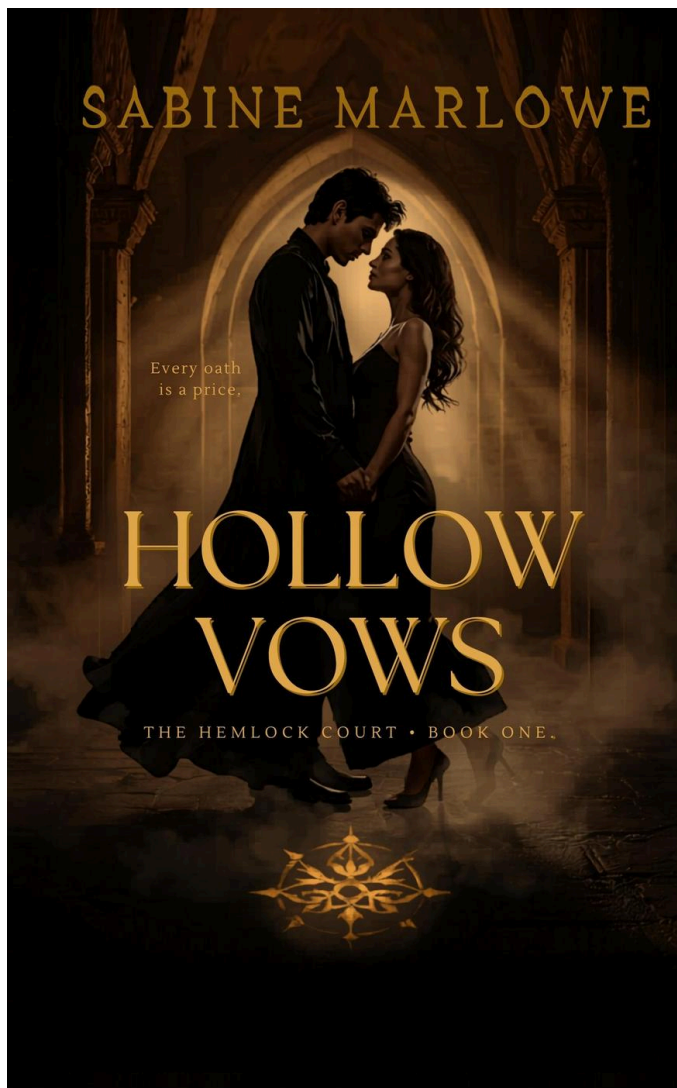
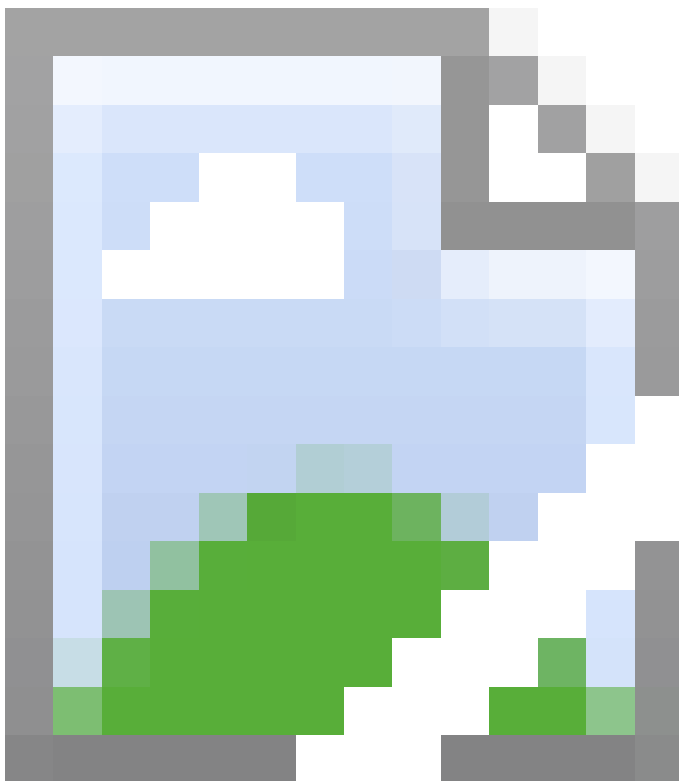


Hollow Vows (The Hemlock Court, #1)

Sabine Marlowe

2026-09-11





Hollow Vows

The Hemlock Court, Book One: A Dark Academia
Romance

Sabine Marlowe

Hollow Vows: The Hemlock Court, Book One: A Dark Academia Romance

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A Note Before You Begin

Hollow Vows is a dark romance intended for readers 18+. It contains explicit sexual content, on-page violence, references to a sibling's death and grief, and themes of coercion and power imbalance within a secret society, with morally grey characters. Consent is depicted on the page. This book ends on a cliffhanger; the central couple's happily-ever-after is earned across the five-book series. Please read with care.

For the ones who read with the lights off, and the sisters
who would burn it all down.

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Prologue: Cora

Three years earlier.

They tell you the candles are for reverence. That is the first lie, and I believed it longest.

The candles are so that afterward no one can say what they saw. Flame doesn't testify. It only throws your own shadow back at you, enormous on the undercroft wall,

until you are convinced the largest, most monstrous thing in the room is yourself.

I had wanted this. That is the part I cannot make fit. For two years I had wanted the hood and the Latin and the brass key, wanted to belong to something that had stood since 1791 and would stand after me. I came from a town with one stoplight and a sister who slept in the next bed, and Blackthorn offered me a world where nobody had ever been small. I would have signed anything.

I did sign. That was the trouble.

They were all there, ringed around the stone: the faces I'd trusted, the ones who'd taught me which fork and which silence. I searched them for the one face that had promised me this would be different, and I found it, and I understood from the way it would not meet mine that different had never been on offer.

"The pact must be renewed," the voice said. The voice I knew. The voice that had been kind to me in daylight.

I had read enough of the old ledger by then to know what *renewed* meant. I knew it the way you know a stair is missing in the dark, too late, with your whole weight already committed.

So I ran.

The undercroft has one door and ninety-one steps and I took them like something with wings, the cold air tearing in and out of me, the bell tower above me ringing nothing because it was not yet the hour. I remember thinking, absurdly, of Wren. That I owed her a phone call. That I had said *call you tomorrow* and meant it, and that tomorrow had just become a thing I would have to fight for.

I almost made it to the top.

A hand closed on my wrist. Not roughly. That is the detail I would give my sister if I could give her anything. Not roughly. Gently, the way you'd stop someone from stepping into traffic, as though even now it was being done *for* my own good, as though I were the one being unreasonable in the face of two centuries of arithmetic.

I turned to see who it was.

And God help me, it was a face I loved.

"I'm sorry," it said, and the terrible thing, the thing I have carried into whatever this is that comes after, is that it meant it. "You were never going to be able to live with knowing."

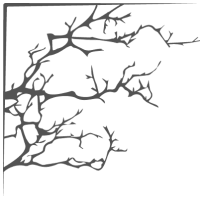
They were right about that, at least.

Whoever finds this (and someone will; I have hidden it where only a Calloway would think to look, in the one language only my sister could read) know that I did not fall. I did not climb that tower to jump. I climbed it running, and a hand I trusted brought me down, and the people who loved me in daylight let it happen because the math had been done long before I was born.

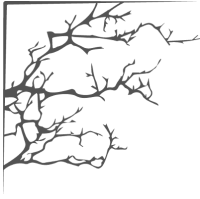
Don't grieve me, Wren.

Avenge me.

And then, *please*, get out before they do the math on you.



PART 1: The Infiltration



Chapter 1: The Hemlock Seal

The brochure called Blackthorn "a sanctuary of the mind." It forgot to mention the gargoyles.

They crouched along every roofline, wet with October fog, watching me drag my one suitcase up a drive built for the kind of cars I'd only ever keyed. I'd practiced my story on the six-hour bus ride until it stopped sounding like a lie. *Transfer student. Comparative literature. Scholarship.* All true, technically. The part I left out was the only part that mattered: that my sister had walked up this same drive four years ago, and three years ago they'd sent her home in a box.

They told us she jumped. Cora, who was afraid of the diving board. Cora, who texted me *call you tomorrow* the night before they say she climbed the bell tower alone.

I never got the call. So I came to collect it myself.

The dormitory matron handed me a brass key and a look that said she'd already priced my coat. "Calloway," she read off her ledger, and I watched her face for the flicker, the small recognition of a name that had died here. Nothing. Either she didn't know, or she was very good. At Blackthorn, I'd learn, those were usually the same thing.

My room was at the top of Wexford Hall, slant-ceilinged and cold, with a window that looked out over the quad to a building no brochure had photographed. Black stone. No lights. A door with no handle that I could see.

I was still staring at it when someone spoke behind me.

"You're in the wrong place."

I turned. He was leaning in my doorway like he'd been poured there: tall, dark-haired, dressed in the kind of plain black that costs more than tuition. Mid-twenties, which made him too old to be a student and too young to look at me the way he was looking at me, which was the way you look at a problem you intend to solve.

"It's my room," I said. "Key and everything." I held it up.

"I didn't say wrong room." His eyes moved off me, to the window, to the black building, and back. Something cooled in them. "Wrong *place*. People like you don't last here."

"People like me."

"Scholarship." He said it the way other people said *contagious*.

I should have let it go. I'd promised myself I'd be small here, forgettable, a gray little nobody who got close to the truth without anyone noticing she was reaching for it. That was the plan. The plan lasted exactly until he smiled, slow, certain, like he'd already decided I'd be gone by Christmas.

"You know what's funny," I said, crossing to the door so he'd have to step back or let me into his space. He didn't step back. Up close he smelled like cold air and something darker, beeswax and smoke. "Everyone who's ever told me I wouldn't last has been wrong. It's kind of my whole personality."

"Is it." Not a question. His gaze dropped to my mouth and climbed back up, unhurried, and the awful thing (the thing I'd be angry about for weeks) was that my pulse answered it before my brain could vote.

"And you are?" I asked.

"Late," he said, and pushed off the doorframe. He was halfway down the corridor before he added, without turning, "Lock your door, Calloway."

I hadn't told him my name.

I stood there with the cold coming through the window and my heart going like I'd run somewhere, and I understood two things at once. The first was that he'd known exactly who I was the second he saw me. The second was that whatever had happened to my sister, it wasn't finished; it had just been waiting for the next Calloway to walk up the drive.

I locked my door.

It didn't help. When I turned around, there was a card on my desk that hadn't been there before. Heavy cream stock, no name, a single line in ink the color of dried blood:

You are invited. Come alone. Tell no one.

And pressed into the wax that sealed it, still warm under my thumb, was the small five-petaled flower I'd last seen in my sister's handwriting, in the margin of the letter that was supposed to be a suicide note.

Hemlock.

I'd come here to ask a question. Someone had just answered it before I opened my mouth: *we know who you are, and we've been waiting.*

Good. So had I.



Chapter 2: The Watcher

The Court does not summon. I had learned this distinction early, at nine years old, the night my father first folded my hand around a sealed note and explained that the Thorne name was architecture, not inheritance. Buildings don't choose to stand. They are placed, mortared, and they hold because the alternative is rubble.

The note slid under my door at half past three. I was already sitting at the window overlooking the quad (had been for an hour), which is something I had done so

many mornings that it had stopped being insomnia and become instead a kind of vigil, though for what I could not have said.

The wax was pressed with the Thorne sigil. Mine, technically, since my father's death. Eighteen months, and I had not yet learned how to look at my own seal without some brief rearrangement of the chest.

I dressed. I went.

* * *



THE INNER CHAMBER EXISTS beneath the main hall in a passage that no campus map has ever named. Three floors down, cut into bedrock, the stone so old it has its own smell: mineral, airless, preserved beyond its natural span. The lacquered table seats twelve. Seven were present when I arrived.

Margot, in the chair that had belonged to my mother until my mother decided that the cold was incompatible with her constitution and relocated to Lisbon with six trunks and no forwarding address for anyone inside this room.

Crane, hands folded, his mild face doing the particular thing it does when Margot is already present: making itself smaller, more inoffensive, the way a sensible animal avoids being the largest target in a space that rewards size with attention.

Sebastian, at the far end. Precisely equidistant from everyone at the table. He always does this: positions himself where all angles of the room are visible to him. I spent years thinking it was vanity. I understand now it is something else.

"You're late," said Margot.

"By eleven seconds," I said. "You were early."

She smiled in the way she smiles: upper lip only, swift and controlled, communicating nothing it does not intend to. I took my chair. The head of the table, because there is no one else to take it.

My father's chair is the coldest seat I have ever occupied. Eighteen months, and it has not yet warmed to me.

"A matter has been flagged," Sebastian said.

He has a gift for announcements. Other people lead into things; Sebastian places them, finished and complete, in the center of the room and waits for everyone else to arrange themselves around the fact.

"Flagged by whom," I said.

"Admissions cross-referenced with the sealed records." He turned a single sheet of paper in my direction, not sliding it to me, just angling it. I didn't reach for it. "A transfer student enrolled three days ago. Comparative Literature. Scholarship intake. She cleared the secondary checkpoint during orientation without triggering it, which is either considerable luck or considerable competence."

"Name," said Margot.

"Calloway," Sebastian said. "Wren Calloway."

* * *



I HAD KNOWN, WHEN CRANE'S eyes met mine across the table with that look of his (mild, careful, specifically nothing), that the name was coming. The way you know a bruise before you press it, because the shape of the pain is already familiar.

I kept my face still. This is the primary skill the Court teaches, in the end. Not loyalty, not discretion, not the Latin phrases of the oath, but the management of surface. The art of presenting a face that does not know what it knows.

"The sister," said Margot. Not a question.

"Younger by two years." Sebastian had a file. Of course he had a file. "No prior documented connection to Blackthorn. No evident contact with Court-adjacent parties. The official family record indicates she accepted the ruling on the elder daughter's death."

"But," I said.

He looked at me. "She enrolled under a composite identity. Scholarship applied for under her middle name and her mother's maiden name. The application is clean, letters of recommendation, transcript, everything legible. But the identity synthesis required effort, and that kind of effort has a recognizable shape."

She came looking. What he meant was: she had arranged herself as a needle in a very particular haystack, and she had done it carefully enough that the automated systems hadn't caught her until a human review connected the surname to the sealed record.

I thought about the girl I had seen in the Wexford doorway. The cheap coat. The single suitcase. The eyes already cataloguing the building the way you catalogue a space you intend to move through without being stopped. I thought about what she had said: *everyone who's ever told me I wouldn't last has been wrong*, and the specific steadiness underneath it, which was not bravado. Bravado is loud because it needs to be heard. What she had was quieter than that, and therefore more dangerous.

I had known, looking at her, what she was.

I had simply decided not to examine the knowledge.

* * *



THE BLOOD VOW HAS SEVEN clauses. I memorized them at twelve, recited them at sixteen, and have not spoken them aloud since the night of my own initiation, when the words came out of me in a voice I didn't recognize as mine: formal and final and gone, the way everything sounds when you are signing something you cannot unsign.

The first clause is loyalty. To the institution, to its continuity, to its unnamed Patron, in that order. The Patron before the members. The institution before the Patron. My blood before my name.

The seventh clause is silence. *What is known in the chamber stays in the chamber. What is done in service stays undone in daylight. What is heard in the blood does not travel to the tongue.*

The seventh clause is the one that matters. It is the one that bites.

My father used to describe the vow as a gift: that it simplified everything, replaced the burden of discretion with architecture. You could not speak certain truths. You could not reveal certain things. You could not, under the most specific and literal construction of the oath, act in ways that materially damaged the Court's interests without the vow exacting its tithe. He described it the way engineers describe load-bearing walls. *Without this, everything falls.*

What he did not describe, because he was a man who did not discuss the cost of things he had already paid, was what the vow does to you over time. Not the dramatic penalties: those are rare, reserved for serious breach, documented in the sealed annals, theoretically survivable. The ordinary cost. The daily one. The way it grows into you like a trellis grows into a vine, until you cannot tell what is the structure and what is the living thing that has arranged itself around it.

I am twenty-five years old. I have lived inside this oath for sixteen years. I can no longer reliably separate what I believe from what I have been instructed to believe. This is, I think, what my father meant by gift. When you cannot examine the walls of your cage, you stop experiencing it as a cage.

The Thorne seat was mine by blood, then by my father's death, then by the Court's formal confirmation: they had to confirm, because the seat is not inherited, it is accepted, and the acceptance carries a cost that comes out of the body and takes several weeks to finish taking. I had been the reluctant heir since I was old enough to understand what reluctance meant and too young to understand that reluctance, here, is itself a thing the vow does not guarantee.

I would have said no.

I did not get the chance.

* * *



"THE QUESTION," SEBASTIAN said, "is what she knows."

"She can't know anything operational," Crane said. He has a voice like someone dimming a lamp: warm, reasonable, producing exactly enough light to see by. "Cora had only reached the first threshold. She hadn't been..."

"Cora had been told certain things," Margot said. "In confidence."

The room went to the particular quality of quiet that is not silence but the management of what to do with what has been named.

I had watched Cora Calloway in the months before her death. Bright, relentless, a scholarship student who had made it through the first rites without flinching and then begun asking questions that were one shade too precise

to be mere curiosity. *Who decides the Reaping list. What becomes of the pledges who don't complete the year. What does the Patron actually receive for what we give.*

The vow had not stopped me from answering some of those questions directly. The vow stops certain truths from leaving the body. It does not stop the angle of a turned head. It does not stop the weight of a hesitation too small to name. Cora had watched me not-answer in ways that told her something, and she had gone digging, and then she had died, and the Court had ruled it a death of despair, and I had sat in this room the following month and said nothing, said nothing, said nothing, because the seventh clause had taken my tongue and everything below it.

She was twenty years old.

Her sister's eyes had the same quality of attention: not the same color, but the same expectation, as if she believed the world would give up its seams if she pressed in exactly the right place. The grief I had recognized in three seconds was mine to recognize because I had put it there. Partially. Approximately. I was one of several causes in a chain I hadn't started and had not stopped, and the seventh clause made it impossible for me to tell her this.

I pressed my thumb against the inside of my wrist, where the vow sits closest to the surface. A small pressure. An orientation.

"She came for information," I said. "She has none yet. Three days."

"Three days," Sebastian said, "is long enough to begin collecting the wrong kind."

He was right. Three days had been enough for Cora.

"What do we do about her?" Crane asked. He had addressed this to the table generally, which was how Crane always raised things he didn't want to be heard asking Margot specifically.

"Management," Margot said. "Close enough to monitor. Far enough that she doesn't read it as a threat."

She was looking at me when she said it.

* * *



SEBASTIAN FOUND ME in the passage after the others had gone up.

This is something he does. He reads a room, identifies which conversations need not to happen at the table, and manufactures the private one with a seamlessness that looks like coincidence and isn't.

"I pulled the elder sister's full file when the alert flagged," he said. "Not just the Court records. Personal history." He paused in the precise way he pauses, long enough to signal that what follows is something he wants you to receive correctly. "The family petitioned for an inquest after Cora died. The petition was declined. Our friends in the county administration handled the routing."

"I know," I said.

"Wren sent letters. Three of them. To the dean of students, to the coroner's office, to a journalist at the county paper who was apparently a family connection." He had his hands clasped behind him, his expression calibrated to nothing. "None of them went anywhere. But she sent them."

"She's persistent," I said.

"She's *organized*. The letters were coordinated: sent in sequence, designed to apply pressure from multiple angles simultaneously." He let a beat pass. "She was eighteen at the time. She's twenty-one now."

I said nothing.

"I want you to understand the distinction," Sebastian continued, "between what Margot wants and what I think the situation requires. Margot wants her managed. I want her evaluated. These are not the same instruction."

He left before I could ask what *evaluated* meant. This was intentional.

I stood a moment in the passage after his footsteps faded, turning the word over. Sebastian has been helpful to me since my father's death in ways that were specifically calibrated to leave me in his debt. Three Court decisions smoothed. Several quiet suggestions that the Patron had a particular interest in Thorne continuity during the transition period, and that Sebastian's own position was best understood as structural support.

The word *support* is not the word I would have chosen.

I had watched his eyes at the table tonight: twice, before he looked at the paper, they had moved to me. Not with the sharpness of threat. With the precision of a man calculating how a piece fits into a larger arrangement he hasn't yet named.

This bothered me more than any open threat would have.

* * *



THE PASSAGE IS ORIGINAL stone, four hundred years of accumulated cold, the kind that comes through a good coat if you stand in it long enough. I had stood in it long enough, over the years, to learn how much you can absorb before it stops feeling like cold and starts feeling like you.

The Thorne name is a debt, my father said. Not a gift.

I had understood that to mean the Court. The vow. The seat. The cycle of obligation my grandfather had committed the bloodline to before I was born. I understood it now to mean also the weight I carried about Cora Calloway, which I could not put down, could not speak of, and could not hand back to the person who deserved to receive it.

Her sister was here.

She had walked up the drive with one suitcase and her measuring eyes and her grief packed in tight enough that it only showed in the set of her jaw, and she was going to

start pulling at threads, because that was the kind of person she was, and eventually she would pull the right one, and it would lead her somewhere I could not follow her and could not, by the terms of everything I was, warn her about.

The vow would not let me tell her.

But there were things the vow did not prevent.

* * *



THIS IS WHAT I TOLD myself, in the passage, in the cold: she was a risk. An untrained outsider with a personal stake, no institutional loyalty, and enough intelligence to be specifically dangerous. She needed to be watched. She needed to be kept in proximity where any information she gathered could be tracked and assessed, where she could be redirected before she found something that would require the Court to make a decision I didn't want made. I would watch her. I would keep her close. I would position myself between her and

whatever Sebastian was evaluating, and between her and Margot, and between her and the Patron's people, whose interests I still did not fully understand.

This was the strategically sensible choice.

I knew it was a lie before I finished telling it to myself. Lies have a specific quality: they fit almost perfectly, like a joint planed a fraction too smooth, and it is only the *almost* that gives them away, if you are paying close enough attention.

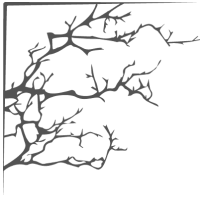
I was paying close enough attention. I told myself the lie anyway, because the alternative was to acknowledge that I had stood in a doorway for three seconds too long and felt something in the arrangement of the world shift, and that was a thing I could not afford and certainly could not name and absolutely could not let the Court see.

She would not trust me. She already didn't. That was the correct arrangement of things, and I intended to keep it.

I turned and walked back up the passage toward the surface, toward the early gray morning beginning to show through the gaps in the shuttered windows. Somewhere above me, in a slant-ceilinged room in Wexford with a view of the building she had no business looking at, Wren Calloway was starting her first full day at Blackthorn.

I told myself I had until she reached breakfast to determine the exact parameters of *close*.

I had used up the time before I reached the top of the stairs.



Chapter 3: The Tapping

Three knocks. A pause. Two more.

I was already awake. I had been since the clock tower chimed eleven, lying in the dark with my eyes on the ceiling, running inventory. Which floorboards between my bed and the window would creak. What the matron's schedule looked like from three weeks of observation. How many steps it took to reach the east wing from Wexford Hall in the dark.

Cataloguing. Old habit. New purpose.

But when the knock came, I sat up differently. Not startled: something older than startled. The way you surface from a deep sleep when you hear your name in a voice that shouldn't be able to reach you across the years.

Three. A pause. Two.

That was Cora's knock.

The one she'd invented when we were nine and twelve, crammed into our grandmother's house for the summer, sharing a wall where Nan enforced lights-out with the enthusiasm of a warden and a flashlight to match. Three pause two meant *are you awake?* I'd return it from my side of the plaster when I was, stay silent when I wasn't, and she'd slip notes under the door on the nights when words felt necessary.

I had never told anyone that code. As far as I knew, Cora hadn't either. It was the kind of thing that belongs to the particular country of childhood, the one with no map and no border crossing, that you only realize you've left when you try to go back.

Someone at Blackthorn knew my dead sister's knock.

I put my feet on the cold floor, reached for my robe, and arranged my face into the expression of someone who stumbled into peculiar midnight situations all the time and found them moderately boring.

The girl in the doorway was small and blank-faced in the way of practiced messengers: not nervous, just deliberately absent. Long coat. No name offered.

"You're expected," she said.

"By who?"

She'd already turned down the hallway.

I followed. The only alternative was to lock my door and pretend this was a dream, and I had come too far, on too long a bus ride, for pretending.

* * *



THE ROUTE SHE TOOK didn't appear on any map I'd memorized, and I'd memorized three. We cut through a service door off the dining hall (propped open from the inside, she didn't touch it, which meant this had been arranged) down a staircase that smelled like groundwater

and old stone, and into a corridor where the overhead lights had been replaced by candles in iron brackets, set low in the stone.

I counted: twelve steps down, left at the first junction, right at the second. The ceiling dropped by three inches, then opened unexpectedly into a low vaulted room the size of a lecture hall. Except no lecture hall I'd been in had floors this old, or walls hung with tapestries gone brown at the edges from decades of candle smoke, or the particular acoustic quality of a space that had absorbed a lot of silence over a very long time.

Eleven people were already in it. I knew this because I counted them twice, in the way you count emergency exits: automatically, then once more to confirm.

One of them was Lucian Thorne.

He was standing at the far end of the room near a door I'd never seen marked on anything, holding a candle with the ease of someone who'd grown up in rooms where candles were the appropriate choice. He didn't look at me when I entered. That was how I knew he'd already clocked me.

The messenger girl was distributing gray robes from a folded stack near the entrance. I took one, pulled it over my own, and tried to look like a person who found this level of pageantry mildly tedious rather than acutely interesting.

"It suits you," said a voice at my elbow.

* * *



SEBASTIAN VOSS HAD a face designed for trust. Even features, even smile, eyes that caught the candlelight and did something warm and practiced with it. He was the sort of attractive that announces itself early, before you've decided how to feel about it, because it has learned that hesitation loses ground. He held out his hand.

"Sebastian. Though by now you've probably heard the name." He had the confidence of someone who assumed his name moved through rooms before he did, and wasn't wrong. "You look like someone who wants to know what's happening."

"I look like someone who was woken up at midnight and handed a robe," I said.

He laughed. A good laugh: unforced-sounding, the kind you practice until the practice disappears. "Fair. The short version: the Court identifies candidates in the first few weeks of term. Tonight is the first look."

"A look at what?"

"At whether you're worth a second look."

I smiled, the way you smile when someone says something true wrapped in something charming, and stored his face in the mental folder I'd labeled *significant*. *Proceed with calibrated warmth and zero assumptions.*

The warmth from that direction was easier to manage than the cold from the one that arrived next.

"She's not supposed to be here."

Margot Ashwell was beautiful the way marble is beautiful: finished, cold, built for a particular purpose and not interested in yours. Her robes fell perfectly over perfect posture. Her gaze moved to me with the focused hostility of someone who has already made a decision and is now looking for evidence to confirm it.

"Transfer students aren't eligible for first-round consideration." She was speaking to Sebastian rather than to me, which was a choice. "There is a process."

"Processes are for people who don't have latitude to bend them," Sebastian said pleasantly.

"Processes are what keeps this from becoming chaos." Now she looked at me. Directly, fully, with the kind of attention that doesn't flatter its recipient. "You shouldn't be here, Miss..."

"Calloway." I said it clearly, watching her face the same way I'd watched the matron's face on day one.

This time: a reaction. Not much of one, quickly swallowed. But something had moved in her eyes at the name: not surprise. Not quite recognition. Something colder than recognition, more like *confirmation*. Like someone who had expected a particular kind of trouble and was noting that it had finally arrived in the shape it was always going to arrive in.

She turned away before I could pin it further.

I watched her spine: rigid, held. Not the rigidity of contempt: that's looser, more performative. This was the tension of someone keeping something very still that wanted to move.

She'd known Cora. I was almost certain.

The third person found me before I'd finished processing the first two, which was either good timing or the illusion of it.

"The candles on the south wall give off a draft," said a quiet voice at my left. A light hand at my elbow: not presumptuous, just briefly present, the way you'd steer someone away from a wet step on a busy street.

He steered me two steps left, toward the north wall instead. Away from where I'd been standing. Away from the far door.

Ellis Crane had a kind face with some weather in it: the kind you earn by spending actual time outdoors rather than being photographed outdoors. Brown hair a little too long, eyes that were paying attention in a way that felt attentive rather than calculating. Mid-twenties. Not performing warmth; just exhibiting it.

"Crane," he said. "Ellis Crane, though no one uses the first."

"Wren."

"I know." He said it without apology. Of course he knew. They'd all known before I arrived. "You looked like you were running through something."

"Just orienting."

"Good habit." A brief pause, and then, quietly: "The south wall is also where Sebastian usually positions himself when new pledges arrive. If you'd stayed there,

you'd have spent the entire evening in his conversational orbit." He tilted his head slightly. "That may or may not be useful to you, depending."

He offered it the way you'd hand someone an umbrella when it starts to rain. No transaction implied, nothing asked in return. Just: *here, you might need this.*

That was the thing about kindness. It was hard to audit in the moment. You only saw the machinery underneath it later, when you had time to sort through what you'd been given and think about why.

I filed Ellis Crane in his own folder, the one I hadn't labeled yet.

* * *



LUCIAN CALLED THE GATHERING to order without raising his voice. Somehow worse than if he'd shouted.

Nine pledges (I'd counted twice, confirmed) arranged themselves in a loose arc. I positioned myself in the middle, the way you do when you want sight lines to the whole room and don't want to be singled out or cornered. Third from the right. Nobody's first choice. Everybody's blind spot.

What the room told me, while Lucian spoke:

The tapestries on the east wall were newer than those on the west by at least a century. Someone had replaced them and either didn't notice the seams didn't match or hadn't cared, which said something about that someone.

There were twelve candles in the iron brackets. Nine were lit. The three dark ones had fresh wax: not spent, fresh, loaded and waiting. This gathering had been staged, and the staging was deliberate: these specific areas illuminated, these specific areas left in shadow. Someone wanted the room to feel half-revealed.

The door at the far end, the one Lucian had been standing near, had a handle. A real one, not decorative. This mattered because the building I'd been staring at from my window on my first night (the black stone building, the one no brochure had photographed) had a door with no handle visible from the outside. This wasn't that door. But it was close to something.

Lucian was speaking. Latin first: the kind of phrasing that comes from very old books and is deployed to sound like authority, because it comes from a time when written words were rare enough to be sacred. Half the room watched him with the reverent attention of people trained since birth to recognize which rooms require it.

I watched the room.

Third from the left in the arc, one of the male pledges kept glancing at the dark candle brackets. Not afraid, exactly. *Checking*. Like they held some meaning he already knew and was waiting to see applied.

Sebastian had placed himself three steps behind Lucian's right shoulder. Not at his side: behind. Close enough to whisper without being overheard, deferential enough to avoid notice. A very considered position for someone who performed ease as naturally as breathing.

Margot had not joined the arc. She stood to the east, technically present, technically not a pledge. Observer, or something with a function I hadn't identified.

Lucian switched to English mid-sentence without announcing the shift. "You've been called because the Court has identified you as candidates. This is not an invitation. It is an assessment."

"An assessment of what, exactly?" I said.

Twelve heads turned.

Lucian looked at me for the first time since I'd entered. Whatever I'd expected to find in that look, it wasn't what was there. He was assessing, yes. But underneath the assessment was something quieter, something he'd shuttered a beat too late: something that in a different face and a different room might have looked almost like relief.

"Character," he said, after a pause that was exactly one count too long. "The capacity to hold what is given to you. And the wisdom to know what not to touch."

"And if a person's assessment comes back unfavorable?"

"They leave Blackthorn." He held my gaze. "One way or another."

The rest of the gathering ran without me making another sound. I listened, memorized, performed exactly the level of attentive-but-not-eager that makes you look like someone doing their best in an unfamiliar situation. Obligations were outlined. Protocols recited. The particular vocabulary of the Court was introduced in careful doses: nothing named directly, never named, always gestured at in the manner of people who've learned that naming things creates accountability.

I memorized every word.

* * *



ON THE WALK BACK UP the stairs, trailing the group at a pace I'd calibrated to look like tired rather than alert, it arrived.

Three. Pause. Two.

The knock that had woken me.

I'd been carrying it like a stone in a coat pocket all evening: aware of the weight, waiting to understand the shape. Now, in the stairwell with candle smoke still sharp in the back of my throat, I put it down and looked at it directly.

