you can sneak up on her?” I ask.

“I think she’s not rational when a certain Hadrian is in danger.” He points at me with the voidstone knife. “For that matter, neither are you. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here now.”

My foot slides the rest of the way out of the boot as I lunge at Caerus’s blade with my bound hands. I’m not afraid to close my fingers around its sharp edges—they can’t drain me now, and I wrench it out of his grip as my forehead connects with his nose. The archaemon falls backward with me on top of him, and I kick and knee at him through my skirt with limited effect, but it’s enough that I’m able to push myself upright off his chest with my forearms. My booted foot launches me off his shoulder, and I run toward the shelter of the trees and rocks on the far side of the hill, carrying the black stone in my bleeding hands.

With the moon so close to rising, I have to get out of sight of the horizon as soon as possible. My senses are so dull I stub my bare toe, and the knife flies from my grasp as I stumble, but I continue sprinting at the shade on the western slope until I trip on the loose rope around my right ankle. I tumble several times, unable to stop myself with my arms and choosing to use them to protect my face as I bounce off roots and rocks. When at last I stop, I can only see a small slice of blue sky directly overhead, and I know I’m safe for at least a few minutes.

Caerus eventually appears above me with blood dripping from his nose over his mouth and down his chin. He reaches into a pocket and pulls out a leather pouch, tipping the contents into his hand.

A memory stone and a bloodstone.

“I wasn’t going to do this until after,” he mutters. “And I’ll have to do more later.” The archaemon weaves past my flailing attempt to hold him away and slaps the stones against my scalp. “Who took your magick?” he demands.

I can’t help thinking of the answer, of the last hour, and I wait for the memory to be leeches away as it crosses my mind.

But it doesn’t go anywhere.

Caerus grimaces in frustration. “Give me that thought, Catrin. What did I do to you?”

I smile. “It’s not what you did to me, but what I did to you.” I pull my slashed hands from where I’d pushed them against his face in our struggle. “My voided blood touched yours. You don’t have any magick, either.”

He leaps back, wiping the scarlet off his jaw where I’d smeared it.

My smile widens. “I guess we both need to avoid Moon’s light now.”

The archaemon shakes his head. “I’ve been voided before like any physician in training. It’s only dangerous for someone in a weakened state.” But he pales. Given how little magick he naturally possesses, its return won’t kill him, but he knows it will be painful, especially after coming down from two or three days of *skonia* use.

“I hope you don’t faint,” I taunt.

Caerus turns and dashes up the hill, and I struggle to sit but fall back with a grunt of pain. My back is bruised from where I landed. I can’t get up before the archaemon returns, carrying the *skonia* water. Holding me down with one knee, he yanks the cork out and then grabs my face to dump the bottle’s contents into my mouth. He intends to incapacitate me until he’s recovered from the return of his power. I want to resist, but the pressure on my back makes me cry out as he begins to pour.

Then suddenly his weight is gone. I sputter against the liquid splashed into my mouth as a tangle of arms and legs roll away. A flash of blond hair tells me who it is that tackled Caerus from the side. Wiping my eyes and cheeks, I maneuver into a position I can sit up from as Simon slams Caerus’s arm against a tree with an audible snap.

As the archaemon screams in pain, Simon is able to pin him to the ground long enough to grab a double fist-size rock in his right hand. Caerus bends his neck as Simon's arm swings down, and the blow that was likely aimed at his temple smashes into his skull behind the ear. His head falls back to the ground, eyes dazed.

Simon leaps off Caerus's still form and runs at me. "Are you all right?" Before I can answer, he seizes me in a hug. "Haema Hespera said she lost touch with your mind, that it meant you'd been voided, and above all I had to keep you out of sight of the moon."

I sink into his chest. "Where is she? I thought she was coming."

"She is, I just outran her." Simon begins tugging at the knot on my bound wrists, then notices the dark, wet spot on his sleeve. "You're bleeding!"

"It's not bad," I say, but Simon pulls my shirt down to inspect the voidstone blade cut. A hiss of pain escapes my lips as he gently presses the spot where the chip of stone is under the skin.

He inhales sharply. "Is that what I think it is?"

"It's worse. Hespera will have to take it out."

Simon glances over to where Caerus cradles his broken arm against his body. "How did the archaemon get you out here like this?"

I pull my lips between my teeth for a long moment before admitting, "I came willingly."

"You came willingly..." Simon squints at me. "To be...?"

"Voided," I whisper. "Yes. Permanently."

"Why?"

"I don't want my magick. I want you."

"Cat, you can have both." He goes back to loosening the rope.

I shake my head. "Hespera said I had to choose."

"Since when have you ever listened to me?"

Hespera's voice makes us both look up. She stands on a large rock uphill, bent over with her hands on her knees, wheezing with the effort of catching her breath.

"You didn't tell me Caerus had taken his brother's magick for his own, or that he would try to take mine." The loops have widened enough for me to slide my hands out. Their bleeding has mostly stopped, though the gashes ache and ooze with movement.

"Wait." Simon's eyes dart back and forth between us. "Caerus was going

to take your magick? How?"

Hespera ignores his question and moves down to stand over me. She gestures to the wound on my back. "Our blessed Moon is over the horizon. Has It seen you?"

"Not yet," I answer.

"Praise the Light." She squats down and probes the cut as Simon did. "I won't explain it to you, Hadrian, until I know you'll be staying. Even then, this isn't something you need to understand."

I grit my teeth as Hespera works the stone sliver upward. After almost a minute, she pulls a handkerchief out and wipes blood away before picking the fragment out with her fingernails, and I exhale in relief. "What do you mean 'until you know he's staying'?"

"The haema has offered me a position at the akademium," Simon tells me as she stands again, holding the bloody cloth. "Contingent on her becoming archaema."

"That's what she wanted to talk to you about?" I gape.

"Yes, yes." The coroner wads up the handkerchief and stuffs it in her skirt. "We can discuss this later. First we need to bring your magick back, before we don't have a choice about how it's done." She looks up the hill, addressing someone else. "It's about time you caught up."

"Some of us are too old for running across rocks," comes Zosima's breathless answer. "What happened to Caerus?"

He pushes up on his good arm. "My light is pinched."

The older haema blinks at him. "What?"

Caerus grimaces in frustration, his voice sullen. "The sticks hate me."

She approaches him and turns his face to the side to study the swelling area over his ear, where the hair is matted with blood. "Oh dear. I don't think he'll be making much sense for a while."

"I didn't mean to hit him there," says Simon apologetically. "He moved his head."

"We can worry about him later." Hespera motions for Zosima to come over to us. "You said you had an idea how to restore power more gradually."

"It was actually Katarene's idea," Zosima says.

"Catrin," both Simon and Hespera correct her together.

Zosima arches her eyebrows. "Very well. Catrin suggested restoring magick in stages, with moonstones. Maia and I tried it yesterday with that

boy in the hospital, and it seemed to work. He vomited but actually stayed conscious.”

Hespera frowns at me. “Where is your necklace, Catrin?”

“I have it.” Simon draws the broken silver chain from his pocket and hands it to her.

“What do I do?” Hespera asks.

“Rub it in her bloody wounds,” Zosima replies. “Then use this one.” She takes off her own stone, which must be brighter than my fading one.

I gasp as the coroner does as instructed. Magick rushes into me, but not overwhelmingly. It makes me queasy, like eating after having an empty stomach for so long. To be certain, we touch it to all sources of my bleeding, which helps, too.

Simon watches as the same is done with Zosima’s stone. “What would have happened if we just put Cat in the moonlight itself?” he asks.

At that moment, Caerus decides to make his escape. He stumbles to his feet and runs up the hill, holding his arm tight to his side. Right as he reaches the top, however, the archaemon stops and goes rigid. A high-pitched shriek begins in his throat but is cut off when he suddenly crumples to the ground like a marionette with his strings cut.

The two women watch the whole incident without making any effort to intervene. Then they turn their attention back to me. “Something like that,” says Zosima dryly.

CHAPTER 51

I didn't end up fainting like Caerus, but I did have a massive headache and a stomach that rebelled for several days. Hespera's honeyed drink was often the only thing that would stay down.

Both conditions keep me confined to my quarters at the akademium. Simon is next to me in the bed every time I reach for him, though, so I'm not completely miserable. Haema Maia brings us the news that Caerus's head injury has affected his ability to speak—or at least to make sense, which has been a wonderful learning opportunity for the whole student body. Interestingly, when bloodstones are used, his thoughts are clear; he just can't find the right words most of the time. It's a condition Simon had actually seen several times in Mesanus, lending more proof to the idea that many people who appear mad based on their speech might have a different problem altogether. Between snuggling with me, he studies Selenae texts on the phenomenon.

The moon waxes greater every night, which I think makes my recovery more difficult. Every time I feel like I've adjusted to my magick, the fuller face appears and I have to crawl back into bed, like a sailor in seas rougher than he's used to. Zosima discourages using a voidstone, saying it will only spread the suffering longer.