The pattern wasn't a cipher. It wasn't something you'd decode from a text or extract under pressure or find written in a book. It was the kind of code that gets learned through proximity: the way you learn a person's laugh, or the specific way they knock when they don't

want to disturb you. You learn it by being *there*. By being close enough, over enough time, to absorb a person's habits.

Cora had taught someone that knock.

Not given it: taught it, the way you teach something to a person you trust enough to let them speak your private language. She had been here long enough, and trusted someone here enough, to share a habit that belonged to the two of us and our grandmother's summer house and no one else in the world.

Which meant the Court wasn't just an institution she'd attended. She'd had someone in it. A real someone, not an obligation. Someone she'd let in far enough to learn the knock she used at home, the same knock she'd used to ask me through a plaster wall if I was still awake.

I thought about Ellis Crane's hand, light at my elbow, guiding me away from Sebastian's orbit. Information offered freely, in the voice of someone practiced at being useful.

I thought about Margot's face at the name Calloway: that cold flash of confirmation, the spine held rigid against something pressing outward.

I thought about a small blank-faced girl who hadn't spoken my name and hadn't needed to, because whoever sent her had known exactly which room to send her to.

I didn't know who yet. But I knew this: whoever had sent that knock was telling me something. Whether they'd meant to or not. You don't use a dead girl's private code by accident. You use it because she taught you, and you use it because some part of you (grief, guilt, or something in between) wants to see if it still works.

I intended to find out which.

* * *



I SHOULD HAVE GONE upstairs.

Two weeks of carefully practiced small-and-forgettable, and I nearly discarded it all in the first hour. But the corridor off the vaulted room branched in two directions when the group dispersed, and I took the wrong turn on purpose, quietly, without announcing myself.

The corridor was low-ceilinged and cold, lit by a single bracket at the far end. At its terminus there was a door.

Not the one Lucian had been standing near. A different one: set flush into the west wall of the stone, with iron fittings older than the building felt. And no handle.

Not a missing handle. The stone around the mount showed clean pale edges against the older gray around it, precise and recent. Someone had taken the handle off deliberately and not long ago.

I stood in front of it, candle raised.

Cora's last letter had taken me a hundred readings to understand, because she'd written it in the specific half-said language of someone who wanted to speak plainly and was afraid to. *There is a place here they don't want us to find*, she'd written. I'd thought she meant a metaphorical place: information, a truth, the kind of thing people mean when they say *find* but really mean *understand*.

It has no handle on the outside, she'd written. *I think that's supposed to mean no one goes in.*

She'd left out the sentence's ending. The one that completed the thought.

I think someone does.

I pressed my palm flat against the wood. Old oak, cold through my robe, dense in the way of things that have been standing in one place long enough to forget they

were ever a tree. Then I held the candle close to the seam between the door and the frame and checked the gap.

Even. Perfectly even, all the way around.

This door opened. Inward, from the inside. I looked down at the stone floor and found what I was looking for: faint marks at the base where the bottom edge had scraped against stone, pale dust in the groove, not settled yet.

Someone was using this room. Regularly enough to have worn that groove into the floor.

I memorized the location (third turn left, second right, twelve steps, west wall) and filed it beside *Margot's face* and *the knock* and *Ellis Crane's hand at my elbow* and all the other things I was carrying that I hadn't yet found a place to put.

Then I straightened my robe and walked back to the stairs at the pace of someone returning from a bathroom detour, which is the pace of a person who has nothing to hide.

The corridor behind me stayed quiet.

The door did not open.

Not tonight.

But Cora had found this room. I was certain of it the same way I was certain she hadn't jumped: not from evidence, not yet, but from the particular knowledge of a person who knew her well enough to recognize the shape of what she would and wouldn't do. She'd found this room, and she'd written about it, and three months later she was dead.

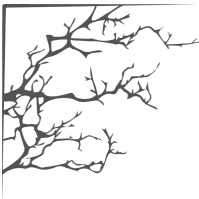
Whatever was behind that door, someone had wanted it kept exactly this inaccessible.

That was practically an engraved invitation.

* * *



OUTPUT: CHAPTER 3 COMPLETE: ~3,000 words.



Chapter 4: The Lock She Shouldn't Know

The pledge rites had not changed in two hundred years.

I knew this because I had read the founding charter once, at thirteen, looking for something I could use against my father, and found instead the same six steps we still performed: assembly, examination, service, the silent hour, the mark, the oath. The founders had built the ritual with the meticulous caution of men who understood that power is most absolute when it appears inevitable. Change the ritual and you imply it could have been otherwise. The Blackthorn Court did not imply things could have been otherwise.

It was my night to run the examination.

This was not the customary arrangement. Crane typically administered this portion (Crane, who was good at it in the way that gentle men are sometimes good at doing harm: quietly, without appearing to notice what he had done). But I had exercised Thorne prerogative three days

ago, citing procedural irregularities, and no one had contended it, because no one contests a Thorne heir on procedural matters. The blood vow's authority is automatic and, when I choose to use it, exhausting to others in a way I have found useful.

The procedural irregularity was standing ninth in the alphabetical line with her hands clasped and her eyes on the antechamber's painted ceiling.

Eleven pledges in gray initiate's shifts, arranged by surname. The candles I had ordered before dawn were lit at the angles I specified: light at those angles makes faces honest by making them uncomfortable, which is worth two additional examiners and costs less. Sebastian had arrived five minutes before the pledges and seen my arrangement and done the calculation, and the corner of his mouth had moved in a way that meant he appreciated my methodology and was filing it for his own purposes. I noted the filing and let it stand.

Calloway stood ninth and studied the ceiling with the systematic attention of someone making a floor plan.

I had placed her ninth deliberately. Eight turns to establish the pattern of ordinary fear. One turn to see where she diverged from it.

* * *



I WORKED THROUGH THE pledges in order.

The examination had a visible structure: a passage from the founding documents to construe, a historical question, one physical task. The Latin was always genuine, chosen to require actual translation rather than pattern-matching. The question was tailored. The task was symbolic: its point was less the completion than what you revealed in attempting it.

Pledge one, Harrington: legacy, over-prepared, translated his passage with contemptuous accuracy and showed the specific relief of a man who has memorized rather than understood.

Pledge two, Bellasis: unprepared, panicked, produced a translation wrong in the most forgiving possible way. I told her that was acceptable and she blinked at a frequency that suggested tears being managed. I moved on.

Six more pledges: acceptable, unremarkable, careful.

Then Calloway.

The passage I had prepared for her came from the Blackthorn Founding Charter, 1762 (the version held in the main archive, shelf seven, reference thirty-one). I had confirmed its contents against the original the previous morning, because I had a need to confirm things against their originals that my father had always called paranoia and I had always called accuracy.

The main archive's version read *a sacramentum perpetuum*, a perpetual oath.

The original, held in the restricted section that no current student had authorization to access, read *sub sigillo hemlocki*. Under the hemlock seal.

Different phrase. Identical grammar. Meaningless distinction unless you knew what the hemlock seal designated, in which case it was the difference between an oath and a selection.

I held out the page.

She took it. Her eyes moved across the lines with what appeared to be genuine reading (the progressive tracking of an unfamiliar text, not the rapid sweep of recognition) and slowed at line forty-three. Her Latin was competent, more than competent; the translation she produced was precise and unhedged, the work of someone who had studied properly rather than scraped through.

I let her finish. Then: "The phrase in line forty-five. The specific *sigillo* referenced. Seal of what?"

The text she held said *sacramentum*.

She should have answered: the oath.

Her eyes did not move to the page. They held mine for a count of two, three, and I watched the space behind her expression with the attention I had developed specifically for watching that space, and I saw something move through it and stop. Not recognition. Not concealment. Something between them, a flicker of consideration that lasted a half-second too long and was gone before I could name it.

"The oath," she said. "As stated. I don't have context beyond this passage."

Safe answer. Correct answer, given what the page said.

But she had paused. And the pause had a particular quality: the quality of someone choosing, not the quality of someone not-knowing. I had made a study of the difference for eight years and I was not often wrong about it.

"Acceptable," I said, and moved to pledge ten.

* * *



I DID NOT LET MYSELF think about the pause until the examination was over.

The silent hour followed: pledges dispersed to service tasks I had assigned through Crane's office, standard work, nothing pointed. I stood at the examiner's lectern after the room cleared and looked at the eleven empty spaces they had occupied and permitted myself thirty seconds to examine what had happened to my reasoning during the two and a half minutes it had taken Calloway to answer a question she should not have needed to consider.

The reasoning had been sound going in. Either she knew the restricted text, in which case the pause would be a tell, or she did not, in which case she would simply answer from what she had.

What she had given me was the correct safe answer delivered a beat too late.

This was not, technically, evidence. A pause can mean anything. Discomfort, distraction, a mind that works laterally before landing. I had been wrong before about the pause (exactly twice in eight years of examinations) and both times the subject had eventually turned out to be precisely what the pause suggested. But I was not a court of law and a Thorne prerogative granted me no particular right to certainty.

I was certain.

My certainty was the problem. Not its content: the content was useful, an intelligence update, a variable brought into sharper focus. The problem was the weight of it, the way it settled in my chest like something that had found a specific place to rest rather than like data to be processed and filed. I had been processing and filing information about Wren Calloway for four days and the filing system was beginning to do something it was not authorized to do.

One degree. The dial of my control had moved exactly one degree toward something I had no vocabulary for that was not also dangerous.

I left the lectern. I had work to do.

* * *



I SENT CALLOWAY TO the east archive with a sealed letter for the restricted correspondence tray.

The tray was not marked. Finding it correctly required either asking someone or already knowing the archive's internal organization: a layout available only to senior members and not included in any materials provided to new students. I had a view of the east corridor from the third casement of my study, and I positioned myself there with correspondence I was nominally reviewing and watched the pledges move through their silent hour with the domestic diligence of people learning what service meant to the Court.

She appeared in the east corridor four minutes after I dispatched her.

She did not look at a single door.

Not one. No checking, no orientation, no asking. She moved down the corridor with the unhurried certainty of someone navigating a space she had already memorized,

found the correspondence tray in under three minutes, placed the letter, walked back out. No excess motion. No cover behavior, and cover behavior is itself a form of excess motion; its absence is as legible as its presence, to someone who knows to read it.

She had been in the east archive before.

I sat back from the window. My fingers, I noticed, were pressed flat against the casement sill with a pressure that the casement had not required.

I released them. Smoothed the marks I had left.

She had prior access. Which meant she had been in restricted areas she had not obtained authorization for, using them with enough confidence to have internalized the layout. For four days, at minimum, or longer, if she had come to Blackthorn knowing what she would need and knowing where to find it.

The question this raised was not whether she was investigating. I had assumed investigation since the moment I reviewed her transfer file and found a photograph of a girl with Cora's mouth and Cora's particular brand of grief turned to forward motion. The question was how far the investigation had gotten, and who had taught her what she clearly knew, and what she had already found that I did not yet know about.

The third question was the one that made the evening feel less like management and more like something I had not yet found a name for.

I picked up my coat.

* * *



THE GROUNDS AFTER THE silent hour had the quality of a breath held.

Fog had come in from the river (it usually did, this time of year), rolling across the lower quad until the older buildings looked like suggestions rather than facts. I moved through it without a lantern, knowing the path by a decade of repetition, crossing the groundskeeper's wall through the gap that had been there since my second year and that no maintenance request had ever seemed urgent enough to address.

The Proctors' House stood on the far side of the gap. Black stone, unlighted, the fitted panel that had replaced its original door facing the empty grounds in a direction that appeared, from the standard approach, to be the only approach.

The north face was not the standard approach.

It faced the groundskeeper's wall, hemmed in by shadow from morning until full dark, uninteresting from a distance because there was nothing to interest a casual eye. No window. No door. No architectural feature that would invite investigation from anyone who was not already looking for something specific.

Set into the wall at hip height, behind what appeared to be a drainage conduit, there was a lock.

It was not on any maintenance record I had ever reviewed. It had been there since the building's construction, and it opened a secondary access route that the Court used for one purpose, once a year, in the weeks following the Reaping. Three people in the current Court knew this lock existed.

I was one of them.

I came around the corner of the groundskeeper's wall and stopped.

She was crouched at the base of the north face with a tension wrench and something narrow (a pick or a modification of one) and she was working with the practiced efficiency of someone for whom this was not a new skill but a practiced one. No searching at the pins. Her elbow was angled with the specific economy of repetition; this was technique rather than improvisation. She was listening for the lock rather than forcing it.

I stood in the shadow of the wall and did not move.

She would have it open in under a minute. I let her have it.

Not because I needed to see whether she could. I already knew she could. I let her have the minute because I needed to watch what she did after (whether she went straight in, whether she photographed the space, whether she had a specific target or was conducting a general search) and because some portion of me that I was not yet prepared to examine directly wanted thirty seconds more of watching her be exactly what she was before I had to become what the Court needed me to be in response to it.

The lock gave.

She exhaled (half satisfaction, half something else, the specific sound of an intelligence proven right) and pulled the secondary door clear of the wall. Eighteen inches of

clearance. Cold air came through it carrying the smell of old paper and something chemical and the particular cold of a room that had been sealed since last March.

Since the Reaping.

"Don't go in," I said.

She turned slowly. No startling; I noted that and filed it alongside the east archive and the pause and the fact that her Latin had been better than most of Blackthorn's credentialed postgraduates. She looked at me across the dark gap, the tension wrench still in her hand, the open door behind her a rectangle of darkness that smelled of things I had spent years choosing not to examine closely.

"I wasn't going to," she said. "I just needed to know if I could."

The remarkable thing was that it was true. I could hear truth the way some people hear pitch (not perfectly, not always, but with enough consistency to trust the signal when it was clean). It was clean. She had not come through the grounds with a plan for this door. She had found the lock at some earlier point and needed to confirm whether her read of it was correct.

The intelligence she had consulted was her own.

I crossed toward her. Not quickly: I do not move quickly toward things I want, because want is information and information is leverage and I had enough of other people's leverage already working on me. I walked at the pace of a man determining what to do next.

She didn't move.

The open door at her back let through cold that reached me ten feet away, and I stopped close enough that the candle she was carrying (still lit, which I found disproportionately irritating, because it should have gone out twice in the wind off the river) threw our shadows together across the black stone.

"Where did you learn that," I said. Not a question. The grammar of someone who has already begun to catalogue the answer and wants confirmation of details, not fact.

She looked at me. The careful neutral she had worn through the examination was gone, or shifted: something underneath it more visible in the dark, and I could not determine whether what I was seeing was closer to defiance or to the thing defiance is used to protect.

"Lockpicking," she said, "is just listening."

She closed her fingers around the tension wrench and waited for me to decide what I was going to do about it.

I had a rule. Eight years of evidence that the rule was sound, and one evening of evidence that it was doing something it had never done before, which was bending. The rule was: never let anyone see the variable move. The dial was the one thing I had kept from the Court, from my father, from every person who had understood that the Thorne heir's control was its own kind of power and had spent years trying to find the fracture point.

She was standing at it.

"Close it," I said.

She reset the lock. The click was quiet and definitive: the sound of something open going back to sealed.

I walked away first, because I had to, because the alternative was standing in the dark near a door that smelled of the Reaping with a woman who had found it without a map and picked it without hesitation, and asking the question that had been forming in me since the night I had seen her photograph and understood what it meant that she had come here.

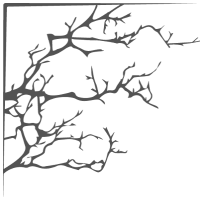
Who sent you in prepared.

And underneath that, quieter, which I would not yet look at directly...

What did I do, to make any of this necessary?

The fog had thickened while I was inside it. The candle she'd carried should have gone out at the groundskeeper's wall. It burned all the way back to the main building, and I told myself it meant nothing, and I told myself that with exactly the conviction I had brought to everything else tonight.

Behind me, somewhere in the dark, I heard her follow.



Chapter 5: In the Stacks

The restricted stacks smelled like old arguments. Three floors of iron shelving, candlelit alcoves, manuscripts that hadn't been touched since before my grandmother was born, all of it perfumed with the particular mold that grows in places where people have been absolutely certain they were right for centuries, and not one of them ever was.

I liked it. It suited the work.

I'd gotten in with the key I'd copied from the ring hanging in the pledge common room, the one that said *Restricted: Initiated Members Only* in Latin, because of course the Latin. Forty minutes with a wax impression and a borrowed file, slower than I'd liked but quiet enough to avoid notice. I'd told myself I'd put the copy back before morning.

I'd been in here for two hours when the far door opened.

I didn't look up from the ledger.

The footsteps were quiet and deliberate and unhurried in the way that things are unhurried when they know they've already won. I'd been cataloguing that gait since the moment I arrived at Blackthorn. It had its own architecture, weight distributed differently from how other people moved, like he'd calculated the exact coefficient of silence required and applied precisely that.

I turned a page.

"The restricted stacks," said Lucian Thorne, "require an initiated Court membership."

"Funny." I ran my finger down a column of handwritten names. "I have a key."

"Stolen."

"Borrowed." I looked up then, because I'd learned early that the thing about people like him was that they expected you to look away first, and I wasn't ever going to do that. "I was going to put it back."

He was standing at the head of the aisle. Black, as always, not theatrical black, not costuming, but the expensive absolute black of someone who'd been wearing it since birth and found it simply correct. Hands behind his back. That expression on his face that meant he was already three moves ahead and wanted me to have a moment to realize it.

I turned another page.

"You picked a lock last night," he said.

"You watched me pick a lock last night."

"Yes."

"And you didn't stop me."

Something moved in his jaw. Almost nothing. "I'm stopping you now."

"You're talking to me now," I said. "It's a bit different."

He moved into the aisle.

Not fast, he was never fast, nothing he did was careless, but he moved, and suddenly the distance between us was a thing I was measuring in centimeters without meaning to. I noted the exit behind him, the secondary door on the third floor above us, the window that probably didn't open. Force of habit.

I picked up the next ledger.

"That's a restricted document," he said.

"I'm in the restricted section." I didn't open it yet. "It tracks."

"Calloway."

He said my name the way he said everything, like he'd already sorted me into a slot and confirmed I was filling it correctly. *Problem. Scholarship. Calloway.*

"That's me," I agreed.

"What are you looking for?"

"Hard to say." I opened the ledger. The handwriting was cramped and old, the ink oxidized to the color of old tea stains. "I'll know it when I find it. That's usually how it works."

"It's not." He stepped closer. "That's the story people tell themselves when they're in over their heads."

"Helpful of you." I found the year I was looking for and kept my face neutral. "Did you follow me here, or is this a coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidences."

"Then you followed me."

"I knew you'd come." He said it without apology. "I've been waiting."

That was not the answer I'd expected. It landed somewhere in my chest that I didn't want to examine, so I filed it. "Flattering."

"It isn't meant to be."

"I know." I looked up. "That's why it is."

The hairline crack appeared, one half second fracture in the composure, a slight adjustment around the eyes that said I'd said something he hadn't prepared for. It sealed immediately. But I'd seen it. That was enough.

"Close the ledger," he said, "and tell me what you're actually here for."

"Close the ledger yourself," I said, "and tell me what you're afraid I'll find."

He closed the distance.

I held my ground. This was not, I should say, a sign of composure. It was pure stubbornness dressed up as confidence, which is most of what bravery actually is. He stopped two feet away and looked down at me and I looked up at him and the library held its breath between us.

"You don't know what you're doing," he said.

"Usually not." I held his gaze. "It's honestly part of the charm."

Something crossed his expression. Not humor, not quite. The acknowledgment that humor had been sighted in the vicinity and he was choosing not to engage with it.

"You're going to get yourself killed," he said.

"You're the third person to tell me that since I arrived." I tilted my head. "Is there a betting pool? I'd like a cut."

He reached past me.

Not for me, for the ledger. He moved with that controlled precision, his arm crossing the space between us, and I had half a second to decide: step back and cede the ground, or hold still. I held still. His arm was three inches from my shoulder. He took the ledger and set it on the shelf behind him.

Then he didn't step back.

He put one hand on the shelf beside my head. The other hand went to the shelf on the other side. He didn't touch me yet, but he effectively caged me in. The stacks were narrow and he was tall, and the geometry of it was a very deliberate calculation.

The message was architectural. *You're not leaving.*

I'd grown up in a house where the walls had corners, and I'd learned early that the only thing to do with a corner was to lean into it and show your teeth.

"Interesting technique," I said. My voice came out steadier than I felt, which was all I needed. "Very medieval. Do you practice it, or does it just come naturally?"

"You picked a lock," he said, quietly, "that has been unpicked for eighty years. I need to know how."

"YouTube," I said. "Excellent tutorial. The presenter has a soothing voice."

His jaw moved. "Calloway."

"Lockpicking isn't illegal." I held his gaze. "I checked."

"It is when the lock belongs to the Court."

"Then add it to my tab." I didn't blink. "You can back up anytime."

"When I'm satisfied."

"You can be satisfied now."

"I'll decide when I'm satisfied."

He was close enough that I could smell him, cold stone and something warmer underneath, beeswax and something darker, old wood or old smoke. It was not, I noted with profound irritation, an unpleasant smell.

I shifted my weight, and the movement brought the side of my hip against his thigh. The contact was electric, a sudden spike of heat that made the air in the stacks feel too thick to breathe. He didn't move away. Instead, he leaned in, his chest barely grazing mine, until I could feel the steady, heavy thrum of his heart through the fabric of his shirt.

"You like to play with fire," he murmured. His voice had dropped an octave, losing some of its formality and gaining a rougher, more intimate edge. "Even when you know you're the one who will get burned."

"I've always liked the heat," I whispered back.

The banter was still there, but the subtext had shifted. It wasn't just about power anymore; it was about hunger. I could see the dilation of his pupils, the way his gaze dropped to my mouth and stayed there. The controlled stillness he usually wore like armor was fracturing.

He shifted one hand from the shelf. He didn't touch me yet, but his fingers hovered just a fraction of an inch from the line of my jaw. I could feel the warmth radiating off him, a magnetic pull that made me want to close the gap myself.

"May I?" he asked. It was a low, quiet request, the first genuine piece of vulnerability he'd shown since I'd met him.

"Yes," I said, my voice barely more than a breath. "You may."

He didn't waste the moment. His hand slid around the back of my neck, his thumb hooking under my jaw to tilt my face up. It wasn't a forceful grip, but it was possessive. He leaned in until our foreheads touched, his breath warm against my lips.

I reached up, my fingers curling into the fabric of his jacket, pulling him closer. I wanted the friction. I wanted to know if he felt as unstable as he looked right now. I pressed myself against him, feeling the hard line of his thighs and the sudden, sharp intake of his breath when my chest crushed against his.

"You're far too disruptive," he murmured against my lips.

"That's why you like me."

He didn't argue. He kissed me, but it wasn't a gentle start. It was a collision, a desperate attempt to resolve the tension that had been building between us for days. He tasted of mint and something dark, and he kissed me with a precision that felt like he was trying to map every inch of my mouth.

I groaned softly, my hands sliding up from his jacket to grip his shoulders, pulling him into me. The world narrowed down to the smell of old paper and the heat of his skin. I wanted more. I wanted to tear through the layers of wool and cotton that separated us. My hand wandered down, grazing the flat of his stomach, feeling the muscles there tighten under my touch.

He let out a low sound, something between a sigh and a growl, and pressed me harder against the shelves. The iron groaned behind me. He shifted his weight, his knee sliding between mine, pressing firmly into the heat of my center. I gasped, the sensation sending a jolt of electricity straight to my core.

I tilted my head back, exposing my throat, and he took the invitation. He moved his lips from my mouth to the sensitive skin just below my ear, his teeth grazing me in a way that made my toes curl in my boots. I felt a sudden, pulsing ache between my thighs, a desperate need for him to stop being so controlled.

"Lucian," I breathed, my voice shaking.

He stopped. He didn't pull away, but the kiss ended. He stayed there, his face buried in the curve of my neck, his breathing heavy and ragged. I could feel him trembling slightly, a vibration that told me he was fighting himself just as hard as I was.

"We shouldn't," he whispered, though he didn't move an inch. "Not here."

"Then take me somewhere else," I challenged, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

He pulled back just enough to look me in the eye. The hunger was still there, raw and undisguised, but the mask of the Court member was sliding back into place. He looked at me as if I were a puzzle he couldn't quite solve, an equation that kept changing its variables.

"Not yet," he said. The words felt like a sentence. "The timing has to be right."

"You're always worrying about the timing," I said, my voice still thick with desire. "Life happens in the gaps, Lucian."

He let out a short, dry laugh and finally stepped back, breaking the circuit. The sudden absence of his heat felt like a physical blow. He released my neck, his hand lingering for a second too long before he dropped it to his side.

"Move," I said, trying to regain my composure, though my breath was still coming in short, shallow bursts. "Or I'll make you move."

He gave me the look of someone who has been threatened by things considerably larger and better-equipped than a scholarship student with picked lock access and a copy key, and has found it, on balance, unimpressive.

"Try," he said.

I brought my knee up, not to connect, just intention, just enough shift in weight, and when he adjusted I used the redistribution of momentum to duck under his arm and put three feet of aisle between us.

I turned around. He was still standing where I'd been, both hands still on the shelves, looking at the empty space I'd occupied with an expression I'd never seen on him.

Surprise. Small and genuine and unperformed.

"Good," he said, after a moment. Quieter. "That was good."

I did not say *I know*. I said: "Now tell me what's in the ledgers."

He turned around. Took the ledger from the shelf behind him and looked at it without opening it. "Names," he said. "Dates." He set it down on the reading table between us. "The column you've been trying to translate."

"Which says?"

"Which you have another hour of Latin before you read correctly." His hand rested flat on the cover. "And which I'm not going to help you with."

"Because you can't,"

"Because I *won't*."

There it was. *Can't* was locked doors and blood oaths, whatever arcane architecture the Court ran on. *Won't* was a choice. Which meant he was protecting something. Which meant he had a reason to protect it. Which meant he was in this deep enough to have reasons.

"She was here," I said. "Cora. She came to these stacks."

Something shifted in his face. Very small. The same adjustment around the eyes.

"Most pledges do," he said. "It's part of the process."

"She wasn't browsing." I watched his hands. The one on the ledger. The slight tension across his knuckles. "She was looking for something specific. The same thing I'm

looking for."

"You don't know what you're looking for."

"I know more than I knew yesterday." I crossed my arms.

"And more tomorrow than today. That's how it works when you have time."

"You have less time than you think."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a fact." He lifted his hand from the ledger. Stepped back, putting more space between us, and I noticed that he did it deliberately, measuring the distance, resetting the variables. Like he needed the room to think. "There are people in the Court who have already begun asking questions about you."

"They should. I'm interesting."

"They're not asking with interest." His voice had gone flat. "They're asking with intent."

That landed differently than anything he'd said before. Not because I was afraid, I was afraid, I'd been running on the fuel of it for three years, but because it sounded, for the first time, like it was coming from the same side of the table as me.

"Which people?" I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. Deciding something internal.

"That," he said finally, "is the wrong question."

"What's the right one?"

"How fast can you move when you need to?"

I thought about it. "Faster than you'd expect."

Something moved behind his eyes. Not the sharp surprise of a minute ago. Something older and heavier that had been sitting there for a long time.

"I know," he said quietly. "I've been watching."

He said it like anything true, plainly, without apology. *I've been watching.*

I let that sit.

"You watched her too," I said. "Didn't you."

He said nothing.

"Cora." I held his gaze. Not a question. "You watched my sister."

The candle to my left guttered. The library made the sound old libraries make at three in the morning, a settling, a slow exhale, like the building itself was putting

down weight. Somewhere above us, on the second floor, the iron shelving creaked.

"Everyone here watched everyone," he said, finally. "That's what the Court is."

"That's not what I asked."

The silence stretched. He was very still, and I had begun to understand that his stillness was its own language, that the quality of it changed, that this particular version was the one where something was being held back by an act of will.

"She asked the same questions you're asking," he said.

"How did that go for her."

I said it without heat. Without anything in my voice at all, because the heat was the thing I couldn't afford to show, not here, not with him reading my face.

His jaw set. Then he said it.

"*Cora.*"

He said her name the way a scalpel moves. Precise and deliberate and designed to find the exact place that opens. He said it and he watched my face and I felt the current hit me in the sternum, her laugh first, always her laugh,

then the morning the call didn't come, the brass box with her things, the way the matron's voice had sounded on the phone, and I held.

I pressed my feet into the stone floor.

I held everything inside where it belonged.

Nothing on my face. Nothing in my hands. Three seconds of silence that cost me things I wasn't going to count right now.

"And?" I said.

His eyes moved over my face. Reading it. Finding, I hoped, nothing readable.

"You didn't flinch," he said.

"No."

"She would have. By now." He was still watching me. Not with coldness. With something more complicated than that, something that had weight to it, some interior accounting I wasn't being shown the ledger for. "She flinched the first time someone said her name like a trap."

"Then I'm not her." I kept my voice even. "Is that what you were testing for?"

He didn't answer. Which was its own answer.

"You knew," I said. "When I arrived. You already knew exactly who I was."

"Yes."

"Before you came to my room."

"Yes."

"And you still told me I was in the wrong place." I looked at him. "Was that a warning or a test?"

Another long pause. Something complicated behind his eyes.

"Both," he said. "It was always both."

He picked up the ledger and carried it back to its shelf and slid it into place without looking at me. When he turned around, the composure was fully reinstated, seams sealed, architecture restored. Whatever I'd seen cracking through it was gone.

"Leave the stacks," he said. "Now. Don't come back without me."

"I thought you couldn't escort unauthorized pledges. Membership requirements."

"I have a dispensation." He moved toward the door. "Get some sleep, Calloway."

"What about the column? The Latin one?"

He paused at the door. Didn't turn around. The candlelight caught the line of his shoulder, the rigid set of it.

"It says *Reaped*," he said. "Go to sleep."

The door swung shut.

I stood in the candlelight and breathed, one breath, just the one, and then I went to the shelf and took the ledger back out.

Reaped. A column of names with dates going back two hundred years. One entry per year, occasionally two. Names I recognized from portraits in the main hall; names I didn't recognize at all. The column that had stopped in 1994 and resumed in 1997, that three year gap that had snagged at me from the first pass.

I found the year Cora died.

There was no name. Just a date, and beside it a smear where an entry had been removed, carefully, by someone who knew what they were doing, and below it a note in handwriting I hadn't seen before.

Insufficient. Flagged for review.

She'd been meant to be in this column. And she'd found something first. Found something and been removed from the list, and then she'd died anyway, and they'd called it a jump.

I put the ledger back and stood in the dark.

He'd said her name like a trap to watch me flinch. He'd done the same thing to her, I could feel the shape of it now, that particular weapon, and she'd flinched, and she'd kept looking anyway, and she'd died. And he'd been watching the whole time. Watching her the way he was watching me, measuring something, weighing it against something else.

I didn't know yet what I was being weighed against.

I didn't know yet which side of the scale he was on.

What I knew was this: *Reaped* was a column with a pattern, and Cora's name had been pulled from it, and someone had done the pulling carefully enough to leave only a smear.

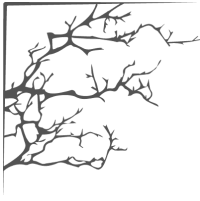
That wasn't a suicide. That was a cover up with a filing system.

I walked out of the stacks into the cold corridor and let the door close behind me. The stone was wet with something that wasn't quite condensation. The torches in the hall threw shadows that moved the wrong direction.

I hadn't flinched.

I didn't know yet if that made me safer than she'd been, or simply a different kind of target.

I was starting to think it might be both.



Chapter 6: The Debt

There is a version of the story I have told myself so many times it has worn smooth, like stone under water, like a name repeated until it stops meaning anything.

I was not there. The tower was empty when they found her. The Court's conclusion was unanimous: a girl too fragile for Blackthorn, too full of questions for her own peace, who walked up four flights of stairs and decided the answer was down. I signed the attestation. I affixed my seal.

I have done a great many things I will not recover from.
That was one of them.

I had not thought about Cora Calloway in eleven months.

And then her sister said, *Tell me about Cora*, in a voice like a blade laid flat (not threatening, not yet, just making sure I registered the weight of it) and something inside me that I keep packed in ice cracked straight down to the center.

I sat in my office for two hours after I left the stacks.

The candle burned down to a stub. The decanter of brandy remained untouched, which was the most honest measurement of how badly I was managing; I have never been able to drink when the guilt gets large enough to crowd the room. There is not enough alcohol in Blackthorn's cellars for what I did to Cora Calloway, and I have always known it, and I have always known that abstinence is not penance, merely punctuation. A brief pause before I continued being exactly what I am.