On the fourth evening, Hespera knocks on our door. The moon has been up for a few hours, and I've been leaning on Simon's shoulder with a basin nearby.

"Let's go for a walk," she says.

I follow her warily. When we enter the courtyard I have to stop and adjust. In some ways it feels like the earliest days of discovering my magick, when moonlight was overwhelming and I would close my eyes and cover my ears

and breathe slowly until I could handle it all. I just don't recall this queasiness.

The coroner waits patiently, but she scolds me a little. "This would be faster if you wouldn't hide so much."

Maybe what I'm really avoiding is my magick's full return. I'm not sure I want or deserve it. "Why is this so much harder than the night I voided myself in Collis?"

"The moon was full that night, yes?"

"Very nearly," I answer, gesturing to the low face made pink by the approaching sunset. "More than that."

"Then you took all your medicine at once, so to speak." Hespera gestures for me to follow her, which I do. "You also have much more control over your magick now, meaning you have more to regain."

It almost sounds like a compliment.

We walk to the bell tower with the clock indicating when the moon will set, about an hour after midnight. As we climb the steps, I wonder if she intends to keep me in its light until then. The only reason I can think for going up here is to see it.

"There are also a few less enjoyable aspects of being a woman." Hespera glances over her shoulder. "When you're in the time of losing blood—as I can tell you are now—the balance of magick in your body swings back and forth and can make you feel ill. Even Hadrian women can feel it, some more than others."

That explained a few things but created new questions. "Does that mean even non-Selenae have some magick?"

"We don't want to admit it, but yes. Not enough to use but enough to make treating them easier."

I frown thoughtfully. "I guess I still have much to learn."

Hespera opens the trapdoor into the top level and continues up. "Fortunately, you are in the best place for that." Her voice is tentative, hopeful.

So this is to be an appeal for me to stay. As I step back into the moon's light, I clear my throat to hold my stomach contents in place as much as in discomfort. "Haema Maia said you will be named archaema, now that Caerus is ... is..."

"As he ought to be?" Hespera finishes. "Yes."

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you, but the chair is yours, when you’re ready.”

I shift my feet and fix my eyes on the horizon. “What will happen to Caerus?”

Hespera leans on the rail next to me and looks in the same direction. “We discussed turning him over to the Hadrian authorities. After all, he did kill two people, and that may foster some trust between us, that we would offer up a criminal within our ranks to their justice.”

“He wouldn’t be able to stand trial, the way he talks,” I point out. “They would think him insane.”

“Which is why we probably won’t do that,” she says. “Unless evidence comes to light that proves it wasn’t also Alastor in the citadel that night. It’s a little murky now.”

“And either way, the Selenae have the right to punish him,” I point out.

“Yes. Which is ultimately my decision, too. I don’t relish it, much as I dislike him.”

That kind of responsibility isn’t something I’m sure I want, either. I turn to face her. “When and how did you realize what Caerus was doing?”

Her focus stays firmly on the moon, the evasiveness I’m used to returning. “Do you mean that he was going to take your magick or that he didn’t have any of his own?”

“Both.”

She sighs. “You know I was listening to you with the blue stone, until you realized it. But when Simon came to me that morning, worried about you, I knew you’d decided to void yourself. If you didn’t come to me or Maia or Zosima, you would’ve gone to Caerus, but you were gone by the time we got to his quarters.”

We weren’t, but that’s a minor detail. Simon must have skipped going to Martin’s reinstatement to get there when he did. “You could’ve warned me that’s why Caerus wanted to do it.”

“Would you have believed me?”

“Probably not.”

“Which was my own fault,” she admits. “What I did to Simon—what I told you I did—undoubtedly made trusting me impossible, even after you found out the truth. The only thing I could think was to give you that book in hopes that you would figure it out yourself, but you didn’t take it.”

Because I hadn't wanted Philippa to stumble across it. "I read it, though. I thought that was what you were planning to do to me."

"Again, I have only myself to blame for that," Hespera says. "But given what and who I was trying to shield, I hope you can understand."

She takes a deep breath. "As for knowing Caerus's power was unnatural, it's been a long time." Hespera lowers her eyes to the courtyard. "We were once ... intimate. Shortly after he became archaemon, when I was despondent over what I gave up for nothing, trying to find meaning and purpose in the strength of my magick. He managed to convince me that maybe the two of us were meant to usher in a new era, given how strong we both were. But when you're ... that close to a person, there are things that can't be hidden."

She pivots and brings her gaze to me, her chin firmly set. "Strength of blood magick can be over or underestimated. The presence or absence of it cannot. And he had *none*."

That's something I'll have to take her word for. "Why didn't you tell someone then? Or later?"

"Because if it became known what we did, I would've been forced to bond with him." She raises her eyebrows at me. "A rule that was the only reason Simon was permitted to stay with you, and likely the case with your own parents. We Selenae don't take the intimate act lightly."

"I'm surprised Caerus didn't try to force that issue," I say, then add wryly, "Or does he not remember it?"

Hespera's smile is grim. "That might have been his intention. Maybe he wanted to trade Alastor's magick for mine at some point. Fortunately, I'd already become an expert in the actions I needed to take to make him forget." Then she shrugs. "I put my own memories of that night into the same stone. Because of that, I could only recall that it happened, but not the details. I spent several years wondering if I was mistaken in what I'd realized, that I wanted to believe he didn't have blood magick because I was bitter over what I'd lost. Even if I hadn't smashed the stone, it would have been impossible for me to use it to revisit the memory in a way that would allow me to be sure."

"I imagine you also wanted to forget it more than anything."

"That and many other things." She reaches into her skirt pocket and pulls out a folded linen handkerchief. As she opens it, the embroidered letters *EW* become visible on one corner, but then I'm distracted by the three

glimmering stones in the center of the cloth. “And it’s past time for me to do the same with these.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to do that. No one is harmed if you keep those memories.”

“It harms me,” she replies, though her hand trembles. “As long as I have them, I can’t move forward. I cannot be the archaema I need to be if I’m trapped in my past.”

She squats down to the floor and pries up a stone with her free hand. I don’t have to ask how she knew it was loose—beneath is glittering white dust. Hespera raises the three stones to her lips one last time before dropping them into the rectangular hole. I can’t help flinching as she uses the end of the removed stone to crush and grind them until they’re indistinguishable from the grit already there. Then she replaces the piece and stands, wiping her eyes. “There. It’s done. Edward is gone, and I can fulfill my duty to my people.”

I’m not sure he’s as gone as she thinks he is. “So who will be the coroner now?”

Hespera looks at me like I’m daft. “I will be, of course. Archaema isn’t that much of a job that I can’t do both.” She pauses. “I could use an assistant, though.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I thought you already had one.”

“She still needs a lot of training,” Hespera says dryly. “And she recently indicated she wanted to quit.”

“How do you intend to encourage her to stay?”

The coroner drops her roundabout language. “Has Simon told you about my offer?”

He’d said she had a position but not mentioned anything further, other than hinting we would need to talk when I was feeling better. I shake my head.

“I think the akademium needs a new department. We have ones for injury and infectious diseases and surgeries. Then there’s mine, which works backward when there’s nothing to treat.” Hespera habitually reaches for her ring, which is now set with the blue stone, and caresses the luminous star. “Edward actually gave me the idea, when he brought that woman in the scarf. He said he wished there was a way for us to remove the sick or damaged elements that made people do such things.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” I say.

“Likely not, at least in that sense,” she admits. “But the mind is a part of the body like any other, and it deserves study and care. It’s something both Selenae and Hadrians have neglected.”

I imagine it for several seconds. “A department of the mind.”

Hespera drops her hands. “It could have two sections within. One run by a physician who focuses on medical aspects, and another by an expert in behavior. They’d work very closely together and could be called upon by reeves and judicare for their opinion rather frequently.”

“It would take years to build a competent department,” I say.

“Then there’s no time to waste.” She hesitates. “Simon wouldn’t give me an answer until he’d discussed it with you, but it worries me that he hasn’t brought the idea up yet. Do you think that means he’s not interested?”

I recall all the reading Simon has been doing over the last few days, remembering also pages of notes I’d seen him writing, and I smile wryly. “I think he’s got it half planned out already.”

CHAPTER 52

Hespera forcing me to face the moon—and my finally accepting the idea of keeping my magick forever—does my recovery a tremendous amount of good. When the fullest night arrives a few days later, I'm as strong as ever, which is a good thing because everyone is expected to witness her anointing as archaema. It's such an important event that even some non-Selenaes attend—physicians from the other hospitals in the area, at least two judicare, and a handful of nobles. I'm allowed to invite Philippa and her mother, and of course Martin and Edward come.

Disciplined as ever, Hespera keeps her eyes forward even as Edward hisses in sympathy when Haemon Nestor makes a cut across her palm with a silver knife. Then she walks to the center of the Moon Pool with her blood exposed to the full moonlight to recite the long version of the oath of a physician. Once finished, Hespera turns her hand over to pour what's puddled in her palm into the water, where her sacred vow echoes out to all those with blood magick then fades like smoke on a breeze.