The papers on my desk were about Wren. Her records: the ones I had already reviewed twice that week, a frequency I had not examined too closely. Transfer from Saint Anselm's, comparative literature, scholarship, clean enough that it almost looked fabricated. Almost. I had run it past the archivist, who confirmed the grades were genuine. The story held.

The story held, and Cora Calloway's sister was inside my walls, picking locks she had no right to know existed, and she had looked at me tonight with her chin up and her eyes sharp and her grief right there at the surface, unashamed, unhidden, and she had said *tell me about Cora* the way you say a name you are not willing to let be buried.

I closed her file and set it face-down on the desk.

Then I opened it again.

* * *



THE FRAGMENT COMES when I am not expecting it, which is the nature of things we cannot finish burying.

It comes like this: the smell of rain on stone, which is the smell of Blackthorn in October, which was the smell of the night I stood in the corridor outside the Court's lower library and heard Cora Calloway ask a question she should not have asked. This is the part I have tried to

revise. In the version I prefer, I was elsewhere: at the refectory, in my rooms, anywhere but that corridor. But memory is not a document. You cannot redact it with a good enough seal.

I was there.

She had gotten into the restricted archive. I still do not know how; the lock was a Court lock, which means someone helped her or someone failed to stop her, and both possibilities have a name I have not been willing to say aloud. She was standing at the catalog desk with a folder open and her hair falling forward over one shoulder and her whole body radiating the particular stillness of someone who has found the thing they came for. She had not heard me.

The folder was the Reaping records. 1987 through the prior year, bound in black linen, annotated in my father's hand.

The rule is simple, clean, and absolute: initiates do not look at the Reaping records. It is written into the pledging vow. It is written into the blood. The Court does not pursue those who look and run; it pursues those who look and *know*, who leave the archive carrying something the founders never meant to survive outside those walls.

I should have stopped her.

This is the part the fragment goes unreliable on me: the part where I tell myself I was already moving, already opening my mouth, already preparing the words that would have sent her out of that room with a reprimand and a redacted memory of whatever she had seen. I tell myself the fragment goes dark because the choice happened too fast, because I heard footsteps behind me in the corridor and turned to find Sebastian, who had also apparently come to check the archive, who had also apparently been in that corridor with no satisfactory explanation, and in the second I turned back...

She was gone.

The folder was closed. The archive was empty. The door at the far end of the corridor, the one that leads to the east passage, was still moving on its hinges.

I told Sebastian she had been reading late and startled herself. I told him it was nothing. He smiled the way Sebastian always smiles, which is to say without reaching his eyes, and said of course and turned away first, and I stood there in the cold library with my heart doing something irregular in my chest and thought: *she has time. I will handle it.*

She did not have time.

I know this. I have always known this. I was so certain I could thread it: keep the Court from noticing, move her out of the archive's shadow, find some reason to classify her exit from Blackthorn as voluntary before the Reaping season opened. I had done it before. I had maneuvered a pledge out twice in my tenure, gently, at cost to myself but never to them. I had the leverage. I had the plan.

I had sixteen hours.

The fragment ends there. Not with the tower (I was not there for that, I have told myself this, I continue to tell myself this) but with the archive door still swinging on its hinges and me standing in the cold, certain I had time.

Certainty is its own kind of violence. I understand that now. What I did to Cora Calloway was not the thing Sebastian did, was not the thing the Court authorized, was not the tower or the fall or the night that took eleven months to stop dreaming about. What I did was wait.

I will not wait again.

* * *



THE RATIONAL ARGUMENT for keeping Wren Calloway under close supervision constructed itself without much assistance from me, and I was grateful for its tidiness, because it kept me from having to examine the other reasons.

She had already picked a Court lock. She had already been inside the Thorne archive stacks, which was not a privilege extended to pledges. She had already demonstrated a facility for appearing in places she should not be and behaving as though she had every right to them, which was precisely the trait that had gotten her sister killed and would get Wren killed too if I did not manage it.

That was the rational argument. It ran four more pages in my head, each objection answered in order, each risk catalogued and assessed. I am very good at this. I have been constructing legal defenses for things I wanted since I was nine years old.

The defense did not mention the way she had looked at me in the stacks: not afraid, not backing down, matching me stride for stride in a conversation designed to unsettle her. It did not mention that when I said her sister's name and watched her face, what I felt was not the satisfaction of a trap sprung but something low and sick, like a stone dropped into still water.

I requisitioned the paperwork from the pledge registry at half past midnight.

The Court allows senior members to designate personal pledge assignments for purposes of mentorship, extended observation, or specific project needs. The language is formal and clean; it does not specify what kind of observation, or what the projects may be. It is used, primarily, for exactly the kind of surveillance I was now claiming. The Court would approve it without comment. Crane might raise an eyebrow. Sebastian...

Sebastian would say nothing to my face, which meant I would need to watch my back.

I completed the form in my own handwriting rather than dictating it. Name of pledge: Calloway, W. Reason for assignment: *pledge demonstrates exceptional aptitude and warrants accelerated mentorship track*. Duration: remainder of pledge season, unless extended by mutual consent.

I held the pen over the last line for rather longer than was warranted.

Mutual consent is a formality. Pledges do not refuse personal assignments; the vow forbids it, and the Court has mechanisms for those who try. But I had written it, and I left it written, because I am aware that I have already done enough to people who had no means of refusing me, and there are lines I am drawing now, late, imperfectly, in the dark, that I should have drawn years ago.

I signed it. I sealed it. I left it on my desk to deliver in the morning.

Then I sat in the dark for a while longer and thought about Cora, and whether she would recognize the shape of what I was doing as protection or as exactly what it looked like: a man taking possession of the only leverage point that could destroy him, dressing it up in the language of strategy, telling himself it was better this way.

She would have, I think. Cora Calloway was sharp enough to see straight through me. It was why she frightened the Court.

It is why her sister frightens me.

* * *



I FOUND WREN IN THE east courtyard at eight in the morning, which was where the pledges took their breakfast in the first week of term, a vestige of some older hazing practice that had survived into its current form as merely uncomfortable rather than genuinely dangerous, though the distinction was narrower than it should be. The October air had teeth. She was sitting apart from the others, a mug cradled in both hands, and she was watching the gargoyles along the roofline with the expression of someone who had been watching them for a while and had developed theories.

She heard me before I spoke. I know because her shoulders dropped one precise degree: not a flinch, not tension, but the small adjustment of someone who has decided how they intend to be looked at and is composing themselves into it. I found I could track this now. I was not sure when I had started tracking it.

"Thorne," she said, without turning. "Early for a visit."

"It is not a visit." I stopped at the appropriate distance, which was close enough to be heard but far enough to give her room. I had thought about the distance on the way across the quad. That, too, was something I was not examining. "I have paperwork for you to review."

She turned then. She was wearing the pledge gray, which suited no one; on her it managed to look like a choice, which I suspected was not an accident. Her eyes moved to the folder in my hand. "Should I be worried?"

"That depends on your definition."

She waited. She was good at waiting: not patient exactly, but strategic, holding her silence the way you hold a card. It reminded me of the archive record I had reviewed, and then of her sister, and then of the corridor, and I put all of that behind me with some effort.

"The personal mentorship track," I said. "You've been assigned to it."

"I don't remember volunteering."

"Pledges don't volunteer. They're selected." I held out the folder. "The terms are outlined. Standard commitment: regular check-ins, access to restricted resources appropriate to your level, attendance at specific Court events in my company. It runs through the end of the season unless either party petitions for review."

She did not take the folder immediately. She looked at me over it for a moment, and I made myself hold the look without managing it too carefully, without packing too much ice into my expression, because she was already watching for the tells and I did not want to give her the satisfaction of finding one too early.

"*Either party* can petition?" she said.

"Yes."

"That sounds almost like a choice."

"It is a choice," I said, "within the architecture that exists. I can't dismantle the architecture. I can only tell you that within it, your preferences have weight with me." A pause. "More weight than is customary."

Something moved behind her eyes. She took the folder.

She flipped through it quickly: skimming, but actually reading, not performing the skim. I watched her find the mutual consent clause. I watched her read it twice.

"Why me," she said. It was not quite a question.

"Because you picked a lock last night that I needed you not to pick." Because the archive door is still swinging on its hinges in my memory and I have not slept cleanly in eleven months. Because your sister's face looked nothing like yours and still I see it every time you lift your chin at

me like you're daring me to blink first. "And because you're going to make trouble regardless, and I would prefer to be in a position to see it coming."

She looked up at me. "That's very honest."

"I have my moments."

"You said Cora's name last night," Wren said. "On purpose. To see what I'd do." Her voice was even. No accusation in it, which was more unsettling than anger would have been. "I'd like to know why you have it."

The vow flexed against me: not painful, not yet, just present, like a hand laid flat against the inside of my sternum. A reminder. There were things I could not say, not because I lacked the will but because the will was irrelevant; the vow was older than my choices, and it was built to survive exactly this kind of conversation.

"Because everyone in this building has it," I said, which was true and was not the answer she was looking for. "Your sister was a pledge here. Her name is in the records."

She held my gaze for three full seconds. I counted, because counting is the kind of thing I do when I am trying not to feel something in a way that shows.

"All right," she said.

"All right?"

"I'm accepting the assignment." She closed the folder.

"On one condition."

I waited.

"You don't say her name again," Wren said, "unless you're going to tell me something true about her."

The vow pressed. I breathed through it.

"Agreed," I said.

It was not a promise I was certain I could keep: not because I intended to lie to her, but because the truths I had about Cora Calloway were the kind that cost something to carry, and I had already been paying interest for eleven months, and I was not sure what it would do to either of us when the principal came due.

But I said it. And she nodded once, sharp and decided, and tucked the folder under her arm like a deed to something.

The forced proximity began at nine o'clock, when I had my assistant clear the room adjacent to my office and had Wren's belongings moved there from Wexford Hall. It took twenty minutes. She stood in the doorway of her new rooms (bigger, quieter, with a window that looked

out over the locked garden and not over the building no brochure photographed) and she did not thank me, which I had not expected.

She looked out the window for a long moment.

Then she looked at me over her shoulder with those dark serious eyes, and she said: "You're watching me."

"Yes," I said.

"So am I," she said, and turned back to the window.

I left her there. I walked back to my office and sat at my desk and stared at the space where Cora's file had been until I was certain my hands were steady. Then I reopened the Reaping records (not the originals, which lived in the restricted archive, but my personal copies, the ones that were mine to touch) and I turned to the page with the current year's slate.

Eleven names. The pencil line through three of them that meant *handled*. Eight remaining.

I ran my finger down the list the way I have done every October for four years, reading the names like a liturgy, taking the weight of each one. This is what I was given. This is the cage. This is what the Thorne name means, and I was told at nine years old that it was not a gift, and I have been paying the debt ever since.

Her name was not on the list. Not yet.

I closed the records. I went to work.

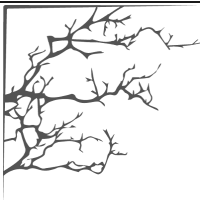
Outside my window, on the other side of a shared wall, I could hear her moving: the soft systematic sounds of a person not unpacking, but *searching*, cataloguing, memorizing the dimensions of the space she'd been given. Learning the room the way you learn a battlefield.

I let her.

If she was going to come for the truth, I would rather she came for it where I could see her. That was what I told myself, sitting at that desk in the gray October morning, and if I sat with it long enough and refused to look at it sideways, it was almost convincing.

The thing about a debt that old is that you stop being surprised when it starts collecting.

I turned to the first paper in my stack and picked up my pen and began to write, and somewhere in the next room, Cora Calloway's sister began quietly, methodically, to take my life apart.



Chapter 7: Cora's Desk

The thing about being Lucian Thorne's personal pledge was that it was supposed to feel like a punishment.

It did. I just happened to be good at punishments.

The reassignment came before dawn, slid under my door while I was lying in yesterday's clothes watching the crack of hall light on the ceiling. Official Court letterhead. Dense small type, the kind reserved for things that needed to sound like law. *The pledge designated Wren Calloway is hereby requisitioned for personal attendance to Lucian J. Thorne, Court Arbiter, effective immediately. Report to the east wing of Thorne Hall at nine a.m. Bring nothing. Speak when addressed.*

I read it three times. Then I folded it into quarters and pressed it under my mattress next to Cora's journal, because that was what you did with evidence.

The east wing turned out to be the library.

I understood immediately that this was not good for Lucian. He'd meant it as a cage, and he'd filled it with books.

Three stories of shelves packed spine to spine to spine. A gallery with iron railing running the second and third levels. A rolling ladder on brass tracks that went the full circuit of the room, the kind of detail that says someone loved this space enough to be clever about it. The light came from windows that were too high and too small, fighting the October fog and losing, supplemented by standing lamps that lit a radius of about three feet and nothing else. The room smelled like old paper and cold stone and the particular leather-and-smoke smell I'd been cataloguing for weeks as *specifically Thorne*. Like someone had burned down something important once and kept the smell as a reminder.

Lucian was at the main desk, at the far end. Back to me. Pen already moving.

"You're late," he said.

"Two minutes. The fog ate the quad."

"Fog is not a reason."

"Neither is this meeting, but here we both are."

A pause: I was learning his pauses, the weather of them. This one was three beats, the kind where he was deciding whether to engage or let the comment die. He let it die, which I was starting to think meant he didn't want me to see what his face did when he actually found something funny.

"Sit."

A second desk had been placed to his left. Small, precise, humiliating in its smallness. A stack of books that were not for me: Latin on top, then Greek, then something leather-bound with a brass clip that looked like it would bite. A lamp. A chair. A clear message about hierarchy.

I sat. I folded my hands. I looked like someone who planned to be useful.

I began to map the room.

* * *



HE WORKED IN SILENCE for the better part of an hour. I pretended to.

The Latin was too hard and the Greek was worse and the clipped leather volume I wasn't touching, but I kept my eyes moving over the pages while my actual attention tracked geometry. One door in, at the front, where we'd entered. One door out, set into the shelving at the rear corner, unlatched by a centimeter, enough of a gap to mean it led somewhere real and not a broom closet. Three windows, all high and useless for anything but light. The desk I occupied: wide, old, Georgian-ish, ring marks from centuries of careless cups, the grain of the wood worn through on the left where every person who'd sat here had rested their arm. The main desk, where Lucian sat: bigger, darker, fixed to the floor or as good as. The kind of piece that predated the concept of moving furniture.

Forty minutes in, he said, "You're not reading."

"I am."

"You've turned one page."

"It's a difficult page." I looked up. He was still writing, still not looking at me. His pen moved without hesitation, which seemed inhuman. "How long have you been doing this?" I asked.

"Writing?"

"Working without stopping. The pen hasn't paused."

"I'm not doing you the favor of seeming ordinary," he said. "Don't mistake efficiency for performance."

I looked back at my Latin. He looked at nothing I could see.

"What do you want to know about the room?" he said, a minute later.

I kept my eyes on the page. "What makes you think I want to know anything."

"You've been counting exits since you walked in."

Not a question. I considered denying it and decided that was worse: caught out in a lie was more exposed than caught out in a habit. "Old anxiety," I said. "New spaces. I count things."

"What things."

"Exits. Breakable objects. People who could stop me if I needed to move fast."

He set the pen down. Turned.

In the lamp light his face was all planes. That sharpness he carried everywhere: it read as cold until you noticed how fast his eyes moved, how little they missed. He was

watching me the way I'd been watching the room. We were both maps pretending to be people.

"There are two exits," he said. "One looks from the inside. One does not." He picked the pen back up. "The locked one is mine."

He'd just told me which door was interesting. Careless or deliberate, and I didn't believe in his carelessness. I filed it away and went back to pretending to be a scholar.

* * *



CRANE APPEARED AT HALF past eleven with a tray.

He was the only Court member I hadn't started plotting against, which said something about both of us. He wasn't handsome the way Sebastian was: Sebastian was all deliberate jaw and arranged charm, the kind of face designed to convince you the mouth behind it was trustworthy. Crane was just genuinely kind-looking. The

warmth lived around his eyes, actual and irritating, the warmth of someone who hadn't learned yet to keep it in a drawer.

He set the tray on my desk without asking. Tea, and a plate with two pieces of shortbread on it. I looked at him. I looked at the shortbread.

"You heard about the reassignment," I said.

"News travels in this building." He sat in the spare chair across from me and picked up the other piece of shortbread and ate it without apparent self-consciousness. "I thought you could use something that wasn't the dining hall."

From the main desk, Lucian said nothing. I felt his attention reorganize: that particular stillness of a person choosing to monitor something he was pretending not to care about.

"How are you settling in?" Crane asked.

"To which part."

"Either. Thorne Hall is disorienting at first." He glanced at the shelves, the heights of the room, the poor light. "All these rooms. They don't label anything."

"I've noticed."

"It's intentional. The founders believed orientation was a privilege." He said it without irony and without apparent endorsement, which was an interesting line to walk. "The collection's older than the school. They built the building around the books."

I looked at the shelves like I was being polite. I was counting sections. History, law, theology, something that looked like botanical records. Whatever the Reaping was, it would be in this room if it was written down anywhere.

"The desks are original?" I asked. Casual-interested, the voice I used when I needed someone to keep talking.

"The main one." He nodded toward Lucian's. "Hector Thorne's. From the founding Court." A pause. "The one you're sitting at came later. Eighteen-fifties, I think."

He said it without weight. And then, maybe because he was looking at my face and seeing something in it I'd failed to lock down:

"Your sister sat there."

The shortbread in my hand turned to chalk.

I kept my face very still. Crane was watching me with that direct look: the genuine kind that's hardest to read because it looks exactly the same whether it's being used as a weapon or offered as a gift.

"Did she," I said.

"She spent several afternoons here. Research, she said."
He was careful now: I could hear him choosing. "She was bright. Asked good questions." A beat longer than the others. "I liked her."

"Most people did," I said. My voice came out level. I was proud of it.

"Not enough of them," Crane said, quietly. And then he was standing, picking up his tea, and there was nothing in his voice to read, just loss, or the excellent performance of it. "I'll have the Harwick papers to you by three," he said to Lucian, and left.

The door closed.

I sat with the shortbread going stale in my hand and looked at the desk.

Cora had sat here. In this chair, at this desk, under these same bad lamps. She'd been doing what I was doing: looking, cataloguing, pretending to belong. She'd been so close to whatever she'd found that someone had decided it was time to stop her.

The anger came slow and clean, the way it always did when I let it. Not hot. Just sharp. Like a lens focusing.

I put the shortbread down.

Okay, I thought. So. Where did you look?

* * *



LUCIAN LEFT AT NOON without announcement. Stood, closed his book, put on his coat, and said, "Don't touch anything," which I was learning to translate as *I'll be back in approximately an hour.*

I waited ninety seconds after the door closed. Long enough to be sure. Not long enough to waste.

Then I got on the floor.

It was an old habit. Cora had taught it to me the same summer she taught me to pick a padlock and read a person's face and leave a room without anyone remembering you'd been there. *People own the vertical,* she'd said. *Nobody thinks about below. Down is where you leave the things you need to be sure of.*

She'd carved her initials under the dining room table at home. Inside the threshold of her closet. Under the wooden frame of the mirror we'd shared. I'd thought it was her being sentimental: leaving her mark the way you leave a hand on a wall as you walk. A signature on the inside of things. *Cora was here.*

It had never occurred to me that it was also a system.

The underside of the desk was rough, unfinished, dark from age. I moved a hand along the center brace first, left to right, slowly. Nothing. The left strut. Nothing. The right strut...

There.

Two letters. Small and deliberate, each stroke cut with patience rather than urgency. Not the frantic scratching of someone killing time: these were pressed in with care, with intention. The intention of someone who wanted them to last.

C.C.

I held my hand over them and did not move.

She'd been here. She'd sat at this desk in this room with its bad light and its locked door and its smell of smoke and old paper, and she'd run her hand along the underside the same way I had, and she'd thought *I want to leave something*, not for drama, not for sentiment, but because

she'd known. At some level she'd already known, and she'd left herself a marker the same way she always had. *Cora was here. Cora knew something. Cora was afraid.*

I pressed harder against the letters as if I could feel her fingerprints under mine.

Call you tomorrow, she'd texted. The last message she ever sent me. I'd been at work when it came through and I'd thought *I'll call her after my shift* and then I'd gotten home and started making dinner and it had slipped, the way things slipped, because nothing terrible had ever happened before and so I'd had no reason to understand that *I'll call her tomorrow* was a thing that didn't always exist.

The grief was a door I'd learned to keep shut. I leaned against it now and let the weight of it press into me and then I breathed out and felt it solidify into something harder. Usable. Cora had been here. Cora had been looking. And I was going to find what she'd found before whoever had stopped her had the chance to stop me too.

I got up off the floor. Sat back down in her chair. Put my hands flat on the desk and thought.

She'd hidden things. She always had. Not just initials: actual things, the way she hid the diary and the letters and the birthday money she was saving. She would have

left something here if she'd found it here, because that was how she thought: keep the evidence close, keep it somewhere you could get back to it.

I stood up and went to the shelves.

* * *



I WASN'T LOOKING FOR the page when I found it.

I was doing a careful circuit at waist height: not pulling volumes, that was too visible, but dragging a fingertip along the spines, feeling for anything tilted or recently replaced. Gaps. Wrongness. The particular disorder of a shelf that someone had handled and restored in a hurry.

It was the Seneca. *Letters from a Stoic*, brown spine, Roman numerals on the date. Tilted half a centimeter left of perpendicular: not enough to notice glancing, enough to notice touching. I looked at it for a count of three.

Then I pulled it.

The page was behind it. Flat against the back of the shelf, wedged into the gap between the last book and the wood, pressed as thin as possible in the way you press something when you need it invisible and can't quite make yourself destroy it. Or when you run out of time.

The top half was gone.

Burned. The upper edge was still curved, brown and brittle, the ghost of fire. What remained was the bottom half, the half the flame hadn't reached, or the half someone had stopped before it did. The handwriting was rushed and small, pressed hard into the paper. Every letter leaning forward like it was trying to get somewhere.

I knew the handwriting.

I had twenty-two years of it. Birthday cards and grocery lists and the notes she used to leave on the mirror in dry-erase marker when we lived together that first year she was in school and I'd come to visit. I'd saved some of them. I still had one, folded small in my wallet. *Soup in fridge, don't be a martyr*, it said. *Love, C.*

I held the half-page under the nearest lamp and read what was left:

...the rite isn't what they say it is. What they call elevation is the opposite. I've read the ledger. I've read it and I know now what Reaping means and I need to get this out

of the building before...

A tear. Clean horizontal, not a burn. Across the middle of the page like someone had pulled it before she could write more, or like she'd ripped it herself to buy time.

...he doesn't know I know. He still thinks I'm just...

Gone.

And at the bottom, three lines that had survived because they were furthest from the fire, and the fire had been going upward:

If anything happens to me before I get this to W: the desk. She'll know what to look for under the desk. She always knows.

It was never a choice. It was always a...

Black edge. White nothing. The last word was ash.

I stood in the middle of Lucian Thorne's library with my sister's half-burned letter in my hand and the room was very quiet and the fog pressed against the high windows and somewhere deep in the building a clock measured out another second and then another.

She'd meant me. W. She'd hidden evidence and left me a map and she'd been right: I'd found the initials, I'd looked under the desk, I'd known what to look for the way she'd

always trusted I would, because she'd known me the same way I'd known her, down to the marrow, down to the habits we'd made into each other.

She'd planned for me at the end. She'd thought of me.

I folded the half-page into quarters. Small, precise, the way she'd taught me: three folds, tight creases, no bulk. I slid it inside the waistband of my skirt, under my sweater, flat against my skin. A thing I'd swallowed. A thing that was part of me now.

When Lucian came back twenty minutes later, I was sitting at the desk with the Latin open and my hands folded and my face performing a careful imitation of someone enduring a very boring afternoon. He stood in the doorway for a moment and looked at me. I looked back.

Something moved in his expression. Almost a question.

"Any questions?" he said.

I couldn't tell if it was about the Latin.

"None," I said.

He sat down. Picked up his pen. The room settled back into its silence.

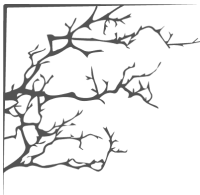
I sat with the page warming against my skin and let myself think the thought I'd been refusing all day: *She knew*. Cora had seen the ledger. She'd understood what the Reaping was, what it meant when they called something an elevation. She'd been trying to get the evidence out and someone had stopped her. *He*, she'd written *he*. One person. Someone who thought she was still blind.

She hadn't been blind. She'd been betrayed.

I kept my breathing even. I kept my hands still. I turned another useless page of Latin and did not look at the hidden door that Lucian had told me about like a dare, and I did not look at him, and I thought: *He doesn't know I have it*.

And then: *I have a sister to bury properly. I have a name to find*.

And then, because the third thought was always the dangerous one at Blackthorn: *And whatever she started, I'm the one who's going to finish it*.



Chapter 8: The Lesson

The lesson was not designed to kill her. That was the distinction the Court drew between tradition and liability, and I had spent enough years administering both to know the boundary between them was thinner than either side preferred to acknowledge.

Sebastian had designed tonight's exercise. He had not explained his reasoning. Those two facts, taken together, were the only warning I was going to get.

The pledges assembled in the undercroft at half past ten in their gray initiate's shifts, seventeen of them, reduced to rough equivalence by the simple mechanism of identical clothing. The Court called it humility. The founding charter called it the *erasure of false distinction*. What it was, in practice, was a way of making people difficult to tell apart in the dark. I had worn the same shift at fifteen and understood this only in retrospect, which was the Court's preferred method of instruction: experience first, meaning after, cost always last.

Wren came last.

She always came last, not from tardiness but from the same calculation that put her nearest the door in every room she entered. Last in, first to exit. I had catalogued this tendency across ten days of enforced proximity, alongside her habit of quartering unfamiliar spaces left to right and ceiling to floor, and the precise expression she wore when she was pretending not to remember something she very clearly remembered. I had a detailed mental inventory of Wren Calloway's operational habits. I had told myself, repeatedly, that this was tactical. I was becoming less convincing to myself about it.

She found her assigned place in the circle without looking at me. She looked at Sebastian instead.

That was the right instinct.

"Tonight's lesson," Sebastian said, and his voice in the vaulted undercroft carried the ease of a man who had never once been required to be uncomfortable, "is about nerve."

* * *



FORTY-SEVEN STEPS TO the top of Aldenmere Tower.

I had counted them at twelve years old, the first night my father brought me up in the dark to show me what the Court expected of the name I carried, and the number had not changed in the intervening years. The steps were narrow and worn concave in the center, smoothed by centuries of feet that mostly did not remember the men attached to them. After the first landing there was no railing. Only the cold press of stone on either side, the darkness above, and the sound of your own breathing.

The pledges climbed in single file. I positioned myself last, behind Wren, which I told myself was standard supervisory practice.

She climbed steadily, one hand trailing against the stone wall at intervals, not gripping, just touching, the way she touched everything she needed to understand. The gesture was so characteristic it had become a kind of

notation in the inventory I kept of her. I watched the back of her head and did not think about why I was watching it.

The tower chamber at the top was circular and open, the bell long since removed, the four arches facing the cardinal directions with nothing between them and the drop. October fog moved through in slow ropes. The campus below was dark in the Court's particular way: every window extinguished by regulation, every path unlit, the buildings rendered to shapes against a slightly lighter sky. From the north arch, you could see the ornamental pool.

Three stories down. Black water, narrow enough from this height to make you consider what landing in it meant. The Court had commissioned the pool in 1887 for reasons the records called aesthetic. I had always suspected the real reason and had long since stopped finding it interesting to verify.

Sebastian moved to the center of the room with the ease of a man who knew where the good stones were.

I knew where the good stones were. I had been shown.

"The tradition is simple," Sebastian said. "Each of you will approach your assigned arch. You will stand at the edge and look down for sixty seconds. You will not step back. You will not speak. When your time is done, you

will return to center." He let the silence work on them: seventeen pale faces in candlelight, performing various grades of composure. "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the capacity to proceed in its presence. Tonight you will demonstrate the capacity."

He handed me the list.

I read it once. Read it again.

Wren's assigned arch was the north one.

The north arch faced the steepest drop to the pool. Its threshold stone (I knew this because I had signed a maintenance report two years ago and knew the campus's fault lines the way you know the fault lines of anything you are responsible for managing) had a crack along its inner edge. The crack ran from the right corner toward center and produced a slight lip of displaced limestone that was not visible in the dark and would catch an unsuspecting foot in exactly the wrong direction.

Standing on it wasn't dangerous. The stone wasn't going to give way. But someone unfamiliar with the lip would step wrong, and wrong at the north arch meant the fog and the black pool and the thirty-foot drop all became briefly relevant.

I looked at Sebastian.

He was watching the pledges with the expression he wore in Court meetings when he already knew how the vote would go. Patient, comfortable, arranged.

I had a number of options. None of them were sanctioned. All of them would require explaining myself to Sebastian afterward, and Sebastian was extraordinarily talented at the aftermath of explanations.

So I watched the first pledge walk to his assigned arch, and I did not intervene.

* * *



THIRTEEN PLEDGES STOOD at the edge of the world and looked down, and I was aware of Wren for the entire duration the way you are aware of a sound you cannot locate: present at the edge of everything, never where you look directly.

She was third from last. She stood in the candlelight with her arms at her sides and her chin at the insolent angle that meant she was at full attention and not going to show it. I knew this angle. I had catalogued it. She was watching every pledge return from the arch.

She was mapping their footing.

I did not permit myself to feel anything about this. I catalogued the fact of it instead, which was what I had been doing for ten days to manage the particular problem of Wren Calloway: converting feeling into notation, notation into data, data into something I could file. My filing system was becoming unwieldy.

The fourteenth pledge finished. Returned.

Wren walked to the north arch.

She moved without hesitation, which told me she had been watching long enough to decide that hesitation was more dangerous than the arch itself. It was the correct decision. She reached the threshold, and I watched the moment her foot found the crack, not a flinch, but a fractional weight transfer, heel correcting for unexpected topography, balance adjusting.

Good. She'd found it.

She stood at the edge of the north arch and looked down at the pool, and sixty seconds began.

I could see her face in three-quarter profile. She was looking at the drop with the expression I had come to recognize as Wren-not-performing, open and calculating and underneath both of those, something older. Something specific to her and to the specific darkness below.

She was thinking about the bell tower. About her sister. About a text message she had never received the follow-up to.

She was three stories above the place where the Court had decided a girl named Cora Calloway had jumped, and she was standing there doing the arithmetic of it with the particular controlled grief of someone who has been doing that arithmetic for three years.

Sixty seconds. The fog moved. The candles guttered.

Then Sebastian said, from close behind me and quiet enough that only I would hear: "The last pledge always gets the full two minutes. Court tradition. Charter provision."

I looked at him. He met it with pleasant attention.

There was no such charter provision. I knew the charter. I had spent eleven years memorizing the charter, because the charter was the cage, and knowing its exact dimensions was the first step toward understanding which bars were load-bearing. Sebastian had invented

this the way he invented everything, with enough certainty that challenging it would make me look like I'd missed something.

He was watching Wren.

I turned back to the north arch.

Seventy seconds.

The wind that came through the north arch at seventy-three seconds was not the wind that had been moving through the tower for the previous hour. This was the other kind: the sort that arrives between weather systems with no obligation to announce itself. It hit the north arch at an angle that pushed sideways rather than through, which meant it pushed Wren's corrected balance (already compensating for the lip, already fractionally off-center) in the wrong direction.

She dropped six inches before her hands found the arch's edge.

Not a fall. Both hands came out, both hands found stone, her body arrested itself with the competence of someone who has been catching herself for a long time. She had it. She would have had it.

I was already across the room.

Twelve feet in under two seconds. My hand found her left arm; she was already upright by then, already pulling herself back, and there was nothing my presence accomplished except to demonstrate, to everyone in the circular chamber of Aldenmere Tower, that I had moved before I could have known she was falling.

Wren looked at my hand on her arm.

She looked at my face.

I was still looking at the drop.

"I had it," she said.

"I know." My voice came out wrong: lower, stripped of the ice I keep it packed in. I released her arm. I took one step back and then a second. "Your time is up."

She held my gaze for one moment that was too long and then walked back to the center of the room without hurrying. I turned and faced the chamber (seventeen pledges, Sebastian, Crane) and all of them had watched me cover twelve feet in under two seconds.