Before closing her fist, the new archaema rotates her cut back to the light and looks across at me with a thought only I am strong enough to hear. *This will be you someday.*

Perhaps. I'm not in a hurry.

I am eager for the next event, however. As soon as Hespera exits the water, Haema Maia nudges Simon and me into it. Several Selenaes squint at the brightness of my scarlet dress, and it probably confuses many of the guests, but I would wear nothing else for this occasion.

The bondmarks on our wrists—freshened on mine and redrawn on Simon's—now include ones on the left sides. When Simon takes my hands to complete the circles, I suddenly hear his voice in my mind. *You are so lovely.*

I could stare at you all day. All night.

I blink, then realize the tingling in my fingers isn't from excitement, it's coming from a thin metallic ring he wears on one hand. He smiles a little when I look up at him questioningly. *I thought it might be handy.*

Distracting is more like it. Rather than the solemn vows we're meant to repeat, Simon keeps sending me increasingly explicit thoughts about what he wants to do when this is over. As a result, I stumble over the words and remember almost nothing except the way he kisses me at the end.

We wade out of the water, holding hands and my sodden skirt. Philippa is beside herself with happiness as she comes to meet us, but it's not just for Simon and me. Apparently after seeing the dress she made, the wives of one of the lords and a judicare have made arrangements to visit her shop in the coming days.

Martin thumps Simon on the shoulder in congratulations, though he quietly chastises his friend for being so secretive about our attachment. Edward also offers his own best wishes before dropping into thoughtful silence as Hespera approaches.

Can we leave yet? Simon asks.

I squeeze his hand in apology but then have to let go because he's back to sending tempting thoughts to persuade me.

The new archaema holds out her hands so I can grasp them and bow as I've seen others do. Simon does the same, and I really hope he's controlling his thoughts as he does. She acknowledges the courtesy graciously, though uncomfortably, then offers me a leather pouch. "This is for you," she says formally. "On the occasion of your full bonding."

I feel the focused power before it's fully in my hand and can tell it's a ring like hers. But when it settles into my palm I see it's not the blue sapphire I expect.

"I had the chipped part smoothed out," she explains before I say anything.

"How can this be mine?" I manage to ask. "It belonged to Caerus."

"Really?" Hespera blinks slowly in exaggerated innocence. "I recall very clearly that he gave a piece of it to you. That could only mean he must have wanted you to have the whole thing." She holds up a hand before I can protest. "And it's not his anymore. Not after he misused it. I trust you won't make the same mistake."

The strength gathering in my hand makes it hard to breathe. "I thought at

first it was the blue stone I returned to you.”

She smiles wryly. “I didn’t think you’d appreciate having the one that was connected to mine.” Hespera side-eyes Simon. “Nor did I want to be privy to everything in your life.”

I put the ring back into the pouch. I’ll deal with it later.

Singing has begun around us, and the non-Selenae guests shift their feet uncomfortably. Well, all except Edward, who seems to know the words. Hespera dips her head in farewell before turning away. “I think I’d better escort our esteemed guests out before the heresy rubs off on them.”

Simon grabs my hand again. *Now?*

“Yes, now,” I tell him.

I start to head in the direction of our quarters, but Simon tugs me another way, reminding me that we’ve been moved to those of instructors. Though I’m technically a student, he’s to be head of the new discipline of Mental Medicine. Once I’m a physician, we’ll be equal partners in the department.

It’s so dark inside the two-story living space that I have to guide him until we reach the bedroom upstairs, where the window is open to the Moon’s full light. I expect Simon to move close for a kiss, but he backs away.

“First, I have a gift for you, too,” he says.

I frown. “But I didn’t get you anything.”

“Trust me, that dress is more than enough, even if it’s really only the wrappings.” He reaches into his vest pocket, and my mouth falls open when he pulls out another silver ring, set with the memory stone from my uncle.

I hold out my hand at Simon’s gesture, and he slides it onto my finger. As I look into its rainbow-faceted depths, the image of my parents, happy and in love, dances across my mind.

Simon shrugs in embarrassment. “It’s not anything like what Hespera gave you, but now you can see them whenever you want.”

“I love it,” I whisper, pulling his mouth to mine. “It’s perfect.”

His hands are already undoing the laces at my back as we drift into the rectangle of moonlight across the floor and bed, and all I can hear is his voice in my head. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

I love you.

★ ★ ★

Six weeks later, Edward and Martin arrive at the akademium shortly after dawn. It's a new moon and day of rest for everyone not on hospital duties, and Simon and I are headed to the classroom he'd taken for the investigation. All Alastor's carvings have been moved there, both for the records Simon and Martin have been putting together and to keep them out of the eye of the overly curious public. Several additional pieces that had been sold were also tracked down and retrieved, and their owners compensated. Here the evidence was secure, but we didn't want them in our possession any longer than necessary, either. I hated going in that room, even with most of the carvings covered.

Martin has managed to match all but three murders to known victims, and it bothers him they may never be identified, but Simon said yesterday that he'd finished noting everything useful from the carvings. There was no reason to keep them anymore, so the question had become what to do with them. Selling them, even with the intent of giving the proceeds to the victims' families, was not an option, nor was keeping them.

The brothers wave as they cross the courtyard, and Simon and I alter our path to meet them. Edward now wears a golden chain from shoulder to shoulder over his chest rather than the rope of a shire reeve. His election as judicare was certified a few days ago, and he can't help plucking at the new decoration as it catches on the weave of his tunic every few steps with the swinging of his arms. In his other hand he carries a folded letter, which he immediately offers to Simon.

"This is for you." Edward clears his throat. "My first official judgment."

Simon breaks the seal and holds the open parchment so I can read at the same time. It says the carvings, being of no more use in the investigation and their existence being a source of stress for all moral people, are to be destroyed.

I look up. "When?"

"As soon as you can manage," Edward replies. "Such a declaration must be posted publicly, so word will spread through the city soon. I recommend taking care of it before much of an audience can gather."

People were far too interested in Alastor's "art." Two carvings were even stolen from Alastor's house before they could be brought here, though they were recovered and the thieves punished with three days in the citadel stocks.

I nod. "I'll ask the archaema for the coroner's wagon. Seems appropriate to

carry them in it.”

“And I’ll go with you,” Edward offers politely, though his eyes light up. We leave as Martin and Simon begin discussing the details of the disposal.

Once we’re out of earshot, I address Edward. “I hadn’t had a chance to offer you my congratulations on your election yet.” Though he’d been to the akademium several times since then, it was never to see me.

“Thank you.” Edward adjusts his chain again. “It feels odd.”

“But it suits you.”

The cheeks above his ruddy beard turn a shade pinker. “It was mostly because of this investigation. People credit me more than I deserve, so really, I owe it to Simon and Martin, which is terrible given how I treated them.”

“Your hands were tied by the law,” I reassure him. “And you were there when they needed you.”

“I’m glad, too, for your assistance. Haema Hespera said it was invaluable, that she only knew to tell me because you’d warned her.”

I wonder if Edward realizes how his heart beats faster when he mentions her name. As for me warning the coroner, that wasn’t what I’d intended to do, but I let it pass. “Don’t take this to mean we’ll abuse the connection,” I say instead, “but we’re all glad to have you in this position. You’re more likely to listen to us on future investigation matters.”

“Is it true then, that there’ll be a new department for criminal mind treatment and studies?” he asks.

“Yes and no,” I answer. “It won’t be limited to the realm of those who are dangerous. We’ll address all aspects of the mind and its health, including damage due to injury or other traumatic events.”

He nods. “A worthy endeavor.”

Simon’s already talking about going to Mesanus next year during a term break, to consult with the brethren and sisters there who care for the mentally afflicted. He hopes to bring some back with him for his department, at least temporarily, but he hasn’t convinced Hespera quite yet. One permanent Hadrian at the akademium is enough of a change at the moment, though Edward is putting more than just a foot in the door as well.

The archaema readily approves use of the wagon and the horse, and she and Edward fetch it as I return to Simon and Martin, who are already bringing the twisted carvings outside. I join them in their work, and we’ve almost finished by the time Hespera and Edward arrive with the wagon. The

pair are deep in a heated discussion of some philosophical or legal matter, but I've learned that these conversations, though outwardly appearing much like arguments, are nothing of the sort. Long, intense debate appears to be the way Hespera especially expresses respect, and—dare I imagine it—affection. Not that I'd say that to her face.

We switch to loading all the carvings onto the wagon, then cover them with a large piece of canvas. Philippa comes to meet us as we lead the horse and cart out of the main gate. Apparently she's heard the news, though she'd known Simon had made the request and was actively waiting for the judgment. She walks beside us while several other citizens follow at a distance. By the time we've reached the north gate, the crowd behind us is substantial—and growing. There's no time to waste.