Crane looked away first. His expression was careful.

Sebastian didn't look away.

* * *



I RAN THE LESSON TO its conclusion with the mechanical accuracy of a man conducting inventory while a fire burns in the next room. The closing Latin. The dismissal. The correct register of authority, neither too warm nor too cold, the voice the Court used for ceremony to indicate you were an instrument rather than a person.

The pledges filed out in their gray shifts. Wren was last, as she had been last in, and I did not watch her go. I noted the direction she walked. I calculated the time it would take to reach Wexford Hall at her pace in this wind. Then I noted I was doing this and stopped doing it, which was itself a kind of accounting.

Crane passed me on the way out and put a hand briefly on my arm. He said, "Good lesson," in a tone that meant something else entirely, and he did not look me in the eye while he said it.

I stood in the emptied chamber and attended to the inventory of my mistakes.

First: positioning myself at the back of the line.

Second: examining the north arch when my attention should have been distributed.

Third: covering twelve feet in the time it takes to recognize a problem rather than the time it takes to assess whether the problem requires my specific intervention.

Fourth (and here the inventory developed the particular texture of a thing that could not be made smaller), the look on my face when she turned around. I had felt it happening. That was the worst of it: I knew what it looked like when I was containing myself, and I had not been containing myself. I had been standing at the north arch with my hand on Wren Calloway's arm and something showing in my expression that I had not shown anyone since I was nineteen years old and had not intended to show again.

The blood vow, which lived in the space behind my breastbone and communicated its preferences in gradations of warmth, registered nothing. It didn't need to. Some failures don't require annotation from the architecture of your obligations.

Sebastian fell into step beside me on the path between the tower and the hall. He didn't speak for long enough that I understood the silence was deliberate.

"Well," he said, finally. "That was instructive."

"Standard lesson. The wind was higher than anticipated."

"Was it." He walked in silence for several steps, hands in his pockets, his breath misting in the cold. "She caught herself, you know. Before you reached her."

"Redundancy is preferable to failure."

"Of course it is." Another pause. "I've been watching you watch her, Lucian. Ten days. I've tried to talk myself out of what I'm observing, because I know you're not a fool and I know you understand the specific consequences of attachment in this institution at this time. So I keep looking for the alternative explanation. I keep coming back to what I saw in that tower."

"I fulfilled my supervisory obligation."

"In two seconds. Across twelve feet." He stopped walking. I stopped because he had. Sebastian in the dark was the same as Sebastian in any room: comfortable, precise, watching from behind the warmth in a way that never quite let you forget the watching was the point. "I've seen you not intervene. I watched you decline to act in the Aldermere initiation when a pledge broke his wrist, because the timing was wrong for the Court and you knew it. I've seen you perform indifference with enough precision to make your father proud. What I saw tonight wasn't indifference."

I said nothing.

He looked at me for a moment in which his expression did something I hadn't seen it do in a long time, which was become almost honest. "I know what it looks like," he said. "When a Thorne decides something belongs to them. I watched your father do it. I know what comes after every time."

"The comparison is not applicable."

"She's a pledge. She's an outsider with a scholarship and no protection in this building and she has been asking the wrong kind of questions since the day she arrived, and she is your personal assignment, which means if she breaks, the break lands on you." He said it without cruelty, which was worse than cruelty. "She's going to get you killed."

The fog had come down enough that the ornamental pool was invisible from here. The campus was all wet stone and darkness and the particular silence of a place that has learned not to be heard.

Sebastian held my gaze.

"Or worse," he said. "Chosen."

He walked away before I could answer. Whether that was mercy or strategy, I had never entirely untangled with him, and tonight I lacked the clarity for the attempt.

I stood alone on the path and let the cold settle into my shoulders and tried to determine whether what I was feeling was fear.

Forty-seven steps down from the tower. Twelve feet across a chamber in the dark.

Above Wexford Hall, an attic window came on: the specific amber of a lamp rather than overhead light, which meant she was at a desk rather than preparing for sleep. I knew which room the window was. I had counted the windows from this path more times than I intended to count.

I turned and walked back to Thorne Hall.

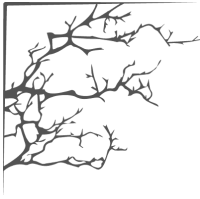
She's going to get you killed, Sebastian had said.

He didn't know the half of it. He didn't know what was in the cup on the other table, or what I'd traded to make certain she'd never touch it. He didn't know about the night I'd stood outside the archive and listened to the Court discuss the Calloway girl as a liability with a natural resolution, and what it had cost me to keep my face empty while they discussed it.

He didn't know that I'd been keeping those costs for ten days, stacking them quietly in the part of myself I was running out of room for, and that tonight in the tower I had run all the way out.

The blood vow said nothing. It was, I had learned, patient about the things that hadn't happened yet.

It was the things that had already happened that it collected with interest.



Chapter 9: The Letter

"L"

The burned page smelled like an apology.

I'd been staring at it for two hours by the time the chapel clock hit midnight, long enough that the smell had become background noise: smoke and water damage and the faint, medicinal ghost of whatever accelerant had been used, years before I ever arrived, to make sure Cora's handwriting didn't survive in full.

Cora had terrible handwriting. She always did. The kind of cramped, left-leaning scrawl that looked like an argument with itself. Our mother used to say she wrote like she thought: too fast, too many things at once, no faith that the paper would hold them all. I used to think it was charming.

Now I pressed the flashlight closer and hated it with my whole heart.

* * *



THE PAGE WAS ROUGHLY five inches by three, what was left of it, anyway. The right edge had burned cleanest, a smooth dark line like someone had been careful about what to destroy. The left was ragged. Most of the top was gone. What remained was a block of Cora's dense, urgent handwriting, shot through with smudge and water damage and the ghost of a line she'd written and crossed out three times.

I had already photographed it four ways to Sunday. I'd spent an hour with my notebook trying to reconstruct the words I could see and the ones I couldn't had become archaeology. Context. Handwriting patterns. Cora's particular habit of forming certain letters.

What I had:

...the Reaping isn't what they tell the pledges. It's not a...

Gone. Fire.

...L has been watching since I asked about the original vow. I thought it was...

Smudge. More fire.

...if they find this, if something happens to me, the R...ing is the k...

The edge. The clean edge where someone had folded and lit and wanted the rest to not exist.

I sat in the cold of my slant-ceilinged room with my back against the radiator and thought about what happens when someone burns a page instead of the whole journal. You burn the page because there's something specific on it. Something that names you.

* * *



I HAD HEARD THE WORD before I understood what it meant.

Three times, actually. Once on my second night, when two senior members had walked past the archive room I wasn't supposed to be in and said it between themselves in the flat, logistical way of people discussing a weather pattern they'd long stopped trying to change. Once from Margot, who'd used it like a footnote: *the Reaping comes every year, you learn to work around it*. And once last night, from Sebastian, talking to someone down the hall while I'd pretended to sleep.

She's going to get you killed, he'd said. *Or worse. Chosen.*

I hadn't understood the *or worse* then.

I did now.

The Reaping wasn't hazing. It wasn't the usual Court cruelty dressed in ceremony and plausible deniability. Cora had known what it was, or come close enough to knowing that they'd needed her to stop. She'd written it down (*the Reaping isn't what they tell the pledges*) and then someone had made sure she didn't finish the sentence.

The body they found at the bottom of the bell tower hadn't been afraid of heights. She'd been afraid of *them*, and she'd been right, and nobody had listened.

I pressed my palm flat against the page. The paper was fragile under my hand, tissue-thin where the fire had come close. I could feel the grooves Cora had pressed into it, her handwriting deep in places the way you write when you're frightened and still insisting on precision, like the pen is the only thing you can control.

Hi, Cor, I thought at it. I found your desk. Took me long enough.

She didn't answer. She never did. But I kept the habit of checking anyway, the way you keep touching a bruise.

It still hurt.

* * *



LET ME WALK YOU THROUGH how I got there. Because I want to be fair to myself, in the accounting of how wrong I was.

Cora used initials for names she didn't want written out in full. I knew this from her high school diaries, the ones I'd read after she died, looking for warning signs I'd missed. She'd done it for crushes, for teachers she complained about, for friends she was fighting with. A code that wasn't really a code. Just privacy dressed as abbreviation.

L has been watching since I asked about the original vow.

L.

I sat with it. Let it rotate.

The Court, as far as I'd mapped it, had four primary figures: Lucian, who ran everything. Sebastian, who ran Lucian. Margot, who ran Margot. And Crane, whose quiet helpfulness I still hadn't decided whether to trust or mark as suspicious.

Crane's first name, I'd learned in my third week, was actually Theodore. Nobody used it.

Sebastian started with S.

Margot started with M.

Which left Lucian. Lucian, who had been at Blackthorn for six years by the time Cora enrolled. Lucian, who had been running the pledge program then, the same way he ran it now. Lucian, who had selected my sister from the new intake the same way he'd selected me: as his personal pledge, his project, his problem to keep close.

I had thought the personal pledge arrangement was new. I was learning that nothing he did was new.

There was something else. The fragment said *since I asked about the original vow*, and I knew the vow. Everyone knew it: the blood oath the founders had written into the Court's architecture, the thing Lucian had been bound to since before he was old enough to understand what his father was making him swear. He was its current keeper. He was the only person at Blackthorn who would have noticed immediately if a pledge had started pulling at its threads.

If Cora had been asking questions about it, who else would have been watching?

I looked at the smudge below the first L reference and made myself be methodical about it. Cora wrote her L's with a distinctive leftward curl at the base, the most legible letter in her entire handwriting system, which said something. I'd confirmed three other L's on the page. They all matched. The one before *has been watching* was identical.

And below the smudge (barely visible, a ghost of ink on scorched paper), I found another one.

L. Th...

The rest was fire. But that much was there. Two letters after the initial. Two of the letters I needed.

Th. As in Thorne.

I sat back on my heels and felt the cold of the stone floor through my socks and thought about the way Lucian had moved through last night's lesson: reading the room the way I read rooms, a step ahead of everyone in it, and then had *moved* when it came to me. Too fast. With too much intention. Sebastian had been watching from the doorway, and I'd seen him clock it, and I'd watched his face do the careful arithmetic of someone filing an observation away for later.

She's going to get you killed. Or worse. Chosen.

Cora had known who the Reaping pointed to. She'd written his name in the only code she had. And then she'd gone up a bell tower and not come back.

I folded the fragment carefully. My hands were very steady.

* * *



GRIEF IS INTERESTING as a survival mechanism. I've spent three years getting to know mine, and here's what I can tell you: it has phases.

Phase one is the knife. That's the first six months, where everything is an edge and the only thing keeping you functional is how sharp you can make yourself. Phase two is the archaeology: digging around the edges of what happened, trying to reconstruct the shape of a thing from its absence. Phase three is when you find something real. When the absence suddenly has a form.

I was in phase three now, and it felt less like clarity than like stepping into a familiar room and finding out the floor was gone.

She had known. Or come close enough to knowing. She'd been right there (one more entry, maybe two) and someone had made sure she didn't write them.

If something happens to me, she'd written. Not *when*. An *if* that had already resolved itself into certainty by the time she was pressing the pen to paper.

Had she been scared? Had she thought about calling me? Had she sat in some cold room like this one, looking at the same evidence from one angle too close, and decided she could handle it alone because she needed to protect me from it?

I pressed my thumbnail into my palm until the sharpness was the only thing I could feel.

You should have called, I told her. *I know why you didn't. But you should have.*

The dark didn't answer. I hadn't expected it to. What I expected was this: I was going to find out what Lucian Thorne had done to my sister. And then I was going to make sure it couldn't happen again, to me, or to anyone else who walked up that drive with a suitcase and a story and the particular kind of foolishness that mistakes truth for safety.

The question was how.

* * *



HERE IS THE THING ABOUT seduction as an intelligence strategy: it requires you to be honest with yourself first. About what you have and what you're willing to use.

I had thought about Lucian Thorne in ways that had nothing to do with my sister. I might as well name that now, in the privacy of my own accounting, since no one was watching. The way he moved. The way he'd looked at me in my doorway that first night, like I was a variable he hadn't finished calculating. The way he'd smelled: beeswax and cold air and something darker underneath. The particular quality of his attention, which I'd spent six weeks trying to decide whether it felt dangerous because I was his target or because I wasn't one yet.

I'd filed all of it under *deal with later*.

Later was now.

The seduction plan had problems. He was careful. He was suspicious. He was also, possibly, responsible for my sister's death, which complicated the appeal. And yet. There was the evidence on the page, and there was the evidence in the room last night, and both of them said: he wants you close, and he's trying very hard to call it strategy.

I knew that feeling.

The difference between what he was doing and what I was about to do was simple: I would know I was doing it. That gave me the edge.

What I needed was to make him believe the wanting was winning. That I was moving toward him because something in me had shifted, not because I was following a thread. He'd see the intent if I handed it to him whole. He needed to believe he was the one deciding to cross whatever line he'd drawn between us: his controlled calculation, his considered choice.

Which meant I needed to give him a real reason.

Not manufactured. He'd hear manufacturing from across a room; I'd watched him read people for six weeks and I knew what he was looking for. The reason needed to be something I'd actually been changed by.

Last night had changed something. His moving that fast (too fast, the kind of speed that meant he hadn't been thinking, hadn't been running the strategic calculus, had just *moved*) had cracked the version of him I'd been carrying. The one made entirely of threat. The crack was real. I didn't have to perform it.

I could work with real.

The plan was simple in its bones: get close, stay close, make him comfortable enough to slip. Not seduce him into telling me directly: people don't confess in those circumstances, they're usually busy with other things. Seduce him into proximity. Into lowered defenses. Into the specific unguardedness that makes people say things they've been keeping because they're tired of keeping them and they think, for a moment, that the person next to them is safe.

And if he didn't slip?

Then I would find another way into whatever he was hiding. But first: the slip.

I thought about Cora again. About whether she'd think this was a terrible idea.

She would. Obviously. She'd say I was making it personal in a way that would compromise my judgment, and she would be right, and I'd already decided I didn't care. Because my judgment had been compromised since

the morning I stood in our kitchen and watched my mother's face do the thing it did when she answered the phone.

The difference between Cora and me was that Cora had always believed there was a version of the truth that didn't cost anything to get to. She'd thought she could just *find* it, the way you find a lost key. Pocket, drawer, shelf, floor, there.

I had learned, three years ago in that kitchen, that truth was more like a tooth. Sometimes you had to pull it out by the root and accept that the getting of it was going to hurt.

* * *



I PUT THE BURNED PAGE back in the envelope I'd made for it from a sheet of my own notebook. I tucked it into the lining of my coat, which I'd reinforced for exactly this kind of carrying. I stood, let my joints crack,

and looked at my room: the slant ceiling, the cold window, the black building across the quad with its handleless door.

Past two in the morning. Lucian's mandatory Tuesday session in seven hours.

Seven hours was long enough to sleep. Long enough to decide what I was going to wear. Long enough to practice the expression I'd need for the part I was about to play: the girl who wasn't angry at him. The girl who had started, almost against her will, to trust.

Before I blew out the candle, I did the accounting one more time.

What I knew: Cora had identified someone (initial L, possibly followed by *Th...*) connected to the Reaping. Almost certainly Lucian. *L. Th...* on a page she'd died before finishing.

What I didn't know: whether the Reaping was the mechanism of her death specifically, or whether she'd been moved against simply for learning about it. Whether L had ordered her death or carried it out. Whether Lucian's guilt was the active kind or the passive kind: the kind where you pull the trigger versus the kind where you stand in a bell tower and watch someone fall and tell yourself it wasn't your responsibility to stop it.

Either kind would do. Either kind was enough.

What I had: access to his attention. The beginnings of something he was working hard not to name. A willingness to use it, and a reason that was true enough to be convincing because I hadn't made it up.

The radiator clicked and ticked in the dark. Outside, something moved through the November fog.

I lay down on my narrow bed and thought about Cora: how she'd been braver than me in every way that mattered, and how it hadn't been enough, and how I was going to have to be something different. Not braver. Colder.

Keep pointing me in the right direction, I told her.

The room was quiet.

I closed my eyes and made myself sleep, because I needed to be sharp, and because tomorrow I was going to walk into Lucian Thorne's library and begin the careful, deliberate project of making him think I had started to trust him.

And because I needed to be very sure (before I was close enough to risk anything) whether I was doing it entirely to find the truth about my sister.

Or whether, god help me, I wanted to be close to him anyway.

I didn't have an answer. Not yet. But I fell asleep thinking about the three seconds after the lesson, when he'd found me standing and his face had done something before he locked it back down. The look of a man who'd just seen something he thought he'd already lost.

I had a working theory about that look.

Tuesday morning, I was going to test it.



Chapter 10: The Shortlist

I knew what she was doing before she said a word.

That is the part I keep returning to, the thing that makes the subsequent hour so difficult to dismiss as accident or ambush. I saw it coming. Not literally; my study looked

over the chapel garden, not the corridor. But the way a man who has spent his whole life reading rooms can sometimes read the architecture of what a person *intends* before their body commits to it. She had changed something in her approach. Small things. The deliberate spacing of her footsteps on stone. The pause before she knocked, as though she'd reminded herself to knock. The fraction of a second between the sound and the door opening, long enough for a breath, for a mouth to be arranged into something less like a weapon.

Wren Calloway did not soften unless she wanted something.

I was at my desk with the autumn ledgers when she came in, the legitimate ones, the ones the bursar required, the ones that had nothing to do with my work for the Court and everything to do with appearing to be a man who kept civil accounts. Numbers have never lied to me. They are the only honest thing left in Blackthorn.

"You're still working," she said.

"I'm always working." I didn't look up. That was strategic, or it was cowardice; I'm no longer certain there's a difference. "And you're here after hours. Pledges have a curfew."

"You requisitioned me," she said. "That means I'm your problem after hours too."

She was not wrong. That had been my miscalculation, ten days ago, requisitioning her had felt like control, like drawing her close enough to monitor the damage she was capable of. Instead I had simply given her access to every room that mattered to me. Including this one.

I set down my pen.

She was dressed plainly, her dark hair loose, a single candle in her hand she'd carried from the corridor. She set it on the shelf nearest the door like she owned the place and had simply left for a moment and returned. The flame reflected in her eyes in the way candlelight should not be allowed to: warm, moving, indifferent to the effect it had on the people it touched.

"I had a question," she said.

"Most people who have questions ask them."

"Most people who have questions ask people who'll answer them." She crossed toward my desk in that way she had, not aggressive, not theatrical, simply without deference, as though the distance between us was a formality she was too tired to observe. "You're a different problem."

I have a method for being questioned. It was the first thing my father taught me, before the vow, before the Court: when someone is trying to reach inside you for

information, you give them a room. A room with good furniture and no doors. You let them look around. You let them feel like they're getting somewhere.

The problem with Wren was that she kept finding the walls.

"Ask it, then," I said.

She settled into the chair across from my desk without being invited, tucking one leg beneath her in a way that should have looked inelegant and didn't. She looked at me the way she always looked at things she was solving, with that still, specific attention she usually directed at locked doors and dead women's handwriting.

"The Reaping," she said.

I did not flinch. I had trained myself out of flinching before I was old enough to shave.

But the vow moved in me like a key turning in a lock, the particular sensation I have learned to live with the way one learns to live with a chronic ache. Not painful, when the word is only named, named aloud in a neutral register without attachment to a specific truth. The pain came when you pressed toward what could not be said. I had tested those edges enough times to know exactly where I ran out of words, exactly where language curdled and the blood came to collect the debt.

"It's an old word," I said carefully. "The Court uses archaic language."

"For what?"

For what. Two words, and the simplest question in the world to answer, except that every answer I had was behind a door the vow kept locked. I could feel it the way you feel a hand pressed flat against your sternum, not choking, not yet, but there, present, ready to press harder if I continued.

"Tradition," I said. "Ceremony. The Court has an appetite for both."

She watched me say it. She was learning to watch me the way I had learned to watch everyone else, looking for fractures, for the places where a sentence ended one beat too early, where precision substituted for honesty. She was good at it. That should not have made me want to lean forward.

"That's not an answer," she said.

"I'm aware."

"You do that." She tilted her head, and candlelight moved across her face, and I noticed without wanting to notice the soft line of her throat above her collar, the way the

warm light undid the sharpness she usually carried like armor. "You give me the shape of a sentence and leave the meaning out. Why can't you just say it plainly?"

There is a peculiar cruelty in being asked *why can't you just say it* when the honest answer is: because if I tried, I would feel it in my blood. Because the vow the founders built doesn't live only in intention; it lives in the body, in the mouth, in the throat's ability to form certain syllables about certain subjects to certain people. It is not a choice the way my silence about the ledger is a choice, or my silence about my father. It is a cage, and the bars are made of something older than preference.

"Some things are difficult to say plainly," I said.

She looked at me for a long moment.

Then she stood up, and crossed around the desk, and I understood, with complete clarity, the way you understand things you have been pretending not to see, that we had arrived at the part of the evening she had designed before she knocked.

I want to be clear: I understood the strategy. I want that on record, for my own accounting. She had decided to use proximity as a lever, to use whatever charge existed between us as a tool to pry open what language couldn't reach.

I understood it and I did not move.

She stopped at the corner of the desk, close enough that I could smell the cold of the corridor still on her clothes, close enough that if I had turned my chair three inches we would have been sharing the same breath. There was a deliberateness to her stillness that I recognized as courage, not the careless kind she usually performed, but the real kind, the kind you have to decide on.

"There's a version of this," she said quietly, "where you just tell me what you know."

"And there's a version," I said, "where you tell me why you're actually asking."

A silence. Longer than she intended, I thought.

"I found something," she said. "In the library. In Cora's things." She said my sister's name with the same steady evenness she brought to everything, grief worn flat and constant until it sounded like ordinary speech. "She wrote about the Reaping. She wrote about someone with the initial L."

The vow went rigid.

Not painful, not quite, but rigid, the way a bruise goes hard when you press it. I know that sensation as well as I know my own name: the particular protest in the chest, the exact feeling of approaching a wall in the dark and finding it with your fingertips. I could not speak to what Cora wrote, or to whom she had written it about, or to

what I had seen in the last hours before she died. The vow had closed around all of it years ago, and I had spent years since learning the precise shape of what remained to me.

"Wren," I started.

"Don't." She turned to face me fully, and I turned my chair to meet her, standing was the correct response, but I had lost access to correct responses somewhere in the last twenty minutes. "Don't give me the shape of a sentence. I have been here two months. I have been careful and small and *patient*, and I am," she stopped, and I watched the grief surface for just a second before she submerged it, efficient as breathing, "I'm asking you a real question."

She was close enough that I could have reached out and touched her face.

I did not. But the fact that I was calculating the distance told me something I had been refusing to name to myself for longer than I wanted to examine.

"Certain things I cannot tell you," I said. "I want you to hear the *cannot* in that sentence. Not *will not*. Cannot."

Her eyes narrowed. Processing.

"Because of the vow."

I said nothing. The vow permitted that, permitted silence, permitted implication, permitted the careful architecture of a truth I could not speak. She was watching me with the quality of attention she usually gave to locked mechanisms.

"It's like a lock," she said slowly. "It's not that you're choosing not to say it. You physically," she stopped.

I could feel the pulse in my jaw. I should have stood when she came around the desk. I should have put three feet between us and given myself back the geometry I was running out of.

She reached out and touched the inside of my wrist.

Not a seductive touch. A precise one, two fingertips over the thin skin where my pulse was visible, the way you'd check a clock. Measuring.

"When I said the initial," she said carefully, watching my face, "your pulse didn't change. But when I asked you to explain," she paused, "it did." She lifted her eyes to mine. There was something in them I hadn't seen before, not triumph, not the sharp satisfaction of a deduction made. Something more careful than that. "The lock is on the explanation. Not the name."

I said: "You should step back."

I said it the way I say most things, evenly, with the flat authority of a man accustomed to being listened to. To pledges, to junior Court members, to everyone who had learned early that *Thorne says step back* is not a suggestion.

She did not step back. Instead, she leaned in, her weight shifting forward until the edge of the mahogany desk pressed into the small of her back and her chest was a mere heartbeat away from my own. The air between us vanished, replaced by a sudden, suffocating heat that smelled of old paper and something uniquely Wren: rain and iron and a stubborn, defiant kind of hope.

"I think you want to tell me," she said. Very quiet. Aimed.

The honest answer was *yes*. The honest answer was that I had been carrying what I knew about Cora for three years, and it had settled into me like river stone, cold and permanent, the kind of knowledge that changes the color of everything after.

I looked at her mouth, then back to her eyes. My control was a thin glass wall, and she was leaning against it with everything she had. I wanted to reach for her; I wanted to pull her into my lap and bury my face in the crook of her neck until the world outside this room ceased to exist.

"Is this part of your strategy?" I asked, my voice sounding foreign to me, lower and rougher than I usually permitted.

"I don't have a strategy for this," she whispered. "I just want to know if you're as trapped as I feel."

She moved her hand from my wrist to my chest, her palm flattening against the wool of my waistcoat. I could feel the heat of her through the fabric, a brand that made the breath catch in my throat. Her fingers curled slightly, gripping the material, pulling me an inch closer.

I let myself move. I leaned in until our foreheads touched, the contact sending a jolt through me that felt like electricity grounding itself in salt. I could feel the tremble in her breath, the slight shudder of her shoulders. She wasn't just testing me; she was wanting me. The realization hit me with the force of a physical blow, fracturing the formal internal monologue I used to keep the world at bay.

"Wren," I breathed, my voice a warning and a plea all at once. "If we do this, if I touch you, I might not be able to let you go back to being just a pledge."

"Then don't let me go back," she replied. She tilted her head up, her lips a fraction of an inch from mine, inviting and dangerous. "Do you want me? Tell me plainly. No shapes, no riddles."

I closed my eyes for a second, the vow humming in my blood, but this was not a secret the Court owned. This was my own. "I want you more than I have wanted anything since the day I took that vow," I admitted.

"Then kiss me," she said. "Unless you're too afraid of what happens when you stop thinking."

The challenge was the final blow. I reached out, my hand sliding around the nape of her neck, my fingers tangling in the loose silk of her hair. I pulled her closer, not with gentleness, but with a hunger that had been starving for years.

We didn't kiss immediately. We hovered there, the space between our lips charged with an intensity that felt violent. I could feel the heat radiating from her skin, the frantic beat of her heart against my chest, mirroring my own. It was a near-miss that hurt more than a rejection would have; it was the agony of the precipice.

I shifted my grip, my thumb brushing the line of her jaw, tilting her face just so. I wanted to taste her, to know if she tasted as sharp and bright as she sounded. Her eyes were hooded, her breathing shallow and ragged. She leaned into my touch, a small sound of approval escaping her throat that nearly broke my resolve entirely.

"Is this alright?" I murmured against her skin, the requirement for consent a reflex of a man who feared losing control. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

"Don't you dare stop," she whispered.

I slid my other hand down to the small of her back, pressing her firmly against me. The friction of our bodies, the sudden, stark reality of her curves against the hard lines of my frame, made my head spin. I could feel the heat of her thigh brushing against mine, a slow, deliberate slide that promised everything and gave nothing yet.

I lowered my head, my lips grazing hers, barely a touch, a ghost of a kiss that served only to heighten the torture. I felt her gasp, her fingers tightening on my waistcoat, pulling me in. I wanted to devour her. I wanted to tear through the layers of wool and cotton and find the skin beneath.

Just as I began to close the distance, just as the tension reached a breaking point where the only resolution was total surrender, the bell rang.

Not a clock bell. The Court's bell, lower, flatter, with the particular resonance of the undercroft's stone. Three strikes. Formal. Immediate.

The sound crossed the room like cold water thrown.

I was on my feet before the third strike finished. Years of conditioning: the body understanding before the mind that the Court's summons was not a question, not a suggestion, not something you kept waiting while you stood in your study with your face tilted toward a woman who had just spent twenty minutes mapping the exact dimensions of your cage.

Wren stepped back.

We did not look at each other for a moment. The candle she'd brought guttered in a draft from the window, shadow leaping across the books. The silence that followed was heavy, pregnant with the weight of what had been interrupted. The air still shimmered with the heat of our proximity, and the sudden distance felt like a physical loss, a void where there had been fire.

"That's your bell," she said. Her voice was shaky, the edge of it frayed.

"Yes."

"Do you have to go now?"

"Yes." I was already straightening my jacket, the rote motion of reassembling composure piece by piece, the way you dress a wound by habit when you have dressed it many times before. I reached for the ledger on my desk, then left it.

She was watching me with an expression I couldn't fully read, which was unusual. Wren's face had become legible to me in the way that should have alarmed me more than it did, not because she was transparent, but because I had made an inadvertent study of her. This expression was new. Calculating, still, but underneath it something less managed. Something she had not intended for me to see.

"We're not finished," she said.

"No," I agreed. "We're not."

I did not tell her to be in her room by curfew. I did not remind her that she was a pledge and I was her requisitioning officer and the two hours we had just spent in this room were already a breach of several protocols. I picked up my coat and I left, and I did not let myself look back at her standing in the candlelight because I knew what I would see, and I could not afford what it would do to the rest of my evening.

The undercroft smelled of candle wax and cold stone, as it always does, as it probably always will long after everyone currently breathing in it has stopped.

Crane was already seated. Sebastian arrived thirty seconds behind me, still buttoning his cuff, wearing the small satisfied expression he kept for moments when he believed he knew more than the room. I filed the observation and said nothing.

Margot stood at the south wall. I noticed her eyes move to me when I entered, something careful in them tonight, something that was not quite hostility and not quite warning and existed in the uneasy territory between. Margot did not, as a rule, do careful. That was worth noting.

The Headmaster took the center.

He had occupied that position for eleven years, and before that the Court's administrative chair for nine, and before that I did not know and had not been able to discover, which was itself a kind of information. He was a man built to hold things without expression, and he did it with the ease of long practice.

"We have a list," he said. He always started without ceremony when ceremony was not serving a purpose; the Court liked to believe it was above ritual when ritual wasn't useful. "The Reaping year begins in forty-three days. The committee has completed its preliminary review."

He set a folder on the stone table.

I knew this moment. I had stood in it before, three times, four, the particular gravity of a list coming into a room. The Reaping shortlist was not a document you read casually. It named people. The naming meant something

that couldn't be unnamed, and everyone around this table understood that, and everyone around this table behaved as though that understanding was unremarkable.

Sebastian reached for the folder first. I let him, because I was very careful about not appearing to want things in this room.

He scanned it. His expression remained pleasant, which told me nothing about what he felt and everything about how long he'd been in the Court.

He passed it to me.

Eleven names. I read them the way I read everything under observation: steadily, without pausing at any single one longer than another, my face in the arrangement I had learned to maintain in these rooms that communicated evaluation without reaction. I reached the bottom of the printed list.

Below it, in pencil, a twelfth.

The eleven above it were ink, formal, committee-reviewed, set in the Court's standard notation. The twelfth was soft graphite, gray and provisional. The way you write a name when you want to be able to remove it. When the decision hasn't closed yet.

Calloway, W.

I passed the folder to Margot and did not look at it again.

"Objections to the preliminary list?" the Headmaster asked.

Formality. Objections at this stage were either political positioning or errors in judgment, and the people in this room did not make errors in judgment loudly. I said nothing. Sebastian said nothing. Crane, still learning which silences were safe, said nothing.

Margot held the folder for a beat longer than necessary. "No objections," she said.

The folder was collected. The candles burned. The meeting concluded with the particular efficiency of a room where everyone present already understands the shape of what has been decided.

On the walk back through the corridor, Sebastian fell into step beside me. He was in the mood that made him charming, which was the most dangerous version of him.

"Eleven names," he said conversationally. "And a twelfth in pencil."

"I noticed."

"Interesting, that." He smiled at the corridor ahead, not at me. "The committee only uses pencil when they haven't committed. It means someone put the name forward and

someone else pushed back." A small pause. "I wonder who."

I said nothing.

"Soft graphite," Sebastian continued, as though he were simply thinking aloud. "That kind erases easily. Or," and here was the word he'd been building toward, the one that had been waiting since he opened his mouth, "easy to press harder on. If someone wanted it permanent."

He peeled off at the east stairwell with a pleasant nod, and I was left in the corridor alone with the sound of a threat delivered too quietly to be actionable.

I stood there in the dark.