Fortunately, we're also joined by a few more reeves to help keep anyone from getting too close. Our destination is the cemetery, or rather, the fallow field across the road from it. Burying the carvings seemed most appropriate, but the earlier theft made it obvious doing so would not keep them safe. Instead, we'll burn them. The ashes can then be buried at sunset. We don't toss the statues in a pile, however, instead setting them close and upright on the grass with a quiet reverence. Even if they're to be destroyed, each hideous depiction represents the life of a real human being, and they deserve to be treated as such.

As we handle the carvings for the last time, I spy Anna in the crowd, as well as a few faces I recognize from the evidence hearings of the past month. I can't imagine seeing the renderings of their loved ones will bring anything but sorrow—Philippa included—but I suppose there's something to be said for closure. We work with haste as the people are held at a distance by a wide perimeter the reeves burn in the grass to prevent the bonfire from spreading once it's lit.

At last we're ready. Martin and Simon spread lamp oil over the polished wood forms, then set them alight. I stand with Philippa, who holds her uncle's prized violet scarf, torn from when it was removed from the woman's head. At Martin's nod of permission, she steps forward and casts it into the blaze, too, as tears stream down her cheeks.

Some things are not worth the pain of keeping.

Philippa returns and takes my hand as black smoke billows from the pyre like souls finally released from their torment. Simon laces his fingers with

mine on the other side, and together we watch as the life's work of a monster is slowly reduced to ash.

EPILOGUE

The weather is still hot, but there's a change in the autumn breeze that even Simon can sense. So can Philippa next to us on the docks, though she's so nervous that the whisper of coolness doesn't make any kind of impression. Eleanor on her other side is much calmer, at least outwardly. Her pulse is slower, but each heartbeat seems to shake her chest.

When the river barge finally comes around the bend, riding the high tide in from the sea, Philippa seizes my hand. "Is it this one? Can you see him?"

"Yes." I spy Magister Thomas's familiar black cap with its gold stripe, the mark of a master builder, but as soon as we come into view, he pulls it off and holds it to his chest.

I stand on my toes to wave, and he lifts his hand in return. From the looks of it, Mistress la Fontaine took a pair of scissors to his bushy chestnut hair and beard in an effort to make him more presentable. Even his eyebrows are trimmed. The white streaks going back from both temples fly out like miniature wings until he plasters them down with his sweaty hands then jams the cap back over his hair without realizing it's now inside out.

Eleanor sighs. "He hasn't changed much."

"Is that a good thing?" Philippa asks.

"I guess we'll see," she replies.

It feels like an hour before the barge reaches us and is tied to the docks and the gangplank lowered. We move out of the way as a rush of passengers elbow their way off and past us, and then he's crossing, clutching the rope like a terrified six-year-old. His gray eyes search the throng of people and cargo, having lost sight of us.

Philippa pushes me forward. "You go first."

I squeeze my way through the crowd, and Simon is right behind me.

“Magister?”

“Catrin?” The architect’s face lights up and then breaks into pieces as I leap the last few steps into his arms. He holds me so tight I can’t take in air. “I’ve missed you so.”

“And I you.”

He pulls back to hold my face in his hands. “Has it only been four months? It seems like a year or more.”

“How is the Sanctum?” I ask now that I can breathe. “Did you leave Remi in charge? Is Mistress la Fontaine well?”

“Progressing, yes, and yes.” Magister Thomas turns to Simon and holds out his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Simon.”

“Likewise, sir,” Simon replies, shaking the offered hand.

The architect doesn’t release his grip right away, instead turning his arm over to scrutinize the bondmark on the back of Simon’s wrist. Magister Thomas lifts my left hand to compare it and then eyes us sternly. “I see something has happened. Many weeks ago, judging by how it’s faded.”

“Yes, but we can talk about it later,” I tell him. “Someone is here to meet you.”

He pales as white as the streaks in his hair. “They came?”

“Of course we came,” says a voice behind me. The magister drops my hand and Simon’s and we move apart so he can see the speaker.

“Eleanor?” He chokes on her name.

I back away further, suddenly feeling like I’m intruding on a very private moment. Simon moves around to meet me from behind, and I settle into his side. While I don’t really want to watch, it feels rude to just leave.

Eleanor comes within arm’s length and stops. The architect’s hands twitch up and then down in an instinctive embrace immediately halted. After a long, awkward silence, he whispers, “I’m so very sorry. I wasn’t what you needed me to be.”

“You were hurting as much as I was, Thomas,” she replies. “I know that now.” Eleanor bites her lip. “Truthfully, I knew it then, too, but it was easier to be angry.”

“I was a coward for not coming after you.”

“No more than I was for not coming back.”