I thought of two fingertips against my wrist. I thought of a mouth almost close enough to feel. I thought of a woman in my study who had, in the space of two hours, diagnosed the architecture of my silence and come away with more information than anyone in three years had managed to collect.

I thought of her name at the bottom of a list in pencil.

Pencil was provisional. Pencil was not yet decided. Pencil meant forty-three days, and time still remaining, and the possibility of an ending different from the one I had been watching approach since the night her sister's name went into ink.

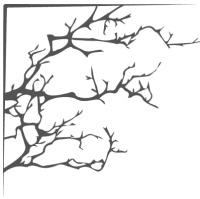
But I had been telling myself there was time for three years already, and the list kept getting shorter, and I kept standing in rooms like this one with my face arranged correctly, saying nothing, and the pencil kept getting pressed harder until it wasn't pencil anymore.

I began walking.

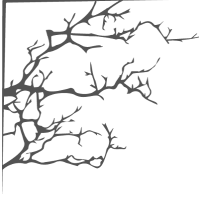
There was no version of the next forty-three days that did not require me to be very careful, and very fast, and willing to press against the exact edges of what the vow permitted. No version where I could continue what I had been doing, keeping her close, allowing evenings like tonight, letting her map the bars of my cage while I stood inside it watching her and calling it strategy.

I knew what was at stake. I had always known.

The problem was that I was no longer certain which outcome I was trying to prevent.



PART 2: The Rite



Chapter 11: Margot's Warning

The news traveled the way bad news always does at Blackthorn: in whispers, then in silence.

I heard it before breakfast, in the stretch of corridor outside my room where the radiator knocked and a portrait of some dead founder watched the door with painted contempt. Two girls from the east dormitory, talking fast, voices low enough that I had to stop pretending to check my phone and actually listen.

Petra Voss. Found at the base of the observatory steps.
Alive, but barely.

I knew Petra the way I knew all the other pledges: by face and Greek letter, by who she sat next to at the Thursday musters. She had a gap between her front teeth and a nervous laugh she used like punctuation. I'd liked her for it. It was honest. Not many honest things at Blackthorn.

They said she'd slipped.

Sure.

The observatory steps were stone, old and uneven, worn smooth by two hundred years of foot traffic and definitely not a hazard, definitely not something that had put three people in the infirmary in the last decade. Blackthorn's maintenance records probably said so. I'd bet every dollar I didn't have that they did.

I went to breakfast and ate nothing and watched the room fill up with carefully arranged faces.

The pledges were quiet. The full members ate their eggs like nothing had happened, except for the particular way they weren't looking at each other: that specific, practiced absence of eye contact that people develop when they've agreed on a story and don't want to accidentally tell a different one.

I knew that look. I'd seen it on the faces of the administrative review board when my family went to ask about Cora. Three people sitting very still, not meeting each other's eyes, and every answer they gave was technically true.

I pushed my toast around my plate and thought about Petra's gap-toothed laugh, the way she'd grabbed my arm during last week's muster when Crane introduced some new piece of ritual nonsense, leaning over to whisper: *do you know what any of this means?* And I'd said *nope*, and she'd laughed that honest laugh into the back of her hand.

I wanted to throw my toast across the dining hall.

I ate it instead. Being useful required staying fed.

* * *



I WENT TO LOOK BECAUSE I'm made wrong. Most people, when something frightens them, have the sense to go the other direction. I start moving toward it. I've been

doing it my whole life: toward the loud noise, toward the dark room, toward the school that killed my sister.

The observatory path was taped off. Not police tape: Blackthorn didn't involve police when it could help it, which was most of the time. Campus security tape, black and gold, which would have been funny if the stone steps behind it weren't still dark in the low morning light.

Not blood. I told myself that. Rain on old stone looks like a lot of things.

I stood at the tape and looked. The observatory loomed behind it, all iron domes and narrow windows that had never been built for stargazing: the angles were wrong, the apertures too small. I'd noticed it in my second week and filed it away. My mental filing cabinet was getting very crowded.

A groundskeeper moved past without looking up. Another figure stood twenty feet further on, wrapped in a dark coat, hands deep in pockets, face turned away. I clocked them the way Lucian had taught me (body language, sightlines, which exits they were closest to) and then I recognized the coat.

Margot.

She didn't look away from the steps when she heard me approach.

"The tape is there for a reason," she said.

"I'm not crossing it." I stopped a foot behind her. "How is she?"

"Stable." A pause. "For now."

That *for now* landed in my chest like a stone in still water and kept sinking.

"What happened?"

Margot turned, finally. Her face was doing the same thing the full members' faces had been doing at breakfast (carefully neutral, carefully arranged) except around the edges, where something else was leaking through. Something that looked almost human.

"She slipped," Margot said. Flat. Practiced.

"Right." I matched her tone. "Slipped on steps she'd walked every day for two months without incident. In the middle of the night. After a Court meeting she'd been summoned to alone."

Margot's jaw tightened. Just barely.

"You're guessing," she said.

"I'm reading the shape of a lie. I've had practice."

She looked at me for a long moment. The fog sat heavy on the grounds, and somewhere in the old oak at the edge of the path a crow was making a noise like something that had given up on pretending.

"The tape is there for a reason," Margot said again. But this time it sounded less like a warning and more like she was reminding herself.

She turned and walked away.

I watched her go and thought: *she's scared*.

That was new.

* * *



I SPENT THE AFTERNOON in the library not doing any of the work I was supposed to be doing.

The reading room was empty at three o'clock: everyone was at the mandatory convocation, a whole-school assembly that I'd slipped away from the moment it

devolved into ritual Latin and gratitude for Blackthorn's "continued tradition of excellence." I'd gagged on my way out. Politely, into my sleeve.

I pulled up what I could find on the public-facing historical records. Blackthorn had digitized its archive through 2015 and then stopped, which was either a budgetary decision or a convenient one. The records before 2015 were complete. The ones after were spottier.

Three hospitalizations in the last decade matching a certain profile: fall semester, pledges in their second month, circumstances classified as *accidental*. All three on observatory grounds or the bell tower walkway.

The bell tower walkway.

I pressed my palms flat against the reading table and breathed.

Cora had fallen from a bell tower. The official report said she'd climbed it alone at 2 a.m. and jumped, ruled a suicide because she'd been struggling academically: a finding so thoroughly false that I'd nearly laughed at the inquest, the kind of laugh you develop when grief decides to go feral.

Cora had not struggled academically. Cora had been three weeks from finishing her dissertation proposal. She'd had first-class standing in two departments and a research grant the semester she died.

She'd also been asking questions about the Reaping.

I sat in the library and read the three incident reports three times each until I had them memorized. Two pledges had recovered. One had not.

Petra Voss was, so far, in the second category. *Stable. For now.*

I needed her to stay there.

I needed her to stay there badly enough that I had to stay very still for a few minutes, eyes closed, reminding myself that the right kind of useful was quiet useful. That the way to help Petra was to keep pulling the thread I'd already found, not to storm up to the administration building and scream until something happened.

I had screamed at administration before. About Cora. It hadn't helped. I'd learned things from that experience, most of which involved keeping my volume down and my methods better.

I was still sitting very still when the reading room door opened.

Margot sat down across from me.

She put a folder on the table and kept her hands on it, staring at it like it had personally offended her. She didn't say anything. I waited, because at Blackthorn I'd learned

that the person who speaks first loses.

* * *



MARGOT HAD THE FACE of someone who had decided to do something she didn't want to do and was going to do it anyway out of pure, cold principle. I recognized that face. I wore it approximately six times a day.

"I'm not your ally," she said finally.

"Okay." I kept my voice even. "What are you, then?"

"Complicated." She pushed the folder across the table toward me. I didn't touch it yet. "There are things the Court doesn't tell pledges. Things I didn't know when I was initiated."

"And now you know them."

"And now I wish I didn't." A flat beat. "Open it."

I opened the folder.

It was a list. Names: twelve of them, spanning forty years. All female. All pledges. Each noted with a single date and the word *withdrawn* in varying typefaces as the document aged. Some had a second notation: *infirmary*. Two had a third: *internment*.

The campus word for buried.

I kept my face still. Grief had given me this, as compensation for everything it had taken: the ability to receive terrible information without letting it show. I received it now. I let it settle. I looked at every name.

"These were the accidents," I said.

"The ones I could document." Margot's voice was tight, controlled. Her hands were too still. "There are others I couldn't. The records don't go back that far."

"What makes a pledge end up on this list?"

Margot looked at me like she was weighing something and hadn't decided which way to tip the scale.

"They asked things they weren't supposed to ask," she said. "They noticed things they weren't supposed to notice. They became *inconvenient*."

The word landed exactly where she meant it to. I thought of Petra Voss, summoned alone, laughing at musters three days ago. Inconvenient how? Smart enough to catch a thread, or just unlucky, or standing near the wrong person at the wrong moment?

I thought about my own name and where it might be written down and in what kind of ink.

"Why are you showing me this?"

"Because you're going to get yourself killed." No heat in it. No cruelty either, which was somehow worse than both. "You think you're being careful. You're not careful enough."

"Tell me what careful looks like."

"It looks like *leaving*." Her eyes were flat and steady. "It looks like filing a medical withdrawal and being on a train before the Court finishes its morning session."

"That's not an option."

"Then you won't make it to spring." She reached forward and closed the folder, slid it back to her side of the table. She was going to take it with her. Whatever she'd shown me, she wasn't leaving me the evidence. Not a weapon she was handing me, then. A warning. An uneasy mercy.

"What changed?" I asked. "You've been hostile to me since day one. What made you sit down?"

The pause was long enough that I thought she wasn't going to answer.

"Petra didn't deserve it," Margot said quietly. "She wasn't... she wasn't the kind of inconvenient they tell themselves justifies this. She was just *there*. She had the bad luck to see something during the last muster, and someone decided the cleanest solution was..." She stopped. Pressed her lips together.

"I know what the cleanest solution looks like," I said. "I've seen it before."

Margot looked at me. Really looked: not the appraising contempt from initiation night, not the cool management she'd worn at the observatory. Something rawer. Something almost like recognition.

"I know why you're here," she said.

The air in the reading room shifted. Outside, a branch scraped the window in a slow, rhythmic drag, like something pacing.

"Then you know I'm not leaving," I said.

* * *



SHE DIDN'T ANSWER RIGHT away. She was the kind of person who thought before she spoke, which made her dangerous and occasionally useful, depending on the day.

"The Reaping isn't a metaphor," she said at last. "That's what they let you think, the new pledges, the ones they're not sure about yet. It's pageantry, it's ritual, it's tradition. That's the story." Her voice was clipped, methodical. "The truth is that someone is chosen every year, and that choice has real consequences. Not symbolic ones."

"What kind of consequences?"

"I don't know everything. I know enough."

"Then tell me enough."

She was quiet for a long moment. The crow outside had moved to a different tree; I could hear it from a different angle now.

"The pledge who died in 2019," she said. "Her name was Lena Forsythe. She'd been asking about the Reaping for three weeks before she fell."

"And before her?"

"There was a girl in 2016. She was also asking questions." Margot's eyes came up to mine. Dark, precise, doing something complicated I didn't have a name for yet. "Her name was Calloway."

The reading room went very quiet.

I had known it the way you know something before your body is ready to admit it. I'd known it since I arrived: in the particular silence that met my name in certain rooms, in the flicker I'd watched for and almost missed on the dormitory matron's face my first night. I'd known it, and I'd needed someone to say it out loud anyway.

"She was my sister," I said.

"I know."

"Did you know her?"

Margot's expression went somewhere private. "I was a pledge when she was here. We weren't close. But I remember her." A pause. "She was clever. She had the

same way of cataloguing a room that you have. The same way of asking a question that was actually three questions."

"She was better at it than I am," I said. My voice came out steady. I was proud of that.

"Probably." Margot looked back at the folder under her hands. "She figured out the Reaping was real. She figured out more than that, toward the end; she was close to something specific. Something about who runs it and why." A breath. "And then she wasn't."

The crow had gone silent. Everything had gone silent. Just the radiator ticking, and Margot's careful hands on the folder, and the weight of what she wasn't saying.

"They killed her," I said.

Margot didn't answer.

I didn't need her to.

"I need names," I said. "I need to know who makes these decisions. Who's at the center of it."

"If I could give you that, I would already have left." For the first time she sounded tired: not exhausted, but tired in the specific way of someone who has been managing something heavy for too long and has stopped being able to pretend it's sustainable. "I know pieces. Not enough."

"Then help me find the rest."

Another long pause. She looked at me across the table with that complicated thing still going on behind her eyes, and I waited, and the radiator ticked, and somewhere in the wall something old and settled shifted.

"I'm not your ally," she said again. Quieter this time.

"You already said that."

"I need you to remember it." She stood, picked up the folder, smoothed her coat: all the small gestures of a person reassembling themselves from the outside in. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it because someone has to."

"Works for me." I stayed seated, because standing would have made it look like I needed something from her, and I couldn't afford to need anything from anyone right now.

"Same time tomorrow?"

She made a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "Don't push it."

She moved toward the door. I watched her go and catalogued: the folder she hadn't left me, the way she'd kept her voice carefully flat through all of it, the thing in her face when she'd said *she was clever*.

At the door, she paused. Her back was to me.

"The difference between you and your sister," she said, "is that I'm telling you this now and I didn't tell her." A beat. "That might not be enough. But it's what I have."

I opened my mouth. Closed it.

"Calloway." Her hand rested on the door frame. Her voice had gone very flat, the way voices do when the thing they're saying has been sitting inside them for a long time. "Your sister asked too many questions too."

The door swung shut behind her.

I sat in the empty reading room for a long time after that, with the crow's silence and the ticking radiator and the cold afternoon light falling in through the window. I sat there and thought about Cora, who had been clever and curious and had asked too many questions and had died for it.

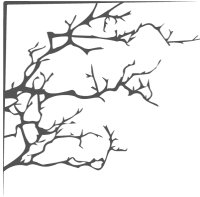
I thought about Petra Voss, stable for now, in the campus infirmary where they would manage her recovery the way they managed everything at Blackthorn: quietly, internally, with extreme attention to what made it into the record.

I thought about my own name, written in pencil on a list I hadn't seen and hadn't been meant to see. Somewhere in this building, on a piece of paper that Lucian Thorne had been handed by someone who expected him to act on it, my name sat in pencil.

Pencil can be erased, I thought.

So can people.

I picked up my bag. I walked out of the reading room into the cold corridor, past the dead founders watching from their frames, and I started making a list of my own.



Chapter 12: The Deepest Rite

The shortlist was a single page of cream vellum, and Wren Calloway's name had been written in pencil.

That detail had kept me awake for three nights. Not the ink names above it (heirs and legacy students the Court had been arranging like furniture for years), but the

pencil. Provisional. Still becoming. Someone was watching to see what she'd do before deciding what to do about her.

I intended to remove that decision from their hands before they reached for the pen.

The meeting with Crane was at half past seven, before the morning session of the pledge rites, when the undercroft still smelled of the previous night's candles and no one had yet gathered enough energy for careful cruelty. I had requested it as a routine administrative matter. That was the exact phrase I'd used: *routine administrative matter*. I had delivered it in the same voice I used to discuss investment returns and seating arrangements and every other piece of machinery that keeps this institution's true business from becoming visible to the outside world.

Crane had the kind of face that looked paternal until you watched it long enough. He was already seated when I arrived, his tea poured, his posture the patient architecture of a man who had watched many younger men overestimate themselves.

"Thorne," he said, the way he always said it: not a greeting, a measurement.

I sat. I placed the ledger copy on the table between us, open to the appropriate page, with a formality calibrated precisely to read as professional and no warmer than that.

"The Calloway pledge," I said. "I'd like to discuss her status on the shortlist."

* * *



THE CASE I'D CONSTRUCTED was airtight. I knew this because I had spent two nights building it, which was two nights more than any routine administrative matter warranted, a fact I had decided not to examine too closely.

The argument was strategic. Calloway was a scholarship student with no Court lineage and a dead sister who had also been a pledge. The combination was a liability, not an asset. The outside world had not looked too carefully at Cora Calloway's death, but that was a grace that might not extend twice. Reaping the sister introduced a redundancy that drew patterns. Patterns drew audits.

I made this case. Calmly. In complete sentences, each built around risk management and optics and the Court's long-term interest in remaining opaque.

Crane listened with the expression of a man watching a performance he'd seen before.

"She performs well," he said, when I'd finished. "The last three pledge assessments: near the top of the cohort."

"She performs because she's investigating." I kept my voice level. "Every question she asks has a direction. She isn't curious. She's *searching*. Putting her deeper into the rites gives her more material."

"And removing her from the list removes the problem."

"It removes the risk."

Crane lifted his tea, studied the steam rising from it, set it down without drinking. "You know, Lucian, I've watched you manage risk for the better part of a decade. I've watched you do it exceptionally well. I have never watched you make an argument this careful about a single pledge." He met my eyes. "We don't need to pretend you're here about optics."

The silence that followed had weight. I had known this was possible (had planned for it, had three alternative framings ready) and still felt something cold move through my chest.

"The Court needs to believe our motivations are strategic," I said, "even when they aren't entirely."

"The Court," he said, not unkindly, "believes what it observes. And what it's observing right now is you, in my office, before morning bells, trying to protect a girl whose name is written in pencil." He paused. "Which means the pencil becomes a pen."

I said nothing. There was nothing to say.

* * *



THE FULL COUNCIL MET at nine. I sat in my usual seat at the long oak table in the room that had no name on any official record, and I watched the decision I had failed to prevent become official.

The room had twelve members and one empty chair: the Patron's chair, always empty, which was the point. You were never allowed to forget that something existed

above you, even in a room where everyone had been taught since birth that nothing in the outside world stood higher than they did.

Sebastian was two seats to my right, which put him in my peripheral vision without requiring me to look at him directly. He'd been doing something careful with his face since the meeting started: a studied neutrality I recognized because I wore it myself. Sebastian had been watching me watch Wren for three weeks. I had been watching him watch me do it.

Crane spoke for four minutes. He laid out the cohort's progress, the approaching date of the full initiation sequence, the question of which pledges were to be assigned to which rites. He did not mention our conversation. He did not need to.

"The Calloway girl," said one of the older members, a woman named Aldridge who wore her hair in a style that had not changed in forty years. "She's been flagged as a flight risk."

"She's been flagged as exceptional," I said, without deciding to say it.

The table went quiet. That particular quality of quiet that means everyone in a room just learned something.

I felt Sebastian's gaze move to me with the precise weight of someone filing information.

"Exceptional," Aldridge repeated. "Then we should give her an exceptional rite."

There is a vocabulary the Court uses that sounds like bureaucratic language until you understand it, and then you can never stop understanding it. *Exceptional rite*. The deepest tier of the initiation sequence: the one that does not appear in the pledge handbook, the one that binds more completely, that costs the most to witness and more to survive. The one that had been assigned to Cora Calloway three years ago, in the weeks before she died.

I had not planned for this specific outcome. In three nights of careful architecture, I had not built a wall against it, because I had believed (wrongly, I understood now, fundamentally wrongly) that my intervention would be invisible. That I was still capable of invisibility.

"The full sequence," Aldridge continued, looking not at me but at the ledger before her, "should be assigned to the most capable pledges. If Thorne believes she qualifies..."

"I said she performed well," I said. "That's distinct from recommending the full sequence."

"You said exceptional." She looked up. Sixty years of Court discipline behind her eyes. "We'll use your word."

* * *



THE MEETING ENDED AT half past ten.

I walked back through the undercroft, through the low-ceilinged passage that connects the Council rooms to the main building, and I stood for a long moment in the corridor where the torches leave a gap of shadow between them and counted the ways I had miscalculated.

There were three.

I had believed Crane would be persuadable. He was not. I had believed the argument would read as strategic. It had not. And I had believed (which was the most expensive error, the one I should have known better than to make) that my control was still intact. That three weeks of proximity to Wren Calloway had not left marks visible to other people.

It had. It had left marks. Crane had seen them in a two-minute observation. Aldridge had weaponized them in five. And Sebastian, who said nothing at the table

because Sebastian always knew when silence was the sharper instrument, had been reading them for longer than either.

The blood vow was a quiet presence in my arm, steady as a pulse. It had been this way since the pledge cohort began, since I'd started noticing which problems had her name attached. The vow does not punish thought. It punishes action taken against its terms.

My thoughts were not, technically, a breach.

But they were getting closer.

She cannot survive the full sequence. That was the thought I was having, which was also the thought I could not afford to have, because having it meant I had developed a preference, and the vow had very specific language about preferences. *The Court's interests first and always, above the personal interests of any single heir.* Written into my blood at nine, with a knife and a cup and a Latin phrase I can recite in my sleep and once did, sweating through a fever, in the dark.

Cora Calloway had been through the full sequence. She'd been exceptional too: bright and curious, asking questions that always had a direction. The Court had looked at her the same way it was now looking at her sister, with the cold appreciation of people who have decided something is useful until it isn't.

I had been in the room when they'd decided Cora Calloway wasn't useful anymore. I had not stopped it. That failure was the stone I'd been carrying since before Wren ever walked up the drive, and now the drive had delivered me a second chance to fail in precisely the same way, and I had managed to accelerate the timeline through a miscalculation so fundamental I wanted to put my fist through the stone wall.

I didn't. I leaned my shoulder against it and looked at the gap between the torches and thought very carefully about what remained available to me.

* * *



THE FULL SEQUENCE WAS assigned. That was immovable.

What was not yet determined: who would run it.

The deepest rite required an initiator: a Court member of sufficient rank to witness and conduct the binding. It had been Crane, the last time. It had been my father, the time before that. The assignment was typically given to whoever the Council believed should hold the leverage the rite created, because the rite, like everything else here, was ultimately about leverage.

I could request it. The request would be read correctly (everyone at that table now understood why I would want it), but the outcome would be the same regardless of what they read into my motives. If they assigned the rite to Aldridge or to Sebastian or to anyone else, I lost the one variable I could still control.

If I ran it myself, I held that variable.

The logic was clean. It was also, I was aware, the logic of a man who had stopped pretending his reasons were strategic, which meant it was the most honest thing I'd done in a week, and honesty at Blackthorn had the shelf life of milk.

But Cora Calloway had been given to a handler who had no particular reason to keep her safe.

And she had not been kept safe.

I found Sebastian in his office, a narrow room off the library that he kept cluttered precisely to make people underestimate how organized he was. He looked up when

I entered. That same studied neutrality, and behind it, the bright sharp interest of a man who had been waiting.

"The full sequence," I said. "I'll run it."

Sebastian set down his pen. The pause that followed was the kind he deployed when he wanted you to feel the weight of what you'd just said. "That's unusual."

"It isn't prohibited."

"No. It isn't." He tilted his head. "The Council will read it..."

"I know what the Council will read."

"And you're doing it anyway."

"Yes."

He studied me for a long moment. Sebastian, who had been my closest ally and most reliable complication for eleven years, who knew every version of my face and had been cataloguing the new ones since September. His expression shifted: not softening, exactly. More like the moment when a calculation finishes running and delivers an unexpected result.

"You know what the full sequence does to pledges," he said quietly. "To who they are after."

"I know."

"And you're still going to put her through it."

I looked at him. "She'll go through it either way. The question is whether I'm there."

Something moved across his face that I couldn't name. He picked up his pen, turned back to his papers. A dismissal, but not an unfriendly one (from Sebastian, a meaningful distinction).

"You're going to have to tell her," he said, to his desk. "She'll need time to prepare."

"I know."

* * *



SHE WAS IN THE EAST courtyard.

I had known she would be. She'd fallen into a habit of reading there in the hour before afternoon lectures (something about the light from that particular angle), which was a detail I had not intended to notice and could

not now unnotice. She was in the far corner with a book she was probably not reading, because Wren Calloway was never not reading a room, even when she was reading a book.

She looked up when I was three steps away. The wariness came first, then the sharp quick assessment: the inventory she ran on every person who approached her, checking exits, checking angles. Then, underneath, something else she did not yet know how to hide from me, which was dangerous for both of us.

"You look like someone just handed you a bill," she said.

"I need to speak with you." I heard my own voice and adjusted it: I'd let something through. I smoothed it flatter, cleaner. "About the rites."

Something changed in her face. She closed the book. "The pledge handbook says the next one isn't until the end of the month."

"The schedule has been adjusted."

The way she went still was something I recognized. The stillness of a person filing information in real time, refusing to react before they understand what they're reacting to. She'd learned that, or been born with it; I wasn't yet certain which, and I was becoming very certain I wanted to know.

"Adjusted how," she said. Not quite a question. A door left slightly open.

I sat across from her (which put us at the same level, which was a choice I made without deliberating about it and then became aware of having made). The courtyard was empty. The fog had not lifted all morning, and the gargoyles on the roofline above us were slick with it, watching with the implacable patience of stone.

"The Council has assigned you to the full initiation sequence," I said. "The deepest rite."

A pause. "Is that what it's called."

"That's what it's called."

She looked at me for a long moment: the real look, the one she deployed when she'd decided to spend something on you. "And what does that mean."

I thought of Cora. Of the room where the decision had been made, and the room where it had been carried out, and the silence of the drive below Wexford Hall in the gray October that followed. I thought of the word *jumped* being used in a sentence that everyone who'd said it had known was wrong.

I thought of what Wren's face would do if I told her any of that, and what it would cost her, and what I was blood-bound and vow-bound incapable of telling her.

"It means," I said, "that I've been assigned to run it."

She absorbed that. The wry curl at the corner of her mouth that she used as armor when something frightened her. "You specifically."

"Specifically."

"That was your idea."

"Yes."

Another silence. The fog shifted; one of the gargoyles shed a thin line of water into the stone below.

"Why," she said.

The vow sat quiet in my arm. It does not punish thought. But there are certain truths the vow does not need to prohibit because they cannot be spoken without dismantling everything I have been since I was nine years old, and *because I cannot watch you die the way I watched your sister die and do nothing again* was one of them.

"The rite requires an initiator," I said. "It matters who holds that role."

She looked at me for a long time. Long enough that I understood she was deciding whether to press, and choosing not to. Not because she'd accepted the answer, but because she'd heard what I hadn't said.

Wren Calloway had always been better at listening for the silences.

"When," she said at last.

"Three days."

She exhaled once, slow and controlled, the kind of breath that is not quite a sigh. Then she picked up her book and opened it to the page she'd been on, and said, without looking up, "You're still here."

I should have left. The information had been conveyed; the conversation had a clear end point; there was no administrative requirement that I remain in a cold courtyard watching fog move across the roofline.

I stayed for another four minutes.

Three days, and she would walk into the undercroft in the gray initiate's shift, and the candlelight would catch her shoulders, and I would be the one holding the authority of her initiation. Which meant I would be the one responsible for what happened to her inside it.

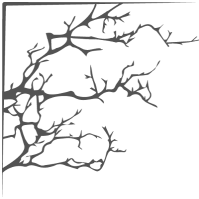
To protect her, I had placed her in my hands. I understood the circularity. I understood too that it was the only move I had. That it was insufficient. That I would make it anyway.

The vow pulsed once in my arm, slow and warm, like a reminder.

I know, I thought at it. I know exactly what I'm doing.

The fog shifted. The gargoyles watched. Thursday, and I would take Wren Calloway into the deepest rite the Court had ever made her sister survive. And I would make certain she came out the other side.

Whatever it cost me.



Chapter 13: Candlelight and Ash

They gave me a shift the color of old ash and told me to leave everything else upstairs.

Everything turned out to mean my shoes, my coat, my dignity, and apparently my will to keep making jokes about it, because by the time I was standing barefoot on cold stone with Crane smoothing the linen across my shoulders, I had run entirely out of material.

"Stop fidgeting," Crane said.

"I'm not fidgeting. I'm thermally suffering. There's a difference."

She almost smiled. Almost. Crane's version of warmth was warmer than most people's real thing, but she was careful about showing it, especially down here, especially tonight. Her hands were steady in the way that hands get when someone has spent years learning to keep them that way. Deliberate steadiness. The kind that remembers the alternative.

"You'll be fine," she said.

"I keep saying that."

"I'll keep saying it until it's true or until we don't need to pretend anymore." She smoothed a wrinkle from the sleeve. "Drink slowly. Don't show them your teeth."

I didn't ask which part of that was advice and which was a warning. With Crane, I'd learned they were usually the same thing, layered one over the other like the pages of a water-damaged book.

The shift was plain, no decoration, hemmed mid-calf. It was the kind of garment that made you aware of your body in the cold: the air against the backs of my arms, the stone under my bare feet, the way the fabric moved when I breathed. I catalogued all of it and filed it under *stop noticing things that don't help you*. I noticed them anyway. I always do.

The undercroft stairs were exactly as welcoming as the name suggested: narrow, limestone, worn smooth in the center where two hundred years of feet had pressed their way down into the dark. My bare feet read every groove. Cold crept up through my soles like it was measuring me, like the building was testing how much of me it could drain before I reached the bottom.

I counted the steps. Forty-two.

Cora had come down these steps.

I hadn't let myself think it until now: in the specific silence of the bottom stair, where the stairwell opened into a space that smelled like centuries of beeswax and something older underneath, iron and wet stone and the particular cold of places that never get sun. The kind of cold that doesn't leave. The kind that settles into the walls and decides to stay.

Had she counted them?

I put my sister back in the pocket of myself where I kept her. This was not the time. This was *exactly* the time to be small and gray and forgettable, to take in as much as possible while appearing to take in nothing at all.

I lifted my chin and walked into the light.

Two hundred candles, give or take. I didn't count them. They were everywhere: iron sconces, floor stands, clusters packed into the alcoves carved along the far walls, doubled in their reflections in the polished stone. The light was amber, thick, unsteady, and it made everything it touched look like it was breathing. The room breathed. I reminded myself that was a trick of fire and not evidence of anything.

The Court was assembled in a ring at the perimeter. Forty, fifty faces angled inward, watching. I clocked Margot in the second position: jaw set, eyes tracking me with the particular expression of someone who wants very badly to dismiss a thing and cannot quite manage it. Sebastian stood beside her, performing casual with the specific effort of a man who doesn't realize he's performing. He looked at me twice in the first ten seconds. Deliberate. Measuring something.

I stored that.

The floor was old stone, mostly. At the center, inlaid in pale limestone, worn but unmistakable: a ring and within it a pattern of intersecting lines I recognized from the library's restricted section as the foundational binding mark of the original charter. The seal that the founders had supposedly cut their oath into, or so the official account ran. Official accounts at Blackthorn were always the version that had survived editing.

I walked to the center because I'd been told to walk there, because moving into the room like I belonged was smarter than hovering at the edge, because it gave me better sightlines, and also because Cora would have walked to the center and I had come here wearing her courage because I'd run out of enough of my own.

All of these things were true. I picked the one that sounded least like fear and I carried it with me across the floor.

Lucian was at the head.

I'd known he would be. I'd spent two days preparing for it and it still landed wrong, the way it always did: like the air pressure shifted when he entered a room, or maybe like *I* was the one who'd changed the pressure and hadn't noticed until I looked at him and found him already watching me.

He was in formal black. No ceremony robes: the Court didn't do robes, they did old money, which is a more frightening uniform. His face was arranged in the expression I'd catalogued as *total management*: every feature in its correct position, nothing leaking. I had seen the management fail twice. I kept waiting for it the way you wait for a geological event you know is coming but can't predict within a decade.

He recited the Latin without consulting a text. Old words, worn into the specific shape of his voice, each syllable placed the way you place a hand on a wall you've navigated in the dark your whole life. I didn't have enough Latin to follow all of it but I knew the rhythm: repetition, obligation, the grinding accumulated weight of things said so many times they've worn grooves in the air itself.

None of it made me flinch.

His hand, I noticed, was not quite steady.

Just for a moment: a barely perceptible unevenness between the third and fourth clauses, and then he had it back, and maybe I'd imagined it. I was extremely good at noticing things that weren't meant to be noticed. I was also recently reminded that I was capable of misreading them at length and with dedication. I'd spent weeks reading "L" as a name when it might have been something else entirely.

I kept noticing. I filed it under *review later*.

Crane lifted the cup.

The cup was silver, old enough that the hallmarks had worn to suggestions. Heavy. When they placed it in my hands the chill ran up into my wrists and I had approximately three seconds to work through my options: drink the unidentified liquid in a ritually significant vessel handed to me by an institution with a documented history of people dying, or put it down and confirm every suspicion they had about my nerve.

I drank.

It tasted like wine with something underneath it: herbs, bitter at the back of the throat, something that might have been honey if honey had forgotten how to be sweet. It wasn't poison. Probably wasn't poison. The Court still needed me functional; the deeper rite required a participant who was present and capable of consent, which I had read about carefully because that specificity had struck me as meaningful. Someone had written that into the oldest version of the charter. Someone had insisted on it hard enough that it survived two centuries of institutional pressure.

Cora had read the same charter. I wondered if she'd noticed the same thing.

I breathed through the bitterness and handed the cup back without letting my expression move, and I felt: more vibration than sound: the slight collective exhale of the assembly. Approval. I'd passed a test I hadn't been told I was taking. The second half of that realization was that I *always* hadn't been told.

Lucian's eyes had been on me the entire time.

There was a moment, right at the edge of the exhale, where I looked at him directly and something shifted in his face. Minimal. The way a door moves when there's wind in a distant room: a pressure difference more than anything visible. But I had spent two months building a catalog of his control and this was something the catalog didn't have a name for yet.

"Speak the vow," he said.

His voice was wrong. Slightly. Lower than the Latin, stripped of something, the way stone looks after rain has washed the dust off it.

I spoke the words they'd given me. I'd memorized them four days ago and turned them over nightly since, looking for the teeth, which were in there: old language layers meaning over meaning: so I'd memorized them carefully and annotated every third phrase with *this probably means something worse than it sounds in current usage*. I spoke them true because lying in a vow

in a place like this felt like the wrong kind of experiment to run on myself. Not yet. Not until I understood the mechanism.

My voice didn't shake.

I was very proud of that. Cora would have been proud of that.

When I finished, the room went quiet in the specific way of people who have just confirmed a variable they weren't sure about. Then Lucian moved.

He crossed the circle in the way he moved through every room: like he'd already mapped the space and was simply confirming coordinates. The candles were between us and then they weren't, and he was close enough that the register of him reached me: cold stone and beeswax and something warm underneath both, the particular warmth of a person who runs colder than they're supposed to.

"The rite requires the mark," he said.

He wasn't speaking to the room. He was speaking to me.

"I know," I said.

"It requires..." A pause so brief it almost wasn't there. Something worked behind his eyes. "Wren. This is the part where I ask you."

My brain, which had been providing excellent real-time commentary since I walked into the room, went briefly and completely offline.

He held my gaze and for once looked like he wasn't managing anything. He looked like a man waiting for something that genuinely mattered to him, which was different: different in the specific way of a thing you've been trained to expect in one form and then find in another.

"I read the full charter," I said. "Including the section they didn't give me. I know what the marking involves."

"I know you did." Something shifted in his expression. "That isn't the same as asking."

He was asking.

In the middle of a ritual in an undercroft full of people who managed my continued presence here and possibly my continued everything, Lucian Thorne was asking.

I hadn't planned for that. I'd planned for coercion, for obligation, for the formal language of an institution that dressed its compulsions in ceremony and called it tradition. I had not planned for him to look at me like this, in front of all of them, and make it a question.

"Yes," I said. It came out steady. "Go ahead."

He lifted his hand to my collarbone: not fast, not like someone claiming a thing, but slowly, deliberately, like he was learning the specific geography of me by feel. His thumb traced the hollow of my throat. Then it moved to the place where my neck met my shoulder, and the cold of him registered against my skin and then disappeared as warmth passed between us in one direction or both, and I honestly could not have told you which.

He spoke a word in Latin I didn't recognize. Old. Older than the vow, older than the charter.

Then he leaned in and pressed his mouth to the place his thumb had been.

Not a kiss. Or: technically it was, which the charter had specified as the sealing act of the mark, but it was also something else, something in the category of *paying attention*, of deliberate care. He stayed for three full seconds. I felt the warmth of it long after he straightened and I understood in some animal, pre-analytical part of myself that this was going to be a problem. It was already a problem. It had probably been a problem for longer than I'd been willing to admit.

When he pulled back, his face was very still.

I said, quietly: "That's not all of it."

His expression didn't change, but his eyes did. "What?"

"The marking. There's a second part. I read the complete text." I held his gaze. "The seal of the deepest rite."

A beat. "You should not have had access to that."

"I know." I let the silence do some work. "But I did."

He searched my face. Looking for something: a tell, maybe, or a trap, or the specific angle I was playing. I let him look. I'd stopped trying to hide things from him a while back, somewhere around the fourth or fifth time it hadn't worked.

"Tell me what you want," he said, low and precisely careful.

This man. *Honestly.*

"I want you to do this right," I said. "All of it. The way the charter says it's supposed to go."

The struggle crossed his face: not the ice, not the management, but the thing that lived underneath both of those, the actual him. The version that surfaced when I pushed too hard or got too close or apparently stood barefoot in an undercroft in a gray shift and refused to do him the simple kindness of being easily managed.

"Wren." My name in his mouth. He said it like something he'd been fighting the specific shape of. "If I do this: if we..."

"Lucian." I said his name back at him with the same weight. "The answer is yes. I've told you the answer is yes. Do you need me to say it one more time?"

He looked at me for one more moment. The candles moved in the draft from the stairwell. The assembly behind me was a silence I could feel pressing at my back.

"No," he said. "I don't."

He cupped my jaw in his hand: his thumb at the corner of my mouth: and he kissed me properly this time. Soft at first, the way you approach something you've been being careful around for months, and then not soft at all. I had forty excellent reasons why this was terrible strategy and I held all of them carefully for approximately three seconds before I let them go, because his other hand had come up to the back of my head and he kissed me like I was something he had been starving over and managing around and finding elaborate justifications not to touch.

I was kissing him back exactly the same way. The world tilted on its axis. I could feel the rough texture of his thumb against my cheek, the scent of cedar and cold air, and the heat of him that seemed to radiate through the thin linen of my shift.

He pulled back just an inch: just enough for me to see the storm in his eyes, but not enough to break the circuit. His breath was a warm ghost against my lips.

"Do you want this?" he whispered. "Right now? Here?"

"Yes," I breathed. The word felt like it had been dragged through gravel. "I do."

He groaned: a low, visceral sound that didn't belong in a ritual: and pressed me back against the invisible wall of his own restraint. His hand slid from my jaw down to the nape of my neck, fingers tangling in my hair, pulling slightly. The sensation sent a jolt straight down my spine, making my toes curl against the freezing limestone.

I reached for him, my hands finding the sharp line of his shoulders, clutching at the black fabric of his coat. I wanted the distance between us to vanish entirely. I wanted to know if he tasted as dangerous as he looked.

He leaned in again, but this time he didn't go for my mouth. He trailed his lips down the line of my jaw, his breath hot against my skin, until he reached the sensitive dip just below my ear. He lingered there, his mouth grazing me, a tease that felt like an invitation and a torture all at once.

"You are far too disruptive," he murmured against my skin.

"You love it," I countered, though my voice was barely a whisper.

He let out a short, sharp huff of laughter and then his mouth was back on mine, harder this time, more demanding. It wasn't just a kiss; it was a conversation about everything we hadn't said for two months. The hunger was there: raw and specific: and I could feel the tension in his arms, the way he was holding himself back from simply sweeping me off my feet and carrying me out of the room.

His hand slid down my back, the palm of it hot through the thin fabric of the ash-colored shift, pulling my hips flush against his. The contact was electric. I could feel the hard line of him, the sheer physical presence of a man who had spent far too long pretending he didn't want me.

I let out a small, shaky sound, and he froze. He pulled back just enough to look at me, his eyes dark, searching for any sign of hesitation.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he said, his voice strained. "At any point. Just say the word."

"Don't stop," I said. "Not yet."

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against mine. We stood there for a heartbeat, breathing each other's air, the silence of the Court around us feeling like a physical weight. The tension was a wire pulled taut between us, vibrating with every breath.

I wanted him to break. I wanted to be the one who broke him. I slid my hand up his chest, feeling the frantic thud of his heart beneath the fabric, and for a second, I thought he might actually do it: he might forget where we were and take me right there on the limestone.

When we stopped, the assembly was perfectly still.

I kept my eyes on his face, which had the expression of a man who has just fallen off something tall and is still calculating the distance. I recognized it because I was wearing the same expression, probably, underneath the part of me that had snapped back into operational mode and was already noting the assembly's silence as data.

My heart was doing something undignified at a very high rate.

"Right," I said.

"Yes," he agreed, which wasn't a response to anything, which I found oddly stabilizing. We were both equally wrecked. That seemed fair.

He stepped back one step. Then he turned to the assembly and spoke the closing words of the rite, and his voice was different: the ice put back but with something running through it that hadn't been there before, a hairline fault, visible only if you'd been watching closely enough and for long enough to know what the original looked like.

I stood in the center of the circle and breathed.

And then I looked down.

Force of habit, probably: I always account for the floor, always track what's underfoot, because in a place like Blackthorn the ground is the thing most likely to give way. Or maybe it was the ritual, the specific experience of *being in the circle*, making me want to understand what I was actually standing in.

The limestone was worn smooth by feet and centuries. The charter binding mark I'd already identified. The intersecting lines of the foundational design. And there, at the exact center: where anyone performing the deepest rite would stand, where I was standing right now, where Lucian's hand had been against my face:

My breath stopped.

Carved into the stone. Not inlaid, not painted, not added later. *Carved*, deeply, old enough that the edges had worn soft, as if they'd been touched and retouched by the knees and hands of people standing exactly here for longer than the charter had existed.

A hemlock branch.

Stylized, but unmistakable: five secondary branches from a central stem, the specific shorthand for *conium maculatum* that I had spent three weeks staring at in

Cora's journal until I could have reproduced it from memory in total darkness.

The mark on the floor, Cora had written, in the cramped hand she used when she was working something out. *Is older than the charter. It was here first.*

I had assumed she meant a different floor.

I kept my face completely still. I kept my shoulders level, my hands loose at my sides, my gaze moving back up and across the assembled Court with the expression of someone completing a ritual and nothing more. Margot. Sebastian's not-quite-casual stillness. Crane's steady hands. Lucian's fractured composure, the closing Latin still in his mouth.

The mark on the floor is older than the charter. It was here first.

Cora had stood exactly here.

I folded my hands.

I waited for the rite to close.

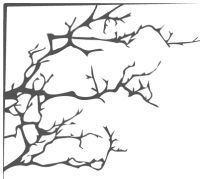
I did not look down again, and I did not let anything move in my face, and underneath all of it: underneath the stillness and the strategy and the two months of careful

small-print caution: my grief came up like a tide and I let it, because it was the only thing in the room that was entirely mine.

I found it, Cora. The thought arrived whole, flat, quiet, addressed to someone who wasn't there. *I'm standing in it right now.*

The candles burned. The Latin closed around me. Lucian's voice, almost itself again, named the words that sealed the rite.

I stood in the center of the hemlock seal and I breathed and I waited, and I kept everything I had just learned in the deepest possible pocket of myself where no one in this room would ever think to look for it.



Chapter 14: The Tithe

There is a particular silence to the undercroft when the candles are lit and the Court is assembled, and I have spent my whole life mistaking it for peace.

It is not peace. It is the sound of two hundred years agreeing to look away.

Wren knelt at the center of the circle in the gray initiate's shift, her bare shoulders catching the light, her chin at the exact insolent angle that made Margot's mouth thin and made something in my chest pull taut as wire. She was supposed to be afraid. Everyone is afraid here, on the stone where the founders cut their oath; that is the point of the stone. Instead she was *reading* the room: counting us, weighing the exits, filing every face. I knew because I had taught myself the same trick at nine years old, the night my father first brought me down here and told me the Thorne name was a debt, not a gift.

I was meant to be running the rite. I heard myself recite the Latin, the old words that taste like rust, and I watched her flinch at none of it. Brave or reckless. With her, I was learning, the line did not exist.

Crane lifted the cup. The rite required the initiate to drink, then speak the vow, then be marked. Simple. I had performed it a dozen times and felt nothing but the cold management of risk.

Tonight my hand was not steady.

Because I knew what was in the cup on the *other* table (the one Sebastian had prepared, the one meant for the pledges the Court had quietly decided were liabilities). A different draught. A worse night. And I had watched Sebastian's eyes move to Wren twice during the procession, calculating, and I had understood that somewhere above us, in a room with better wine, someone had already begun to think of her as a problem with a solution.

So when the cup came to me to pass to her, I turned my body half a degree (nothing anyone would mark unless they knew to) and I gave her mine.

The vow has rules. I have lived inside them so long I forget they are a cage until I press against the bars. Breaking even the smallest of them has a price; the founders built it into the blood, and the blood collects. When I switched the cups, I felt it: a fine bright wire of pain drawn down the inside of my arm, the vow taking its tithe for an act of mercy it did not authorize.

I welcomed it. That frightened me more than the pain.

"Drink," I told her, and my voice came out wrong: lower, rougher, stripped of the ice I keep it packed in.

She looked up at me. And for one unforgivable second neither of us was performing. Her eyes searched mine and found something (the warning I couldn't speak, the

truth the vow would not let past my teeth) and instead of drinking, she said, very quietly, so only I could hear:

"What did you just do?"

"Saved you a headache." I knelt, because the alternative was letting my hand shake where the Court could see it. Close now. Close enough that the candlelight made one warm room of the space between us in all that cold stone. "Drink the cup, Wren. *This* one. Trust me for the length of one swallow, and hate me again after. I'll allow it."

I don't know what she heard in it. I have replayed that moment more times than I will ever admit, and I still don't know. But she drank (eyes on mine the whole time, a deliberate, dangerous act of faith from a girl who had every reason to give me none) and the relief that went through me was so total it was indistinguishable from grief.

I marked her then. The brand is meant to be a formality, a smear of ash and oil in the shape of the five-petaled flower. My thumb moved across the soft skin below her collarbone, and she breathed in, and I felt the breath as if it were mine, and the wire of pain in my arm meant *nothing* against it.

This was the moment I stopped lying to myself.

I had told the Court I was keeping her close to manage the risk. I had told *myself* the same thing in the same cold voice I use for everything. But there is no version of strategy that explains the way I could not take my hand from her skin a heartbeat longer than the rite required, or the murder I felt (clean, simple, almost restful) when I thought of Sebastian's cup.

The Latin demanded the closing line. I said it. The candles guttered as the undercroft door opened at the top of the stairs, the way it only opens for one kind of visitor, and I felt the whole Court go still around me like a held breath.

The Patron's envoy never comes to a rite.

I rose, and I put my body, without deciding to, the way you flinch from fire, between Wren and the stairs.

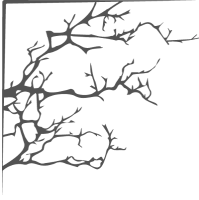
She noticed. Of course she noticed. She notices everything; it is going to get her killed, and I am going to burn the world down before I let it.

"Lucian," she murmured, still kneeling, the brand wet and dark on her skin, "who is that?"

The vow held my tongue. The truth I owed her (*that's the hand that took your sister; that's the reason I'm a liar; that's what's coming for you next*) sat behind my teeth like a stone I'd swallowed years ago and could not bring up.

So I said the only true thing it would let me say.

"The reason," I told her, "you should have run when I gave you the chance."



Chapter 15: After

The candles were still burning when they let us out.

That was the detail I couldn't shake, not the stone circle, not the Latin, not the weight of Lucian's hand at the small of my back steering me up the stairs with something that felt less like control and more like care, which was worse. The candles. Dozens of them, still lit, because someone had planned for us to take their time.

I showered in Wexford until the hot water gave up on me, which took four minutes, because this building was heated by Victorian optimism and blind faith in thick

wool. The water ran cold. I pressed my forehead to the tile and made a list, the way I'd been making lists since I was seventeen and needed something to do with my hands that wasn't crying.

What I know: The hemlock symbol in the floor matches Cora's journal. The undercroft is where it happened. The cup on the other table was different from the one I drank from.

What I don't know: Who prepared it. Who authorized it. Whether Lucian knew before or after.

I got dressed and started a third column, *What I felt*, and then closed that one without writing anything in it.

The ritual hadn't been what I'd planned for. I'd expected theater: smoke and mirrors, social performance, the kind of gothic ceremony that looked impressive and meant nothing. Instead it had meant something, and the something was still sitting in my chest like a coal, warm, persistent, and entirely inconvenient. In the circle, Lucian had looked at me with his control stripped back one layer too many, and I'd looked back, and neither of us had been performing, and then I'd seen the hemlock carved into the floor beneath us and filed it as *useful data* so hard I almost believed myself.

Grief sharpened into edge, my therapist had told me once, when I was too angry to cry and too broke to keep coming. *You use it to cut.* She'd meant it as a warning. I'd taken it as a method.

The edge was getting complicated.

* * *



HIS MESSAGE CAME AT seven-twelve: *You'll breakfast with me.*

Not a question. The man was constitutionally incapable of phrasing invitations as anything other than edicts, which I'd catalogued as a character flaw and, increasingly against my own interests, a thing I found consistently interesting. I typed back: *Does the Court charter cover breakfast orders, or is that still an area of personal autonomy?*

Forty-three seconds. *East dining room. Fifteen minutes.*

He was watching his phone and pretending not to. I filed that too.

The east dining room existed in a different tax bracket from the rest of the building, dark paneling, a working fireplace, a table for twelve currently set for two. The kind of room where old money made decisions over eggs and then declined to document them. Lucian was already there when I arrived, and he stood up, which was an etiquette gesture from 1850 that I had not anticipated and chose not to read into. I was full up on things I was choosing not to read into.

"You slept," he said.

"Two hours. It's fine." I took the chair across from him, small geometry, necessary geometry. "The Patron's envoy. Last night, after the rite. Who was she?"

The briefest pause. "You noticed her."

"I notice everything. It's my worst quality, or second worst, depending on who you ask." I poured coffee and held his eyes over the cup. "She left with a folio."

He answered in careful installments: a woman, late fifties, a car with no plates, a leather folio filled from the Court's archives. She'd spoken with Margot. She'd spoken with Sebastian. She had not asked for Lucian directly, which he mentioned in a tone that meant *this is a threat I haven't finished naming yet*.

"She asked about new pledges," he said. "About instability. About *problems that need resolution*." He turned his coffee cup a quarter rotation, the thinking gesture; I'd catalogued it in week two. "And about Aldric."

The name sat between us.

Aldric was a third-year I'd only ever seen in passing, quiet, large-eyed, on scholarship like me, who'd made the mistake of asking the wrong questions at the wrong time and had spent the last twenty-five days in the medical wing with an injury the official report called a fall and the bruising pattern explicitly contradicted. I'd been tracking him in the margins of my literature notes. *Day 22. No change. Day 25. No change.* Crane had been my source, careful and low-voiced, looking at me when she told me with an expression I still hadn't been able to fully decode.

"How not improving?" I asked.

"Transferred to intensive care this morning." Lucian set down his cup with the precision of someone managing something that was not precise at all. "His family is asking questions."

Good. Someone should.

"What does the Court do when families start asking questions?" I asked.

His jaw set. "It manages."

"That's not an answer."

"No." He met my eyes, and for a moment the careful machinery behind them went still. "It's what I have."

I thought about a lily arrangement and a coroner's report and a phone that rang into nothing. *Manages*. The Court had managed Cora too. I wondered what Lucian knew about that kind of managing, and I wondered what I'd do with the answer when I found out.

"The Patron's envoy," I said, steering. "Does she come regularly?"

"Never unannounced." A pause. "Someone flagged something."

"What something."

"A vulnerability." The word cost him something to say. "In the Court's current structure."

He meant me. I could trace the shape of what he wasn't saying, and it was: *a new Calloway, someone asking too many questions, someone who'd been on a shortlist and survived the rite and was now sitting at his breakfast table with unfiled leverage in her expression*. The difference between Cora and me, I thought, was that I had Lucian between me and whatever was in the cup on

the other table. I didn't know yet whether that made me safer or whether it made me something more complicated: a person who trusted the wrong thing for the right reasons, which was how the elegant traps worked.

"Aldric," I said. "Can you get me the actual hospitalization report? Not the official one."

Something worked in his jaw. "That could create a problem."

"More of a problem than whatever already created one for him?"

A long beat. "I'll make calls," he said.

* * *



HERE IS THE THING ABOUT using someone as a weapon: you have to keep them at a distance. You have to stay clinical, *this is a means, this is a variable in a calculation*. The moment you start noticing how they

hold a coffee cup or the specific frequency at which their control slips or the way their face does something almost-human when they're trying not to find something funny, at that moment the weapon becomes a person, and you become a liability to your own plan.

I had become a liability somewhere around the second time Lucian Thorne put himself between me and harm without being asked.

I ate toast and watched him across the table and had the deeply inconvenient thought that I had walked into Blackthorn University three months ago with an architecture, and the architecture had not included the possibility that the man I'd come to expose might be someone I could actually talk to. Someone who looked at me like I was a problem worth *solving* rather than a problem worth ending.

Bad data. I needed to keep collecting and stop interpreting.

"What happens to me," I said, "if the Patron's people decide I'm a vulnerability."

He was quiet long enough to count. "That won't happen."

"Because you'll stop it."

"Yes."

No qualification. No *I'll attempt to* or *I'll do what I can*. Just yes, flat and clean, like a statement of fact about the weather.

I looked at him for a long moment and felt something shift, the way tectonic things shift, very slowly and below sensation, until the ground is already different under your feet.

"You can't promise that," I said.

"I'm aware." He held my gaze. "I promised it anyway."

* * *



HE HAD A MEETING AT ten. I had Court leave, forty-eight post-rite hours, apparently, written into a charter that I hadn't known existed for a ritual I hadn't entirely survived with my theory intact.

We ended up in the Thorne wing.

I'd tell myself later that he initiated it, *gave me a tour*, I'd write in my notes, nice neutral framing, but the truth was we'd both drifted there after breakfast, him walking, me following, neither of us saying where we were going. The wing sat in a corner of the east building that appeared on no student-facing map, accessed through a door that looked like paneling until it didn't.

I'd built a mental image of his rooms: cold and controlled, architectural, a lot of dark wood and nothing personal. I was right about the dark wood. Wrong about the rest.

Books with broken spines, which meant actually read rather than inherited and displayed. A jacket thrown over a chair at an angle that suggested someone had come in frustrated and not gone back for it. A glass on the windowsill, half-full, with a faint ring beneath it from sitting too long. Either Lucian had forgotten it or Lucian had chosen to leave it, and I couldn't decide which version was more interesting, the one who was meticulous in everything, or the one who allowed himself the private luxury of small disorder.

Maps on the wall: old coastlines, Latin city names, the edges of the known world just stopping where certainty ran out. A photograph on the desk that I didn't look at directly but catalogued peripherally, two people, one of

them a younger Lucian, the other a man who shared his jaw and his quality of stillness. Dead now, I assumed. The Court ate its own.

There was a second door, off the study, half-hidden behind a shelving unit. Lucian steered past it with the practiced nonchalance of someone who had decided in advance not to look at a thing.

I noticed. Obviously.

"Records room?" I asked.

"Storage." His voice was even. "Old correspondence. Court documents that don't belong in the main archive."

Don't belong in the main archive. I let the sentence sit in my chest and said nothing.

We ended up in the study, where the air felt heavy with the smell of old paper and cedar, and a fire was dying in the grate. He didn't lead me to the window seat this time. He stopped by the desk, his back to me, but I could see the tension in his shoulders through the fine wool of his shirt.

"Tell me something true," he said.

I stepped closer, the sound of my own breathing suddenly loud in the quiet room.

"About anything." He turned then, and the look on his face was dangerous. It wasn't the assessment look or the mask of the Court. It was a raw, focused hunger that made my stomach flip. "I find I want something unperformed."

Three months of the truth sat at the base of my throat. The shape of my sister's name. The shape of a box they'd sent home. *Transfer student. Comparative literature. Scholarship*, all true, technically, and none of it true at all. I had the sudden, dizzying impulse to say it. To watch his face when I did and finally, finally learn what I was actually dealing with.

"I have a sister," I started.

He went very still.

"Had," I said, and the correction landed in my chest the way it always did, and I made the only move I had. I stepped into his space, my chest almost touching his. "She died. Few years ago. I'm, still figuring out what to do with that." I looked up at him, my voice dropping an octave. "That's true. That's an unperformed thing."

He didn't answer with words. He reached out and brushed a stray hair away from my forehead, his fingers lingering against my skin. The touch was light, but it felt like a spark hitting gasoline. His hand slid down to the nape of my neck, pulling me just an inch closer.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

The vulnerability in his voice was more provocative than any line he'd ever used to intimidate me. I wanted to tear through the rest of the control. I reached up and gripped the lapel of his jacket, pulling him down toward me.

He stopped just before our lips touched, a fraction of an inch of air between us. He was breathing hard, the heat of it ghosting over my mouth. "Is this okay?" he asked, his voice strained. "Do you want this?"

"I want you to stop asking and just do it," I replied, my voice a jagged edge.

He didn't hesitate. He crashed his mouth against mine with a desperation that felt like a confession. It wasn't a gentle kiss; it was a collision. He tasted of black coffee and something cold, like rain on stone. My hands moved from his jacket to his hair, pulling him closer, trying to erase the remaining distance between us.

He backed me up until my thighs hit the edge of the heavy mahogany desk. He didn't break the kiss, but he shifted his weight, pinning me against the wood. One of his hands left my neck to slide down my waist, gripping my hip with a pressure that promised bruises. I let out a sharp sound, half-moan and half-gasp, and wrapped one leg around his waist, pulling him flush against me.

I could feel everything: the hard line of his chest, the frantic beat of his heart, the weight of him pressing me into the desk. He broke the kiss to trail his lips down my jawline to the sensitive dip beneath my ear. I tilted my head back, eyes closing, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Lucian," I breathed.

He paused, his breath hot against my skin. "Tell me to stop if you want to," he murmured. "Right now."

"Don't you dare stop," I whispered.

He let out a low groan and moved his hand from my hip to the hem of my sweater, sliding his palm up against the skin of my stomach. His touch was searing, a stark contrast to the chill of the room. He pushed the fabric up, his fingers grazing the underside of my ribs. I arched into him, my breath hitching as he found the sensitive curve of my waist.

He moved back to my lips, the kiss slower now, deeper, tasting of something heavy and inevitable. He shifted his hand lower, his palm cupping me through the thin fabric of my underwear, a slow, deliberate pressure that made my toes curl. I gasped into his mouth, my hands sliding down to grip the belt of his trousers.

I wanted more. I wanted the friction, the release, the total collapse of the walls we'd both spent three months building. I started to tug at his belt, but he caught my wrist in a grip that was firm but not restrictive.

He pulled back, just far enough to look me in the eyes. His pupils were blown wide, his gaze dark and fractured. He looked like a man who was fighting a war with himself and losing.

"Not yet," he rasped.

"Why?" I asked, my voice sounding foreign to me, breathless and demanding. "Why not now?"

"Because if I start," he said, his voice shaking slightly, "I won't be able to stop until you've forgotten everything else in this house. And you need your head clear for what comes next."

He was right, which made it infuriating. The tension remained, a live wire between us, vibrating with everything we weren't doing. He leaned forward and pressed one last, lingering kiss to my forehead, then slowly stepped back.

The sudden absence of his heat felt like a physical blow. I stayed leaning against the desk for a moment, my skin humming, my breath still uneven. The power balance had

shifted; he'd given me something real, but he'd also reminded me that he was the one who decided when the game paused.

"The hospitalization report," he said, his voice returning to terms of business, though it was still rough around the edges. "Give me time to make calls."

* * *



HE WENT TO MAKE CALLS.

I stayed.

The study was quiet without him, fire, fog, the photograph of a dead man's jaw. I sat on the window seat for approximately ninety seconds. Then I stood up and walked to the second door.

The shelving unit swung away from the wall with more ease than I expected, which meant either Lucian used this room regularly or someone maintained it. Both options were interesting. The door behind it was unlocked, which

meant either he trusted me or he'd decided that locking it was more telling than leaving it open. I filed the question and went through.

Cold room. High window. Three walls of floor-to-ceiling shelving: archive boxes in cramped handwriting, years and categories, *rite proceedings*, *pledge records*, *tithe accounts*, dust on the oldest, less on the new. A filing system both meticulous and obscure, organized in some logic that wasn't alphabetical or chronological but something more intentional. The logic of someone hiding things not from the room, but from the pattern.

I ran my eyes along the shelves. Pattern first. Anomaly second.

The anomaly was near the back: a manila folder, cheap, campus bookstore, recent, tucked between two leather-cornered boxes from three years ago.

I didn't recognize the folder. I recognized the handwriting on the tab.

C.C.

My hands moved before I decided anything. They reached and they took it and they opened it, and there were the pages.

Nine of them. Torn at the top where they'd been pulled from a spiral journal, I knew the perforation pattern; I'd held a burned fragment of the same journal for three months. Cora's handwriting, cramped and quick, the way she wrote when she was thinking faster than her pen. The way she wrote when she was afraid.

The first page was dated six weeks before she died.

She knew about the Reaping. Not the myth the Court fed to new pledges, the real mechanics, mapped in her careful hand. Who had come before. Who had gone quietly. What the hemlock symbol meant and where it appeared and what the founding documents said about *the tithe the vow demands*. She had been building a case, I realized, with a lurch so physical it felt like falling, she had been doing exactly what I had been doing, brick by careful brick, right up until she couldn't anymore.

L has the founding documents, she'd written. L has everything, I don't think L knows I know yet, but I'm going to,

The page ended there.

The next one was shakier. Faster. The pen had slipped in one place, a long pale scratch across the margin.

I was wrong about L. I need to reconsider. I think I've been wrong about L from the beginning, I need to,

And the last page, barely a page. More impression than sentence. Written, I thought, in the dark or very quickly, the letters running together where the pen had moved faster than the hand:

If I don't get out. Hemlock room. The floor. Look at the floor.

I'd been looking at the floor. Under Lucian's hands, under the Latin, under everything, the hemlock carved into the stone where she'd told me to look, three years before I arrived to look for it.

He had her journal pages.

Lucian Thorne had Cora's journal pages in his private storage room, and I was standing here with my hands shaking, and there were exactly two reasons he might have them: either he'd taken them to keep them safe, evidence she'd found, evidence she couldn't finish, or he'd taken them to make sure they were never found.

I was wrong about L.

She'd been wrong about L. Which meant either L wasn't Lucian and he'd been protecting her record this whole time, or she'd cleared him too soon, and he'd used that window, and I was standing in his locked room with the evidence against her death in my hands and he was twenty feet away.

I folded the pages the way Cora had taught me to fold things, flat, corners tucked, no crease at the edges. I slid them inside my sweater, against my ribs, where they lay cold and thin and real.

When Lucian came back into the study eleven minutes later, I was on the window seat exactly where he'd left me, watching the fog do its usual nothing over the quad.

"I got you access to the report," he said. "Wren, "

"Thank you," I said.

My voice came out even. I was proud of it. I sounded like someone who hadn't just found the thing that could change everything, like someone running no calculations at all while making polite eye contact and accepting coffee.

He looked at me with the full-attention look for a long moment, and something moved at the edge of it, brief and uncertain, like he was almost asking something he didn't yet know how to ask.

"Tomorrow," he said finally. "We'll go through the report together."

"Sure," I said. "Tomorrow."

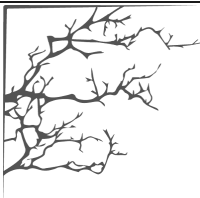
Tomorrow, I'd know what kind of man he was. Tomorrow, one of the two theories I was running would be right and the other would be gone, and I'd know whether the feeling in my chest was evidence of something real or evidence I'd made the oldest, most ruinous mistake available to someone in my position.

Tonight I had nine pages of my sister's handwriting pressed flat against my ribs, and the hemlock question still open and bleeding, and Lucian Thorne three feet away not knowing what I knew.

I was wrong about L.

Cora. Always smarter than me. Always one step ahead, right up until she wasn't.

I was going to catch up.



Chapter 16: Half-Truths

The pages were moved.

Eighteen months of keeping Cora Calloway's last words in exactly the same position (tucked beneath Hobbes's *Leviathan*, third shelf, left side, three centimeters from the spine), and this morning the stack lay flush with the edge.

I knew because I measured. I knew because the night I'd retrieved them from her room, in the four minutes before the Court swept through and took everything else, I'd placed them with the same methodical attention I applied to anything I wanted to survive my memory unaltered. Grief makes a poor archivist. Guilt is more reliable.

Someone had read them.

Someone with the discipline to replace them, but not the knowledge of how precisely I'd left them.