Magister Thomas’s hands tremble as he raises them out to her, palms up. Hers shake, too, as she sets her fingers over his. I’m not sure who pulls the

other closer—perhaps both—but suddenly they’re in each other’s arms, weeping and whispering seventeen years’ worth of apologies.

Now I really want to leave, but Philippa’s pleading eyes from behind her mother keep me rooted. Simon motions to her to come over to us, and she does, giving her parents a wide berth. I lean away from Simon to support her as she waits. Finally, Eleanor and Magister Thomas come apart, wiping their wet faces.

“There’s someone you need to meet,” Eleanor says. “But first I need to fix this.” She removes his master’s cap and turns it right before setting it back over his head.

I nudge Philippa toward them. “That’s your cue.”

Magister Thomas looks around to where Eleanor indicates and sees Philippa for the first time. “My Sun,” he whispers. “She’s as lovely as you are.”

“Really?” Eleanor says, her eyes still bright with tears. “I always thought she favored you.”

Philippa curtsies awkwardly. “It’s good to finally meet you, sir.”

“None of that formal nonsense,” he scolds, holding out one arm. “Come here, child.”

His daughter steps forward into his embrace, and he holds her almost as long as he had Eleanor, who he also sweeps back into his other arm. When they let go at last, he exhales several times before he can speak. “I want to know everything about you. I’m told you’re a tailor of extraordinary talent.”

“Not quite a full tailor,” Philippa replies shyly. “And my talent is debatable.”

“No, it’s not,” I call from Simon’s side.

Magister Thomas pivots to look at me, as though just remembering we’re here, and I can tell he’s torn. I shake my head and smile as I lean into Simon again. *Go on. We can catch up later.*

He nods and turns back to Eleanor and Philippa, and they begin leading him away. The magister has completely forgotten his baggage, and I hurry to give half-payment and directions to one of the dockside porters to follow them with his trunk.

Simon’s arms come around me from behind as I watch all four disappear into the packed Londunium streets. “You know, you’re as much his daughter as Philippa is,” he says softly in my ear.

I tilt my head back against his shoulder and put my hands over his at my waist. “Yes, but she needs him far more right now. And I have you.”

Yes. His fingers lace through mine, and he presses his lips to my neck as his voice flows into my mind. *You have me.*

“Simon!” calls a voice from the far side of the landing. “Simon of Akademium!”

We both straighten to face a young man cutting across the busy docks toward us. It’s a student recently admitted to physician studies, and he stops to catch his breath a couple arm lengths away, his hands on his knees as he pants. “You’re needed at the akademium. Physician Catrin, too. In the coroner’s office.”

“On our way,” Simon tells him, and the messenger turns to trot wearily back the way he came.

“I’m not a physician yet,” I mutter as we follow him up the street. Swift as my progress has been, I still have a lot to learn. Something Hespera enjoys reminding me almost daily.

Simon tugs me along. “And I’m not actually ‘from’ the akademium.”

“But you’re part of it now. It’s your home.”

“Only because you’re there, too.”

I look up at him. “And what if I decide I don’t want to stay and be archaema when the time comes?”

He shrugs. “Then I’ll go with you.”

“Even if it means leaving your work here?” I honestly don’t know how I’ll feel in a few years, but the thought of taking him away from a place where he finally feels valuable bothers me.

“Of course.” Simon squeezes my hand and smiles. *Home is wherever you are.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Dear Reader, for coming back to Catrin's world and story. I hope it's been worth your time. Special love to the reviewers and Instagram posters who take beautiful photos and create aesthetic reels beyond anything I could create.

It's appropriate that I'm writing this out on the Feast of St. Francis de Sales (the patron of writers), because this is the hardest book I've written—one that made me doubt myself and everything I thought I knew about writing. But we got through it, leaning (per usual) on Thomas, Thomas, Thomas, Thomas, and Dymphna. *Deo Gratias.*

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And speaking of now and forever, there's one man for that job, and I couldn't do this without my husband. Michael, whatever fate holds for us, home is wherever you are.

BY ERIN BEATY

The Traitor's Kiss

The Traitor's Ruin

The Traitor's Kingdom

Blood and Moonlight

Silence and Shadow

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



[Erin Beaty](#) was born and raised in Indianapolis and studied aerospace engineering at the US Naval Academy. After tours as a weapons officer on a destroyer and an instructor at the Center for Naval Leadership, she left the navy and started writing, beginning with her acclaimed Traitor's Circle trilogy. Erin also teaches fiction classes with the Armed Services Arts Partnership as well as the Muse Writers Center in Norfolk, Virginia. She and her family have recently moved from Korea to Kansas, where her husband continues his work in the navy.

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