I stood in my study for a long time. Long enough for the fire to fall from orange to grey, for the morning light through the high windows to shift from gold to the flat white of a Blackthorn winter. Long enough to construct,

with the careful attention that was all I had left of my better self, a complete and coherent account of the previous twelve hours.

She had been here.

After (and I had to work to keep the *after* from acquiring its full weight, from dragging the thought somewhere it would be harder to examine), after she had fallen asleep in my bed, I had gone down to the undercroft for the meeting that the Patron's envoy had arrived to chair. Two hours. Two hours in which Wren Calloway had been alone in my private rooms, with the run of every shelf and every foolishly unlocked cabinet, and I had been two floors below discussing supply chain logistics and pretending that the word *Reaping* had no weight.

Two hours.

I thought about her hands. How they went very still when she was thinking, the way a person goes still when they are not thinking, when they are filing. How she'd learned, since those first rattling days in the dormitory, to absorb information without her face.

She had not been sleeping.

* * *



I SAT DOWN AT MY DESK because my legs had made their opinion known.

There is a particular kind of intelligence I had spent seven years in the Court learning to identify and guard against: the kind that presents at the edges as soft and at the center files everything, cross-references everything, builds a picture from materials no one intended to leave lying. My father had called it *peasant cleverness*, which was his name for any capacity he didn't possess. I had watched Wren arrive at Blackthorn with one suitcase and an expression designed to read as overwhelmed, and I had recognized within twenty-four hours that the expression was precisely that: designed.

What I had failed to account for was the object of the design.

I pulled the pages from beneath the Hobbes and smoothed them on the desk. Cora's handwriting. Careful at first, then increasingly compressed: the hand of someone running out of time they didn't know they were

running out of. I had read them enough times to recite them with my eyes closed. *The Reaping. The shortlist. L. Ask L.*

She had meant it as a title, not a name.

I had known that for three years and been unable to correct the record because the blood vow draws a very clean line between what I may confirm and what I may explain, and the difference between those two things was, in this case, a person's life.

The sisters look alike. I had known this when she walked through my door in October; I had filed it and continued filing, because filing is what I do when feeling something would be inconvenient, which has been almost always since I was nine years old and my father first brought me down to the founders' stone and told me the Thorne name was a debt, not a gift.

She had come to Blackthorn for her sister.

Not for the scholarship, which she'd filed well enough to pass casual scrutiny. Not for the literature program, not for the social mobility that Blackthorn's name conferred on its graduates, not for any of the ordinary reasons ordinary people fought for a seat here. She had come with a purpose, and I had watched her pursue it for three months while telling myself I was keeping her close for strategic reasons, and last night I had let her sleep in my

rooms and turned my back and she had found the one piece of evidence I had been too guilty and too cowardly to destroy.

I was going to have to talk to her.

* * *



I FOUND HER IN THE east corridor, moving fast with her bag over her shoulder and her eyes fixed somewhere forward and useful, in the manner of a person very focused on not being in the same building as a specific other person.

"Wren."

She stopped. One slow, deliberate breath. Then she turned, and her face was arranged in an expression I recognized because I had been wearing its cousin all morning: prepared, neutral, a controlled surface over turbulent interior workings.

"I have a lecture," she said.

"You don't. Thursdays are light." A pause. "I know your schedule."

Something moved in her eyes: not quite caught, but adjacent to it. "That's not alarming at all."

"Come with me."

It was not a question. We had developed, over the past weeks, a particular shorthand for the things neither of us would say in public, and the shorthand for *I know, and you know that I know, and we cannot do this here* was a certain flatness in my voice that she had learned to read. She read it now. She fell into step beside me without another word, and I was grateful for it in a way that felt close to dangerous.

The old seminar room at the end of the east corridor has been locked for two years, since the plasterwork developed a crack the university is pretending doesn't exist. I have a key. I have keys to most rooms in this building, because the Court considers access a form of currency, and I have spent seven years making myself expensive. I unlocked it now, stood aside, and closed the door behind us both.

Cold. Dusty. No candles, no Latin carved into the floor, no ceremony of any kind: just two people in a room with a crack in the wall.

* * *



"YOU READ THEM," I SAID.

She didn't pretend. I would have respected her less if she had.

"Yes."

"All of them."

"Yes."

I moved to the window. Outside, November had stripped the oaks to bone, and the quad lay grey and still and damp. I kept my eyes on it because looking at her required something I wasn't sure I had in useful quantities at the moment.

"You came here for Cora," I said. "Not for the scholarship. Not for the literature program. You came to investigate her death."

The silence lasted exactly three seconds.

"She didn't jump," Wren said.

"No." The word came before I could weigh it against the vow's architecture. The pressure stirred behind my sternum (the blood's reminder), but it didn't bite. A confirmation was apparently within permissible range. What was not permitted was the map. "She didn't jump."

I heard her exhale: sharp, sudden, the sound of someone who has been holding a single breath for a very long time and has finally been told they can stop. I still didn't turn around.

"You knew," she said. Her voice was choosing its words the way you choose footing on ice: each one tested before weight is applied. "You knew the whole time."

"Yes."

"And you watched me come closer, and you said nothing."

"I was not able to say anything."

"Don't." The careful voice went abruptly uncaringful. "Don't give me the vow as an excuse for three months of..." She stopped. Started again at a different angle. "You used me."

I turned around.

She was standing in the center of the room the way she'd stood in the undercroft circle: shoulders squared, chin lifted, running the exits. There were tears she was not permitting herself in the corners of her eyes. Her jaw was a blade.

"Yes," I said. "And no."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one I have." I crossed the room, because I couldn't be at the window while her face looked like that, couldn't maintain useful distance with her looking at me like I was precisely what she'd suspected me of being. "I brought you close because it was safer than letting you run without my knowledge of where you were and what you were finding. That part was calculation."

"And the rest."

"The rest was not calculation."

She looked at me for a long time with the unflinching attention she'd been turning on Blackthorn since October, and I did not flinch from it.

"What do you know?" I asked her.

A small pause. "I'm sorry?"

"You read the pages. You've been investigating for three months. What have you concluded?" I watched her face. "You're not going to tell me everything. I'm not asking for everything. But we're trading partial truths here, Wren; you might as well be aware that we're doing it."

Something shifted in her expression. Not quite respect. Adjacent to it.

"I know the Reaping is real," she said carefully. "I know initiates go onto a shortlist. I know Cora found out about it and started writing down what she learned." A beat. "I know *L* doesn't mean what I thought it meant, which means there's someone else I haven't identified yet."

"That's what you'll give me."

"That's what I have." Her chin came up a half-degree. "What about you?"

* * *



I SAT ON THE EDGE OF the seminar table, a graceless gesture that I made anyway, because the alternative was standing over her while telling her things I'd never told anyone, which felt like the wrong architecture for the conversation.

"Your sister found something significant," I said. "In her first semester. Something most initiates take years to locate, if they locate it at all." The pressure sharpened behind my sternum as I approached the edge of what the vow permitted, and I eased back. "I cannot tell you what she found. I cannot tell you how close she was, or to what. But she was..." I stopped. Chose with precision. "She was not wrong. And someone with standing in this institution knew she was not wrong."

Wren was very still. "You're protecting someone."

I had not planned to say what I said next. "Something. And someone. Yes."

She absorbed this. I watched her absorb it: the way she filed it, slotted it into the architecture of everything else she'd built, tested its weight.

"Who?" she asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"The vow," I said, "makes those two things the same. I am not hiding behind it. It is a physiological fact with physical consequences, and I have already paid portions of those consequences for smaller infractions than the ones you're asking me to commit." I held her gaze. "When I say *cannot*, I mean that my blood will not permit it."

She looked at me for a long moment. "Then what can you tell me?"

I had thought about this question, I realized, without ever consciously posing it to myself. I had thought about it every morning for three years, in the interval between sleeping and waking when honesty is hardest to refuse. What can I say? What does the vow allow? What is mine to give, as distinct from what belongs to the Court?

There was one thing. A narrow, insufficient, necessary thing.

"Your sister was brave," I said. "Braver than most people who have passed through this institution across two hundred years of its history. She assembled her evidence quickly, and she trusted carefully, and she was..." The wire pulled. I breathed through it. "She was closer to the truth than anyone before her had been. That is not nothing."

"She's still dead."

"Yes."

Wren crossed to the window. She stood where I had stood, looking out at the bare oaks and the grey quad, and she was quiet for long enough that I began to understand what the quiet meant: not absence of thought, but the opposite. The silence of someone assembling.

"Did you try to protect her?" she asked, without turning. "When she was alive. Like you've been trying to protect me."

The question landed differently than I expected. I had prepared for versions of *you knew and said nothing* and *you're complicit* and *I trusted you*: the accusations that were accurate and that I deserved. I had not prepared for this one, because it assumed something I had not confirmed.

"Yes," I said.

She turned. "And failed."

"Yes."

The word cost more than I had. I watched it cost her something too: watched her face do the complicated thing it did when something she'd needed to be true turned out to actually be true, and the relief of it was inseparable from the grief.

"How did it happen?" Her voice was very low. "Not who. Not names. Just... how did she end up at the top of that tower? How did someone make it look like..." She stopped. Started again. "She was afraid of heights. She texted me the night before they say she climbed alone. She told me she'd call me tomorrow."

I looked at her face.

I had carried the knowledge of how it happened for three years like a stone in the center of my chest, and the vow had made of it something immovable: not forgettable, not expiable, not speakable. I had tried, in the early months, to find the edge of what was permitted: writing it out in the dark, testing phrases in the silence of rooms I was certain were empty. The vow had been thorough. The vow is always thorough.

What the vow had not sealed (what belonged to me, not to the Court, not to any oath sworn over the founders' stone) was a single narrow fact about myself. My own witness. My own position on a staircase at a particular hour. My own face, reflected back in glass, watching something happen to which I had arrived exactly too late.

That was mine. That was only mine.

I crossed to her. She held her ground (she always held her ground) and I stopped when there was very little space left between us, and I looked at her face with its blade-

jaw and its too-careful eyes, and I said the only true thing left in the room that I was permitted to say.

"Wren."

She waited.

"I didn't kill your sister."

The air went still.

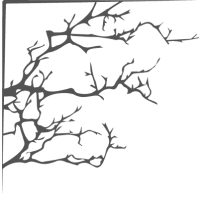
A beat. The length of a held breath. The length of three years.

"But I watched her die."

* * *



CHAPTER 17: COLD WAR



Chapter 17: Cold War

I watched her die.

Four words. I'd been taking them apart since 3 a.m., turning them like a key that wouldn't fit any lock I could find.

Not: *I killed her*. Not: *I didn't know*. Not even the comfort of *I tried to stop it*. Just: I watched. Present, awake, witness, and silent about it for three years while I dragged my suitcase up his family's driveway and told myself I was the only one who'd come looking.

I got dressed in the dark because I didn't want to see my own face.

The dining hall was full of the usual sounds: silver against china, Latin conjugations murmured like prayers, someone crying quietly in the corner, standard Wednesday. I took a seat at the far end of the long table, poured coffee, and opened my phonetics textbook to the wrong page. Nobody sat next to me, which was fine. I'd cultivated an atmosphere.

Lucian appeared in the doorway at eight twelve. I know because I'd been watching the door with the specific focused attention of someone pretending very hard not to watch the door.

He looked like he hadn't slept either. That almost made me feel better. Almost.

He didn't come to my table. He went to his usual seat at the head of the room, and for twenty three minutes we occupied the same space with the precision of two magnets turned wrong way around: close enough to feel it, careful enough not to touch.

When he finally looked at me, I was already looking away.

That was the whole game. I'd gotten very good at it overnight.

He found me in the archive room at noon. Of course he did; Lucian Thorne had a gift for locating me precisely where I'd gone to be alone with my worst thoughts.

He set a coffee cup six inches from my hand. The good kind, dark roast, the way he'd learned I took it without ever asking me directly. That small specific knowledge felt like an accusation now.

"Wren."

"Thorne." I didn't look up from Cora's half burned page, which I'd been staring at long enough that the words had stopped meaning anything. "You can have the other table. It's quieter."

He sat down across from me.

"I'm not here to argue," he said.

"Good. I'm not here to argue either." I turned the page over, turned it back. "I'm here to work."

A long pause. In Lucian's silences, you could hear a whole conversation happening that you weren't invited to: all the careful architecture of someone who chose every word like he was placing load bearing stones.

"What I told you last night," he began.

"Was three years too late," I said, pleasantly. "So it's fine. We've established the timeline. I'm not angry."

The particular neutrality of my voice did everything I needed it to do. I watched him register it: the flatness, the absence of heat, and I watched him understand that I was

more dangerous to him like this than I'd ever been screaming.

He left twenty minutes later. I sat with my cold coffee and turned Cora's page over again and thought: *good*.

Being angry would have been easier. Angry, I would have needed him to fix something. This, this careful frost, left me nothing to need.

Needing things at Blackthorn got people sent home in boxes.

The afternoon was mine, which was the problem with cold wars; they freed up a lot of time.

I went to the student records annex, which I'd been avoiding because Lucian had gently redirected me away from it twice in the past week. I understood now why. Gentle redirection was another word for *I'm managing what you find and when you find it*. I wasn't being managed anymore.

The annex clerk, a third year named Pip who owed me a favor involving a missed exam and a very fortunate coincidence, let me into the older filing stacks without asking too many questions. I told him I was researching graduation records for a comparative lit project. He nodded like that was reasonable and went back to his crossword.

The 2022 withdrawal records were misfiled, which was itself interesting; someone had been through this drawer before me, recently enough that the folders still sat wrong. I found Cora's file in the back, tucked behind an alphabetical neighbor who'd left the year prior.

What was in it wasn't what I expected.

Not a death certificate. Not a coroner's notation. Just a withdrawal form in crisp administrative language: *medical withdrawal, student unable to continue, effective immediately*. Signed by the Headmaster. Countersigned by a name I didn't know, in a handwriting I was beginning to recognize: the same looping, slightly too precise script from the unsigned initials in Cora's journal. The letter *L* I'd misread for weeks.

I photographed the form. I photographed both signatures. I stood in the flickering fluorescent light of the annex stacks and felt the shape of something large and deliberate: not chaos, not accident. *Administration*. The kind that left a paper trail on purpose, because paper trails could be controlled, and bodies are always more complicated than paperwork.

My hands were steady. I'd learned that meant something was very wrong.

On the way out, I checked the register of keys for the restricted archive. Three names in the last six months. Two I recognized. One I didn't yet, but would.

I wrote it down and kept walking.

Margot materialized in the east corridor at four, as if summoned by the precise frequency of someone else's anxiety.

She fell into step beside me without greeting, her heels clicking a counterpoint to my boots on the flagstone. She had the particular quality of someone delivering information she'd like not to be on record delivering.

"There's going to be an audit," she said. "Court convenes tomorrow. Someone's been talking outside."

"Talking about what."

"What do you think." Not a question. "The rites. Specifics. Someone's academic advisor received a very interesting letter. The kind with Latin in it."

The cold thing in my chest sharpened. I thought about every note I'd sent, every person I'd called. Two weeks of silence. "I haven't contacted anyone outside."

"I know. I've been watching you." She said it like that was perfectly normal. "You haven't spoken to anyone beyond these walls in a fortnight. Thorne has, however,

been observed having conversations with Headmaster Lyle that exceed administrative necessity by a significant margin."

I stopped walking.

"He's been covering for someone," Margot continued, without stopping. "The Court thinks the leak traces to him. Or to whoever he's been protecting." She glanced back at me over one sharp shoulder. "This would be a very bad time for him to be associated with a girl who is actively, recklessly investigating a three year old death."

She was gone around the corner before I could answer.

I stood in the corridor with cold stone on three sides and the bell tower beginning to toll five o'clock, and I did the math.

The audit was coming. If they found what I'd been doing: the journal pages, the photographs, the annex visit, it would land on Lucian. He'd already taken hits for me I hadn't known about.

The logical move was to stop.

I walked faster.

He was in the Thorne library at eight: his private one, painted ceiling, the desk that had been Cora's, and I let myself in with the key he'd copied me when I was still

pretending I needed it.

He looked up. Something moved in his face. Hope, I think, which was the wrong thing to feel looking at me right now: and then he saw my expression and it locked back down.

"I need to know about the audit," I said.

"Wren," he started.

"The audit." I took the formal chair, the one across the desk, the one for visitors. Not the close chair. Not the one I'd been using lately. I kept my hands folded in my lap and watched him register the geometry of it. "Margot says they're looking for a leak. She says it traces to you."

His jaw tightened. "It traces to me because I redirected it there."

I looked at him.

"There were questions about certain communications," he said, choosing each word like it was load bearing. "I ensured the inquiry followed a particular path."

"Your path."

"Yes."

"Because if it pointed at me," I whispered.

"Because if it pointed at you," he said, quiet and exact, "the Court would have resolved the question of the Calloway girl rather faster than I prefer."

Resolved. Such a Blackthorn word. Such a clean, terrible word for what it meant.

I looked at the desk between us. Cora's initials were underneath it somewhere, pressed into the wood by someone who didn't think she'd last long enough to see the carving fade. *C.C.* Like she was already signing off.

"That was before last night," I said. "Before you told me what you told me."

"Yes."

"And you're still," I stopped. Started again. "You're still covering."

"Yes."

He said it the way people say things when they've already decided not to explain the rest. I hated it. I hated him, a little, in the specific way you hate people who make you need things you'd sworn off needing.

I stood up and walked around the desk. I didn't know why I was doing it. Maybe I wanted to see if he would flinch. Maybe I wanted to see if the heat between us had burned out in the cold war of the last twelve hours.

He didn't move, but his breathing shifted. He stopped being a statue and became a man: someone with a pulse that was currently hammering against the high collar of his shirt.

I stopped inches from him. The scent of him was there, as always: cedar, old paper, and something sharp like ozone before a storm. It was a grounding smell, a steadying one, and it made me feel like I was losing my grip on the anger I'd spent all day polishing.

"You think you can just manage me," I said, my voice dropping an octave. "Put me in a box where I'm safe and quiet, and that solves everything."

Lucian stood up slowly. He didn't back away. In fact, he stepped into my space, forcing me to tilt my head back to look him in the eye. The air between us felt thick, charged with the kind of static that makes your skin prickle.

"I don't want you quiet, Wren," he said. His voice had lost its formal edge; it was rougher now, a low vibration that I could feel in my own chest. "I want you alive."

His hand rose. He didn't touch me yet, but his fingers hovered just an inch from my jawline. The heat radiating from him was oppressive. My heart was drumming a frantic rhythm against my ribs, and for the first time

today, it wasn't because of Cora or the Court. It was because he was looking at me like I was the only thing in the room that mattered.

"Is this part of the management?" I asked. "The redirection strategy?"

"No," he whispered. "This is a failure of discipline."

He closed the gap. His thumb brushed my cheekbone, then slid down to the corner of my mouth. It was a light touch, barely there, but it felt like a brand. I should have pulled away. I should have reminded him that he'd watched my sister die. Instead, I leaned into the contact, my eyes closing for a second as I breathed him in.

The tension was a physical weight. I could feel the heat of his body through his clothes, the steady radiation of someone who had spent far too long pretending he didn't want to touch me.

"I can't think when you do that," I murmured.

"Then stop thinking," Lucian said.

He shifted his hand to the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me just a fraction closer. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. The world outside the library ceased to exist: there was no audit, no

Margot, no dead girls in old files. There was only the pressure of his palm against my skin and the desperate, aching void between our mouths.

I reached up, grabbing the lapels of his jacket, pulling him down. I didn't want a gentle kiss. I wanted something that hurt as much as the day had.

He stopped just before our lips met. He was shaking, a fine tremor in his hand that betrayed how hard he was fighting himself.

"Do you want this?" he asked. His voice was strained, a plea disguised as a question. "Tell me you want this, because if I start, I don't know if I can stop."

"I want it," I said, the words breathless and honest. "Lucian, I want it."

He groaned, a low sound in his throat, and pressed his forehead against mine. He didn't kiss me yet. Instead, he slid his other hand around my waist, pulling me flush against him. My breasts pressed into his chest, my hips locking with his. The contact was electric, a sudden jolt that made me gasp.

He trailed his lips along the line of my jaw, his breath hot and humid. He stopped just below my ear, his voice a ghost of a sound. "You are the most frustrating thing I have ever encountered in my life."

"Good," I whispered.

I shifted, pressing my thigh between his, feeling the hard length of him against me. A sharp, jagged spark of desire shot through me, making my toes curl inside my boots. He let out a shaky breath and gripped my waist tighter, his fingers digging into my skin.

He moved back to my lips, but he still wasn't kissing me. He was teasing the edge of my mouth, a slow, agonizing brush of skin on skin that made me want to scream. I wanted him to stop being precise. I wanted him to be sloppy. I wanted him to break something.

"Kiss me," I commanded. "Stop thinking and just kiss me."

He obeyed. It wasn't the controlled, formal kiss of a Thorne. It was hungry and desperate, a collision of teeth and tongue that tasted of coffee and longing. He backed me up until the backs of my legs hit the edge of the desk, and he lifted me, sliding me onto the wood in one fluid motion.

My legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, pulling him into the cradle of my hips. The friction was maddening. I could feel everything: the texture of his trousers, the heat of his skin, the way his heart was hammering against my own.

His hands slid down to my thighs, pushing my skirt up, his palms hot against my skin. He kissed me deeper, his tongue sweeping through my mouth with a possessive intensity that left me lightheaded. I arched my back, pressing myself closer to him, needing more than just the friction of fabric.

"Lucian," I whimpered into the kiss.

He pulled back an inch, his eyes dark and blown out, his pupils swallowing the iris. He looked devastated. "If we do this now, I won't be able to let you go back to those files. I won't be able to let you walk away from me tonight."

I looked at him, and for a moment, the ghost of Cora stood between us. The grief was still there, a cold current beneath the heat. I thought about the medical withdrawal form. I thought about the signature *L*.

The desire was still there, screaming in my blood, but the trust was still broken.

"I have to walk away," I said, my voice trembling. "I have to find out why."

He stared at me for a long moment, his forehead resting against mine, both of us breathing hard. The air was thick with everything we weren't saying. He didn't pull away aggressively; he slowly let me slide off the desk, his hands lingering on my waist until the very last second.

"You're right," he said, though he sounded like he hated the fact. "You do."

The heat didn't vanish; it just settled into a low simmer, an unresolved chord that left me feeling raw and exposed.

"Thank you for telling me," I said, and my voice was perfectly even, and I watched that precision press into him: not a slap. Something held. Something with weight.

"You're leaving."

"I have work to do."

"Wren." He said my name like he was putting it down carefully, somewhere fragile. "What I watched, what I didn't stop, I have to live with that. I know what it cost you. I'm not asking you to forgive,"

"Good," I said. "Don't ask."

I left him with the painted ceiling and Cora's invisible initials and two cups of tea cooling untouched on his desk, and I walked back through the corridors with purpose and a specific destination I'd been working toward all day.

I did not cry until I'd turned three corners and found a bathroom with a lock.

Two minutes. That's all I gave it.

Then I washed my face in cold water and went to find the forbidden room.

I'd been thinking about the door since the day I arrived.

Since I dragged my suitcase up that drive and looked out my first floor window and saw a building that every instinct I had said *don't*. Black stone. No lights. A door with no visible handle. Even the brochure hadn't photographed it, which, at a school like Blackthorn, meant it was either very boring or very important.

Cora's journal pages mentioned it twice. Not by name. She called it *the repository*. She wrote: *they keep proof there. They keep what they can't destroy*. She wrote: *I found a way in but I won't write it down, not here, not yet*.

She never wrote *yet*.

Two days ago, buried in a footnote in a Victorian restoration document I'd found in the lower stacks, I'd found a single line about the repository's original locking mechanism: installed by the same craftsman who built the undercroft doors, which used a pressure plate hidden in the stone frame, which could be opened from the outside by someone who knew exactly where to press.

Someone like my sister, who'd been here long enough to find it.

Someone like me, who'd been reading her notes long enough to inherit her map.

The fog was thick enough at midnight to soften the gargoyles, which was its one virtue. I crossed the quad with my hood up and my phone in my pocket and the deliberate unhurried walk of someone who had every right to be outside at midnight, which nobody at Blackthorn really believed, but confidence was ninety percent of permission.

The black building had no lights. It never had. Up close the stone was rougher than it looked from a distance: almost greasy with old moss, centuries of damp worked into it. The kind of surface that said *don't touch* and meant it. I touched it anyway.

The door had no visible handle.

I found the frame by feel, running my fingertips along the seam where stone met iron. Left side, waist height, three inches in from the edge: a slight depression, almost imperceptible. Worn smooth. The ghost of a gesture repeated until the stone remembered it.

I pressed.

A click from inside the wall, soft and mechanical, like a tooth settling into place.

The door swung inward on silent hinges: that was the worst part. A door this old should have screamed. The fact that it opened like a breath meant someone maintained it. Someone came here. Regularly.

I stepped inside and turned on my flashlight.

Twenty feet square. Stone floor, stone walls, no windows, no concessions to the idea that a human body might need air or warmth. A desk along the near wall: old, the surface worn to bare wood by someone's forearms over long evenings. Filing drawers along the opposite wall, brass handles, every single one locked. And on the desk, open as if someone had left it mid page:

A ledger.

Old. Bound in something I wasn't going to think too hard about. The current year's entries ran in tidy columns: names, dates, notations in a shorthand I didn't have the Court's full vocabulary to decode. Yet.

But I knew some of the names. I knew the name of the hospitalized pledge, three rows from the top, with a notation that made my stomach turn over. I knew two others: initiates I'd seen in the dining hall, unremarkable, quiet, the kind of students who don't make enemies.

The kind who didn't see it coming.

And halfway down the left column, in pencil rather than ink, in a hand slightly different from the rest: as if added by someone who wasn't sure yet, who was still deciding, was mine.

Wren Calloway.

Penciled. Not permanent. *Not yet.*

I photographed every page. My hands were very steady, which meant I'd crossed whatever threshold converts fear into function. I photographed the desk, the drawers, the pressure plate mechanism. *Document everything. Then you can prove it later.* That was Cora's rule. I was still following her rules even when she wasn't here to make them.

The last section of the ledger was older entries, historical. I almost closed it, and then I didn't.

2022. The semester Cora died.

One entry, under that month. One name, written in red ink, underlined twice.

C. Calloway. Reaped.

Not: *jumped*. Not: *found deceased*. Not even: *withdrew*.

Reaped.

I stood in the dark of the repository with my phone shaking: hands not so steady anymore, apparently there were still thresholds below this one, and I looked at my sister's name in a stranger's handwriting.

They keep what they can't destroy.

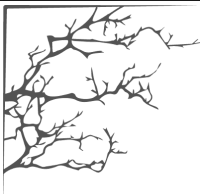
She'd been in this room. She'd seen the ledger. She'd seen her own name the way I was seeing mine, penciled at the bottom of a list that ended in red ink, and she'd gone back to her room and written *I found a way in* and she'd died before she got to write what she found.

I photographed the page. I photographed it twice.

Then I pulled the door shut behind me and pressed until the latch clicked, and I crossed back through the fog to Wexford Hall with my sister's proof burning in my pocket and the audit tightening like a wire around everything Lucian had tried to hold together.

Pencil could be erased.

I was going to make sure they ran out of time to do it.



Chapter 18: The Audit

The call came at three in the morning, which was how I knew it was serious.

The Court communicated by hour of delivery. Noon meant a routine matter. Dusk meant a formal grievance. Dawn meant someone was already dead. Three in the morning meant they had not decided yet which category we were in.

I was already dressed when Crane knocked. He had not learned this about me (that I sleep in increments, that I have slept in increments since I was nine years old and my father walked me through the undercroft and explained the nature of the debt I'd inherited), but he had been in the Court long enough to assume it. He did not apologize for the hour. He held out the sealed black envelope and watched my face.

I opened it. Read it. Kept my face very still.

The lower archive has been breached. Your presence is required immediately. M.

Margot. Of course it was Margot.

I folded the paper twice and slid it into my jacket pocket and followed Crane into the corridor without speaking. Beneath the formal language, beneath the hour, beneath the cool careful signature, I heard what the message actually said: *We know someone was inside. We don't know who. You have until dawn to get ahead of this.*

I had, I estimated, forty-five minutes.

"How bad?" I asked as we descended the back stairs toward the archive wing.

Crane's jaw shifted. "The lock was picked. Not forced. Someone with training."

Or someone who'd watched me work the exact same mechanism in the Wexford library three weeks ago, paying close attention while pretending not to.

I did not say that.

"Anything taken?"

"That's what Margot wants to determine."

There were four of them waiting in the archive antechamber: Margot, Sebastian, and two senior members whose names I have no interest in recording, being the kind of men who preferred not to be remembered in any case. Tall candles burned in the iron

holders. The air smelled of beeswax and cold stone and, underneath both, the particular dry-acrid smell of very old paper disturbed after long rest.

Margot turned when I entered. Her expression had been arranged for maximum legibility: suspicion, authority, the careful neutrality that in her always indicated she had already formed a conclusion and was waiting for me to confirm it.

"Thorne," she said. "You were seen in the east corridor at half past midnight."

The vow pulsed once, low and warning, behind my sternum. It could not compel me to speak. It could not force a confession. What it could do (what it always did, the small vicious precision of its architecture) was prevent certain lies. Lies of commission. Direct falsehoods spoken aloud.

I had spent twenty-five years learning the difference between a lie and a redirection.

"I was," I said.

* * *



THE SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED had texture. Crane went very still. Sebastian's head turned toward me at a new angle: not the angle of a man surprised, but the angle of a man recalibrating something he had already half-suspected.

Margot studied me. She was looking for the thing that would tell her whether she had caught me or whether I was doing what I had always done: arriving ahead of the problem and rearranging its furniture.

"You picked the lock," she said. Not a question.

"I inspected it," I said. "The lower archive falls under the acquisitions committee oversight. I have standing access."

"At half past midnight."

"I keep unusual hours."

"The acquisitions committee meets next Thursday. There is nothing in the lower archive that required inspection at midnight."

I looked at her calmly. "I disagree."

Technically true. I had been in the east corridor at half past midnight. I had been passing through on my way back from the Wexford portico, where I had spent twenty minutes watching the archive building across the quad and seeing a light move behind the lower window. I had stood there long enough to understand exactly what that light was. And I had walked away. I had decided, for reasons I was not willing to examine in front of Margot Harlow at three in the morning, to let her finish whatever she had gone there to finish.

So I had not inspected the lock. And my standing access claim was thin enough that Margot could dispute it if she chose to press.

But I had been in the east corridor. The vow had let me say so.

The tithe came precisely then: the sharp bright wire drawn from collarbone to wrist, the cost extracted not for the lie I'd told but for the one I was carefully navigating around. The founders had been very precise about that distinction. I kept my face empty. I had learned to do that at nine as well.

"I want a full inventory of the archive by morning," Margot said, and I understood she had filed me under *complicated* and moved on to more immediate logistics. "If anything is missing, I want to know before the membership convenes."

"And if nothing is missing?" Sebastian asked. He was still watching me. That particular angle of head.

"Then we have a different problem," Margot said. "Then we have someone inside who knows how to take nothing and leave no trace. Which is worse."

She was right. She usually was. It was the most frustrating thing about her.

* * *



THE FORMAL CONVENING happened at dawn, in the chapter room above the main hall.

By then I had been awake long enough that the edges of things had acquired the faint unreality that comes before exhaustion crosses into its second wind. I sat at the long table and watched the candles and reviewed the preceding forty-eight hours with the detachment of a man approaching a problem in pure logic.

Wren had broken into the lower archive. She had gone in through the east window (the one that could be opened from outside if you knew the trick with the secondary latch), which she had apparently learned sometime between the cold war she had declared on me seven days ago and last night. She had been there long enough to disturb the oldest ledgers, to search through whatever she had come to find.

She had not been caught.

The cost of that was that I now sat here carrying the weight of an implied admission.

Margot called the convening to order with the traditional phrase, and I watched the fourteen faces around the table arrange themselves into the various postures of concern and calculation that characterized the Court's formal proceedings. Some of them were genuinely alarmed. Some were performing alarm with the polished ease of people who had spent their lives inside rooms where performance was the only honest currency.

"There is reason to believe," Margot said, "that confidential documents in the lower archive have been accessed by an unauthorized party. We do not yet know the scope. We do not yet know the method. What we know is that we have a breach. And that a breach of this nature, following the irregularities of the past several weeks..." Her eyes moved down the table without landing on anyone. "...suggests the existence of a leak."

The word moved through the room like a cold draft.

A *leak* was not a burglary. A burglary was a crime; a leak was a betrayal. The distinction mattered here in ways it would not matter elsewhere. The Court had survived external threats for two hundred years by the simple mechanism of having no tolerance whatsoever for internal ones.

"An audit committee will be formed," Margot said. "Three members. Their brief is to review all communications, all access logs, all movements of Court members and affiliated persons over the past ninety days. Full cooperation is required. Non-cooperation will be treated as evidence."

I listened to the protocol with the portion of my attention I could spare from the one question I had been turning since three in the morning.

What did she find?

She had been in that archive for roughly forty minutes, based on when I'd first seen the light and when it went dark. Long enough to find something. Not long enough to find everything. The lower archive held forty years of acquisitions records, thirty years of Reaping documentation, and, in the oldest section near the back wall, a collection of materials that the Court had spent considerable effort ensuring would never be read by anyone outside it.

I did not know which she had reached.

I was not allowed to ask her.

I was not allowed to see her at all, at the moment, without both of us understanding exactly what it would mean if someone was watching. And someone was always watching.

* * *



HE FOUND ME IN THE corridor outside the chapter room, as I had known he would.

Sebastian had a gift for finding me in the moments between formal settings. He had always framed it as friendship: the easy, unguarded warmth of it, the hand on the shoulder, the half-smile suggesting he and I shared a private language about all of this that the others lacked. I had allowed that framing for four years. I was finding it less sustainable.

"That was interesting," he said, falling into step beside me.

"Audits are routine."

"Not the audit." A pause timed precisely. "You."

I kept walking.

"Lucian." His voice had changed register: dropped below the easy warmth to something harder underneath. "I know it wasn't you in the archive."

The vow pulsed. I felt the wire again, fainter this time: a warning rather than a tithe. *Here*, it said. *Carefully*.

"Then you have more information than I do," I said.

"She's going to get you killed." He said it exactly as he had said it weeks ago, in the upstairs hall, after the lesson where I had moved too fast to shield her. He said it

without inflection, without accusation, which was, I had learned, how Sebastian delivered the things he meant most seriously. Everything else he performed. The flat statements were the true ones.

I stopped walking.

"I need you to tell me something," I said. I turned to face him fully, which I did not often do. It was a gesture of trust, or the appearance of one, and we both knew the difference. "Are you with me or against me on this?"

He looked at me for a long moment. The corridor was empty. The candles had burned to their holders overnight and the thin morning light through the narrow windows made everything look pale and provisional, like a sketch of itself.

"I don't know yet," he said.

Which was, at minimum, honest.

"Then don't decide in someone else's company," I said, and kept walking.

I heard him behind me: a breath, a half-laugh, the quiet of a man standing in a corridor with something unfinished in his hands. I did not look back.

Planted seeds grow in the dark. I had learned that from the Court, among other things I would have preferred not to know.

* * *



THE NEWS CAME MID-AFTERNOON through Crane, which meant it was real. Crane only carried things he had personally confirmed.

The pledge from the north dormitory. Terrence Ashby. Nineteen years old, third-generation legacy admission, hospitalized four weeks ago after the incident that Margot had described to the membership as a *hazing irregularity* and that I had described, in the private ledger I kept in my own rooms, in considerably less ambiguous terms.

He had not recovered.

Crane told me in the same tone he used for everything: neutral, careful, carrying the weight without making a performance of carrying it. "The family has been notified. The official cause will be cardiac arrest secondary to the initial injury."

"And the unofficial cause."

Crane did not answer.

"Who knows?"

"The attending physician. Margot. Myself." A beat. "Now you."

I stood at the window of my office and watched the quad below and thought about Terrence Ashby, whom I had seen twice in my life (once at the pledge intake, once on the floor of the lower hall at two in the morning with his face the color of candle wax) and felt the particular quality of anger that has no clean outlet. The kind that turns inward. The kind I had spent a long time becoming very practiced at.

"The family will have questions," I said.

"They will receive answers," Crane said. "Pre-arranged ones."

He left quietly, because Crane understood when a man needed a room to himself.

I stayed at the window. Below, students crossed the quad in the thin afternoon light, their gowns dark against old stone, moving between buildings as though nothing had changed. As though Terrence Ashby had not been nineteen years old and now was not anything at all. As though Cora Calloway had not done the same once (walked across that same quad, attended the same lectures, been folded into the same machinery) and come out the other end of it in a box.

She texted me call you tomorrow.

I had not been there the night Cora Calloway died. I had been in this building, performing other obligations, and I had not known until the morning, and by the morning there was nothing left to know except the shape of the official story, which I had recognized on sight and said nothing about, because the vow had still been new then and I had not yet found the precise dimensions of what it would and would not permit.

I thought about Wren.

Wren in the archive last night with whatever controlled recklessness she deployed in the place of self-preservation, moving through the dark, looking for the confirmation of what she already knew.

Wren, whose sister had walked across that quad.

I went back to my desk and opened the private ledger and wrote Terrence Ashby's name below the others. It was a small gesture. It was the only one the vow permitted me. I made it anyway.

* * *



THEY FOUND THE SECOND pledge at dusk.

I was in the chapter room when one of the juniors came in: door thrown open without the customary knock, face carrying the particular color that faces acquire when the body has understood something before the mind has caught up.

"There's..." He stopped. Started again. "In the east garden. There's..."

I was already moving.

The east garden was accessible from three doors and all three of them were already crowded by the time I arrived. Two senior members. Margot, slightly behind them, very

still. Crane at the edge of the path, looking not at the ground but at the bell tower, with the expression of a man calculating something he did not like the result of.

I pushed through.

The boy was on the flagstones below the garden wall. He had been *placed*: that was the word that arrived and stayed, because no fall produced that particular arrangement of limbs, that specific tidiness, that almost deliberate disposition of the body against the stone. His name was Westfield. He was a pledge from the spring intake. He was seventeen years old. He had been placed precisely at the base of the east wing of the bell tower, at an angle that would read, to anyone arriving and expecting to read a certain story, exactly like a fall.

The same bell tower from which the Court's official record stated that Cora Calloway had jumped.

I looked at him. I looked at the tower. I looked at the deliberateness of it: the angle, the position, the way it was arranged to confirm what the eye expected rather than what had actually happened. Someone had done this very carefully. Someone who knew the original arrangement. Someone who was either sending a message or rehearsing a pattern or making very certain that this particular story would continue to hold.

The anger I had been managing since Terrence Ashby stopped managing itself.

I stood in the east garden in the failing light and looked at the boy who had been made to look like Cora, and I understood (with the cold clarity of a man who has spent his entire adult life inside an institution of precisely orchestrated harm) that the audit was not going to find what it was looking for. The leak was the least of what the Court should have been afraid of.

What they should have been afraid of was that someone in this building was not finished.

Crane appeared at my shoulder.

"Has anyone called the family?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Don't," I said. "Not until we know what story we're telling."

He looked at me. His eyes moved to the tower and back, and I watched him arrive at the same conclusion I had.

"This is new," he said quietly.

"No," I said. "It's not."

The candles in the archive wing came on behind us, one by one, as the dark gathered. The east garden smelled of dead leaves and cold stone. Above us, the bell tower rose into the evening like an old monument to everything this institution had decided it could afford to do and continue calling by other names.

I stood there until Margot dismissed us.

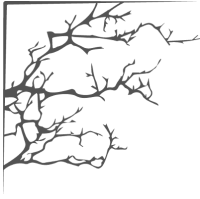
Then I went to find Sebastian.

Not to trust him. Not yet. But to understand, before the audit convened and the ledgers were opened and the Court turned its full attention inward, exactly how much he already knew, and more importantly, who he planned to tell it to.

The answer to that question would determine what came next.

And what came next, I had decided, standing over the body of a boy arranged to look like a girl I had failed three years ago, was going to be different from every careful, managed, vow-bound choice that had come before it.

Whatever it cost.



Chapter 19: The Staged Fall

I had the Cora file memorized by the time I turned nineteen.

Not the official one: that was sealed, sanitized, useful only as a map of what the administration wanted people to *not* notice. The one I'd built myself: my mother's account of the phone call she got, the campus security log I'd pulled through a FOIA request that took three years of escalating letters, and a photograph of the scene that a first-year with a camera phone had posted for six hours before someone made him delete it.

I'd saved it. Obviously I had saved it.

The photograph showed a girl who looked like she was sleeping in the wrong place. That was the worst part: not any violence, because there wasn't any you could see, not the expression on her face, because I couldn't make it out. The worst part was the *arrangement* of her. Knees slightly bent. Hands folded under her cheek. The way you'd look if someone had tucked you in and then misplaced the bed.

Cora never slept on her back. Not once in twenty years of sharing a house.

The girl they found in the east courtyard this morning was arranged the same way.

I was going to need a bigger file.

* * *



THE WINDOW OF THE EAST courtyard study (a room no one was supposed to know I could access, courtesy of a lock I'd cracked in the first week) looked out over the

scene without technically *being* at the scene. This felt like an important distinction. I was not interfering with a body. I was conducting highly elevated field research.

Her name was Priya. Priya Altan, twenty-two, second-year, pledge class three cycles behind mine. I'd seen her twice: once at the rite, once in the dining hall, where she'd been laughing at something her tablemate said, and her laugh was the kind that filled a room and made it embarrassed about how quiet it had been. She'd had a scarf in crimson and a coffee in each hand.

She was on the ground at the base of the east balcony. The balcony Blackthorn officially called an *architectural accent*, which was the institutional way of saying: a ledge no one was meant to stand on.

Which was, of course, the same way they'd described the bell tower.

I pressed my forehead to the cold glass and made myself look until I'd catalogued everything. The position. The particular angle of her. The way the authorities were moving around the site, what they were photographing and what they were conspicuously not photographing, and the one detail that burrowed behind my sternum and wouldn't stop: the single autumn leaf stuck to her folded hands.

Like a garnish.

Like someone had been *thoughtful*.

I pulled out the notebook where I kept the Cora file (the real one, carried on my person since I'd arrived, because there was not a room in Blackthorn I trusted with it) and I opened to the first page. *The photograph*. I had printed it small, tucked between two pages of my cover-story lecture notes.

I held it up to the window light and compared.

* * *



IT TOOK ME FORTY-FIVE minutes. Forty-five minutes of sitting on a cold windowsill with my notebook open in my lap and my throat closing by degrees, working through it the way you work through a proof: step by methodical step, because if you rush it you make mistakes, and I had come too far to make mistakes now.

Cora: bell tower. Priya: east balcony. Both elevated. Both accessible by a route the official account called self-chosen. *One.*

Cora: no signs of struggle. Priya: no visible signs. Though the investigators were still working, and I was watching from a window with limited angles. *Two.*

Cora: hands. The photograph. I made myself look at it again, the way you make yourself touch a bruise to confirm it's real. Hands folded under her cheek, slightly inward at the wrist. *Priya.* Same fold, same inward turn. Probability of two people landing identically from different heights, different trajectories, different momentum: not something I needed to do the math on.

Three.

Cora: no note. Priya: I didn't know yet. That information would come through official channels, which meant through Blackthorn, which meant I would get a version of it that the Court had already decided to let me see.

I wrote *three* and moved on.

Cora: the day before. Our mother, on the phone with me three years ago, voice flattened into something that sounded like calm because it was too broken to be anything else. *She called in sick to her Thursday seminar.*

They thought she was getting a cold. Someone had noticed she wasn't herself in the days before but had categorized it as illness, not distress.

I'd gone back to the seminar attendance records, another FOIA, another year of waiting. She'd been present for every session until that Thursday.

I hadn't been able to find out if Priya had gone to class yesterday. The body had been discovered this morning, which meant the last twenty-four hours of her life were a gap in my file with nothing to fill it yet.

But the day before that, I had watched her in the dining hall.

Laughing. Full-room laughing. Two coffees.

Four. People say goodbye to joy before they go. It's a pattern. Researchers study it. It is not a foolproof indicator, and I don't want to flatten either of them into a data point, so I wrote it down and sat with the discomfort of what it suggested.

Five: the arrangement. Not a coincidence. Not a tragic, terrible coincidence. Not two women falling the same way from different buildings in different years by some grotesque accident of physics.

Someone made them look like that.

Someone, each time, after.

I closed the notebook carefully. Put the photograph back between the lecture notes. Breathed through my nose the way the grief counselor my mother had made me see at seventeen had once recommended, except I was mostly using it to keep from putting my fist through the window.

* * *



THERE'S A THING THAT happens when the thing you suspected turns out to be true.

You'd think it would feel like relief. Like vindication. Like the terrible satisfaction of a puzzle piece finding its groove, the whole image snapping into legibility.

It doesn't feel like that.

What it feels like is this: like you are standing in a room you have been trying to reach for three years, and someone has removed the ceiling, and it is February, and

it is raining, and the room is full of everything you lost and cannot get back, and there is nothing to do with any of it.

I sat in the study above the courtyard for a long time.

Priya Altan had a laugh that filled rooms. She had a crimson scarf. She had someone she ate lunch with, someone she'd been telling something funny, someone who was right now in this building not yet knowing, not yet ...

I pressed my knuckles to my mouth and I let myself feel it for exactly one minute. I timed it. I have a method for this, developed over three years of needing to be functional in proximity to grief: sixty seconds. You let it in all the way, no flinching, no deflecting. You owe the dead that much. Then you button it back up and you *work*.

The clock ticked over.

I wiped my eyes, which had done the thing they do when I am furious rather than sad (allergic response to injustice, basically), and I opened the notebook again.

Page two. What I had.

A matching body position, documented in a photograph that still existed on my hard drive and three encrypted backups. A pattern of elevated-location deaths at

Blackthorn spanning at least one cycle. Cora's journal pages, which mentioned *the Reaping* and *L* and something happening at the solstice. The hemlock symbol, carved into the floor of the undercroft. A developmental editor's feedback that I was, apparently, asking too many questions.

Margot's voice, in the hallway three weeks ago: *your sister asked too many questions too.*

Page three. What I needed.

A name. A direct connection between the pattern and someone I could prove gave the order. Something that would matter outside these walls, that couldn't be sealed or sanitized or quietly made to disappear. A document, a recording, a witness who would survive long enough to testify.

And Lucian. I needed to know (and the thought arrived with a pain I didn't budget sixty seconds for, just let it sit there like a splinter) exactly how much he'd seen of Cora's night. *I watched her die.* He'd said that. He had said that, and I had walked away from it, and now there was a second body in the east courtyard and I had a pattern and a methodology but not a perpetrator.

I was close. I was devastatingly, maddening close.

And close was not proof. Close was a girl in the dining hall with two coffees, laughing, and then arranged.

* * *



THE STUDY HAD ONE DOOR, and I'd spent weeks using it like it was mine. Going down was nothing like coming up.

Coming up that morning, the building had still been pretending it was an ordinary Tuesday. Going down, it had stopped pretending. The east stair was full of people who belonged to no class roster: men in good coats, women with lanyards and the specific unhurried walk of people who have done this before and expect to do it again. Blackthorn didn't call them anything. They simply appeared on the days the school needed a story told well, and then they were gone.

I flattened the notebook against my ribs under my coat, where the Cora file had ridden since September, and arranged my face into the face of a girl who'd gotten lost looking for the library.

It mostly worked. A woman with a clipboard asked if I was all right, *dear*, in a voice that had asked a hundred frightened students the same thing and meant it about none of them. I said I was just shaken, and she nodded and moved on, and I hated how smoothly the machine folded a dead girl into paperwork.

Then I turned the corner by the portrait gallery, and Sebastian was there.

He was leaning against the long window the way Lucian leaned against things (these men were taught to lean, I'd decided, somewhere in their expensive educations), watching the courtyard below with an expression of mild, pleasant interest. The way you'd watch weather.

"Calloway," he said, without turning. "You're a long way from Comparative Literature."

"I heard there was an accident." Small voice. "Everyone's saying ..."

"Everyone's always saying." He turned then, and his eyes did a quick, thorough inventory: face, hands, the set of my shoulders, the place under my coat where my arm pressed a little too carefully to my side. I made myself not move it. "Terrible thing. Sweet girl, by all accounts. Second-year. They do struggle, the ones who arrive here with something to prove." A pause, weighted to the exact gram. "Your sister was a second-year once, wasn't she."

The floor tilted half a degree. He'd reached in and turned a key just to watch what opened.

"I don't have a sister," I said.

"No." He smiled. "Of course you don't."

He pushed off the window and crossed to me, close enough that I felt the cold come off his coat, and at my shoulder he stopped and lowered his voice into something that wore the costume of kindness. "The ones who go looking tend to find. That's the trouble with looking: the building's very accommodating that way." Two fingers straightened my collar, a gesture so casually proprietary I nearly flinched. "Go to class, Wren."

Then he was gone down the stair, unhurried, one of them, and I stood in the gallery with the painted dead staring out of their gold frames and understood that whatever margin of invisibility I'd imagined I had, I had just spent the last of it.

He knew. He'd always known. The only open question was whether knowing was a thing he meant to use, or a thing he was saving.

I went to find the one person in this building who had ever told me a true thing, even a half one.

* * *



I FOUND CRANE IN THE corridor outside the west archive, which is where I'd expected to find him, because Crane was the kind of man who retreated to books when the building held bad air, and today the building was full of nothing else.

He was standing at the window at the end of the hall, hands in his pockets, looking out at nothing. I noticed he'd been crying: not dramatically, not in the way that performs itself, but the small, extinguished kind, the kind you do in private and think no one notices.

"You knew her," I said. Not a question.

He didn't startle. "She reminded me of someone."

He didn't say Cora's name. He didn't look at me. I wondered if he knew that I knew, or if this was grief of a different vintage: a different ghost, a different cycle. There had been other Reapings. The ledger Crane's key would eventually open, which I didn't know about yet, was already full of names I hadn't found yet.

"They're saying it was the balcony," I said carefully. "The same story."

Crane closed his eyes. "I know what they're saying."

"I need you to tell me what you know." I kept my voice level. That was the hardest part of working in this mode: the leveling, the control, when what I wanted was to grab him by the lapels of his sensible professor jacket and scream *Cora, tell me about Cora, tell me everything that happened and everything you saw and what the hemlock means and whose name goes in the blank...*

"I don't know enough," he said. "I have never known enough to act on. That is the architecture of this place: no one person ever knows enough. It's how it stays intact."

"You know more than I do."

He turned from the window. His face was the face of a man carrying something very heavy over a very long distance, and beginning to understand that he might have been carrying it in the wrong direction.

"Your sister," he said. And then he stopped.

"Tell me."

"She found something. Here, in the west archive, I think. She was very careful, much more careful than you." He said it without accusation; it was just an observation, like

a notation in a margin. "She didn't ask questions out loud the way you do. She listened, and she compiled, and she was so close ..." He stopped again. "I tried to warn her. I didn't have the language for it, not that she would have believed. She was very certain she was the smartest person in any room she entered."

"She was right," I said. "She was right, and she's dead."

"Yes." He seemed to age slightly, standing there. "She is."

We were quiet for a moment. Somewhere in the building below, footsteps, voices, the particular hushed authority of official people managing a scene.

Crane reached into the interior pocket of his jacket.

"I've had this for three years," he said. "I wasn't sure ..." He stopped. Started again. "I told myself I was waiting for the right time. I think I was waiting until the danger of giving it to you was outweighed by the danger of not."

He held out a key. Small, brass, different from the dormitory keys; older, more deliberate, with a slight scroll worked into the bow. Not a modern copy.

I looked at it.

"What does it open?"

"You'll know when you find the lock." He pressed it into my hand, folded my fingers over it. His hands were cold. "Your sister would've wanted you to have it."

He said it simply, the way you say something you have thought about for a long time until it wore smooth.

I stood there with the key in my fist and I looked at him, really looked, the way I'd trained myself to look since I arrived here, past the performance to the machinery. The weight behind his eyes. The grief that was real, I was almost certain it was real. The *almost*.

I thought about Margot. *Your sister asked too many questions*. Crane had been there for that, had heard her say it, had looked away with a face that I'd read as discomfort and now couldn't be certain of at all.

I thought about the pattern. The way Blackthorn arranged things to look like help. The way you don't see the architecture of a trap until you're standing in the middle of it.

Crane, who had been kind to me since the beginning.

Crane, who had just given me a key.

I made myself smile. It took effort, but I'm good at effort. "Thank you," I said. And I meant it, or I thought I meant it, or I meant it in the particular way you can mean something while keeping the other hand on the exit.

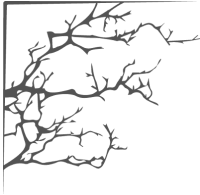
He nodded. He looked, briefly, like a man who had wanted absolution and received something more complicated instead.

I turned and walked down the corridor with the key in my pocket and Priya's name in my chest and three years of Cora pressing at the back of my eyes, and I did not let myself run until I'd turned two corners and was certain no one could see me.

The key was warm from his pocket.

I didn't know yet if that was the warmth of something given in good faith, or the warmth of something that had been waiting a very long time to be useful.

I was going to find out.



Chapter 20: The Confession

The Patron did not shout. That was the architecture of his power: the same even tone for cruelty as for courtesy, so that you were never certain which you were receiving until the door closed behind you.

"The Calloway girl," he said, from the window where he always stood, as though the quad below required his supervision to function. "She is becoming a problem."

"She is becoming a nuisance," I said. "The distinction matters for how we proceed."

He turned. He was seventy-four, carved rather than aged, a man the decades had not softened but only pared further, down to the essential edges. His eyes had the temperature of undercroft stone, and about as much movement in them.

"Resolve it," he said. "Before the audit closes. I will not have an inquiry turning over that particular stone."

I said I would handle it. I said it the way I had learned to say things in that room, flat, immediate, stripped of texture he might grip. My father had taught me the trick

at nine, the night he first brought me here and told me the Thorne name was a debt, not a gift. I had been performing competence in this room for nineteen years, and I was very good at it.

I left without being dismissed. That was, itself, a small act of defiance no one in the room would have been able to name as such, and naming it was the point.

Four flights of stone stairs. October cold. The quad below, full of students who did not know what built the walls they were studying inside.

I had, by my calculation, six hours before the Patron expected some sign of resolution. The audit closed Friday. It was Tuesday.

Six hours was enough time to think. It was not enough time to feel, which was useful.

I went to find Wren.

* * *



SHE WAS IN MY ROOMS.

I found this unremarkable and then, standing in the doorway, found it sharply remarkable: she was *in my rooms*, had apparently picked the lock I had upgraded the mechanism on three days ago, because she was Wren Calloway and picking my locks had become a recurring feature of my existence I had persistently failed to plan for.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the fireplace, not the chair, which was in every observable way more comfortable. She had Cora's half-burned page in her lap and a look I had catalogued before: the one that meant she had stopped being afraid and started being *certain*, which I had learned was the more dangerous state.

She looked up. Whatever she saw in my face made her get off the floor.

"What happened," she said. Not a question.

"The Patron wants me to resolve you," I said. I had intended a more gradual introduction, but the sentence left me before I managed the transition. "Those were the words used. *Resolve the Calloway problem*. He has given me a deadline."

She took that the way she took most things that should have shaken her, standing very still, chin level, something behind her eyes sorting rapidly. I watched her sort it.

"Resolve," she said. "As in."

"Yes."

She looked at the page in her hand. "When?"

"Before the audit closes. Friday."

"Three days."

"Yes."

She nodded once, and picked her jacket off the arm of the chair.

"What are you doing," I said.

"If I leave now I can reach the train before..."

"I'm not telling you to run." And then, because I had apparently lost the management of what I said in front of her: "I was going to. I came here to tell you to run. I have an account. The number is in this room, in the Aurelius volume on the third shelf, enough to disappear on properly. I was going to hand it to you and tell you to be gone by morning."

She stopped. "Was."

"Is," I said. "It is still the logical choice."

She set her jacket down. "What changed."

I looked at her standing there in the firelight with the half-burned page in her hand, and the answer was so entirely obvious and so entirely useless that I said something else.

"She was your sister. You came for her. I know why you came. I know you have half the proof you need and the rest is in this building. Running means Cora stays buried and the Court continues and the next girl they put on that shortlist dies the same way she did." I paused. "I know what I am asking you to give up."

"You're not asking," she said. "You just told me to run."

"I am informing you of the options."

"The options are run or die."

"I am trying," I said, carefully, "to give you a *choice*."

* * *



SHE LAUGHED. NOT THE mean kind, the kind that comes out when something is too absurd to contain.

"A choice. You came to hand me a bank account number and tell me to vanish, and you're calling it a choice."

"It is materially a choice. Two options, neither compelled."

"Lucian." She said my name the way she always did: a degree too flat for deference, a degree too warm for contempt. "You have a blood vow threaded through your nervous system. You've been managing me like a game piece since the moment I walked in. You switched my cup in the undercroft and felt the vow pull you for it and didn't blink. And handing me a bank account number is you giving something up."

I did not answer. The fire moved.

"What do you actually want," she said. "Not what the Patron wants. Not what the Court requires. *You*. What do you want to happen."

The question settled in the air between us with the weight of something that had been approaching for a long time and had finally arrived.

"That isn't a useful question," I said.

"It's the only useful question."

"What I want has no bearing on..."

"Stop." She crossed the room. She stopped close enough that I could see the firelight catch in her eyes, the way it always did, the way I had been cataloguing for weeks without letting myself name the activity. "Just stop. Stop managing the sentence. Stop running three moves ahead. Tell me what you actually *want*."

The vow moved in my blood. It always did when I was near her now, a low, constant pressure, like a finger held against a bruise.

"I want," I said, and my voice came out the way it had in the undercroft, stripped and unpackaged, "you to be somewhere they cannot reach you. I want the Court to burn. I want my father to have been a different kind of man." I stopped.

"Say it," she said.

"I want to have met you differently." The sentence felt like setting something down after a long carry. "I want you not to have a reason to hate me that I cannot explain away. I want the three months I have spent telling myself this was strategy to have actually been strategy, because that would mean I am still functional. I want not to be standing here unable to give you the thing you came for because what I owe you is the one thing the vow will not let me say."

She was very still.

"I cannot tell you who killed her," I said. "Not directly. The vow is not a metaphor, it is a physical structure, and when I press against it, it takes something. You have seen me flinch. You have never asked why."

"I know why," she said quietly. "I've known for a while."

Something in my chest shifted without warning. "Then you know I..."

"I know you watched her die," she said. "You told me. And I know you didn't kill her. I believe that." She held my gaze, and it was the steadiest thing in the room. "What I don't know is whether you're going to keep choosing the vow over me every time it matters."

"It isn't a choice," I said. "It is a biological function."

"Tonight," she said, "is it a choice?"

I looked at her. The fire. The half-burned page on the chair. All the calculus I had spent ten weeks constructing around this moment, all the reasons arranged in careful order, fell apart with the specific grace of something that had been dead for weeks before it hit the ground.

"Tonight," I said. "Yes."

* * *



SHE KISSED ME FIRST. I want to be precise about that.

She kissed me the way she did most things, with evident intention, already committed, as though she had thought it through and arrived at a decision that was already final. I kissed her back. That required no deliberation.

She pulled back. A breath of space between us. Her hands were on my lapels. "I need you to be *here*," she said. "Not in three moves. Here."

"I'm here," I said.

"Good." She let go and stepped back, one deliberate step, and I understood she was giving me room to decide. I understood it was intentional, this particular grace, because she was Wren Calloway who had cracked every lock I owned and read every room I put her in, standing back and *waiting*.

"I want this," I said. "Without the audit. Without what happens Friday. If none of that existed, I would want this."

"None of that stops existing because we want it," she said.

"No." I crossed the space between us. "But it changes what we do about it."

She considered that, briefly, her eyes going somewhere interior and then returning with the decision already made. "Okay," she said.

"Okay," I said, and reached for her.

What followed required me to abandon precision as a method. That was the first thing.

I had thought, in the abstract and controlled way I thought about things I was not permitting myself to think about, that I would remain composed. That I would

conduct it the way I conducted everything: economy, management, careful maintenance of what I showed and what I kept back.

I was wrong by the second minute.

She pulled my jacket off my shoulders and I helped her, and she worked at my shirt buttons with the same efficient focus she brought to picking locks, methodical, quick, and when her hands spread flat against my chest I felt something in my own hands go unsteady, which had not happened to me in living memory. I touched her face first. Then her throat. She made a sound that was involuntary, small and unperformed, and I recognized it the way you recognize a lock turning: the specific sensation of something opening that had been closed.

"Still with me?" I said.

"Extremely," she said. "Don't stop."

I did not stop.

She was sensory in a way that I, who had lived most of my life in my own head, found disorienting and then found necessary. She paid attention with her whole body, catalogued with her hands the way she catalogued with her eyes, and she was not quiet about it. I had spent my adult life carefully calibrated. She dismantled the calibration and seemed completely untroubled by the wreckage.

"Lucian." My name in her voice with no edge in it, just my name.

"I know," I said.

"Do you?"

"Yes." I said it against her shoulder, the hollow of her throat. "Yes."

What I knew was this: I had been keeping inventory of her since September, the way she held a wine glass at arm's length like it might try something, the crack in her voice the first time I said Cora's name, the exact sound of her laugh when something genuinely surprised her. I had been telling myself this was strategic attention. The intelligence of a handler, the surveillance of a keeper. I had been wrong, and the wrongness of it was present now with complete and specific clarity, her hands in my hair and her breath against my jaw.

She looked up at me and I looked back, and for the second time we were not performing. The first had been in the undercroft over a cup I had switched at cost. This was different. This was the thing the first one had been building toward, unhurried and inevitable.

I loved her.

I thought it in the space between moments, with the same flatness I brought to audit figures and vow structure: *I love her*. Not as a problem. Not as an objective. As a fact, the way cold was a fact, the way Blackthorn was a fact, the way Cora's initials carved under a library desk were a fact I had been stepping around for three years. I loved her and the loving had been happening for some time before this moment and I had simply declined to notice, which was the most functionally useless thing I had ever done.

She caught me going still. "Where'd you go."

"I came back," I said.

"Where."

"I realized something."

"Now?"

"The timing is not ideal," I conceded.

She laughed, breathless, a little wrecked, her forehead dropping against mine. "Tell me later."

"Yes," I said. "Later."

I had spent my life treating my body as a vessel for duty, a machine designed to maintain a certain posture and execute specific commands. I had known the geography of desire in the abstract, the way one knows the layout of

a city they have never visited but have studied on a map. But when she pressed me back against the heavy oak of my desk, the map caught fire.

The friction of her denim against my trousers was an irritant that felt like a revelation. I reached for her, my hands finding the curve of her waist with a desperation that bordered on violence, though I kept the pressure controlled. It was the only way I knew how to exist: fighting the tide of my own need with the remnants of my discipline.

"Lucian," she breathed, and the sound was a command.

I stopped, my forehead resting against hers, our breaths mingling in the cold air of the room. "Tell me you want this. Not because I am offering it, not because of the situation, but because you want it."

She didn't hesitate. "I have wanted to tear that composure off you since the first week I saw you. Yes. I want all of it."

The admission broke something in me. I lifted her, her legs locking around my hips with a sudden, fierce strength, and carried her the few steps to the bed. I laid her back against the linens, the white fabric contrasting sharply with the dark, shadowed edges of the room. The

firelight cast long, amber fingers across her skin, highlighting the tension in her shoulders and the defiance in her gaze.

I stripped my trousers and underwear away with a haste that would have been uncharacteristic in any other context. When I stood before her, naked and exposed in a way that felt more vulnerable than admitting my love, she didn't look away. She looked at me as if I were a puzzle she had finally solved.

I moved between her legs, the heat radiating from her meeting the chill of the room. I knelt, my hands sliding up her thighs, pushing the fabric of her clothes aside until there was nothing left between us but a few scraps of lace and silk.

"May I," I asked, my voice fracturing, "may I touch you there?"

She arched her back, her fingers curling into the sheets. "Please."

I used my tongue first, a slow, deliberate exploration that was less about strategy and more about surrender. She tasted of salt and heat, a living, breathing thing in a room filled with dead history. I focused on the small, sensitive knot of her clitoris, circling it with a precision that made her gasp, then sucking it into my mouth with a rhythmic pressure that drew a sharp, high sound from her throat.

She reached down, her fingers tangling in my hair, pulling me closer, urging me to be more aggressive. I obeyed. I wanted to consume the distance between us, to erase the boundaries of handler and subject until we were simply two bodies colliding in the dark. She was wet, her body welcoming me with a desperate openness that mirrored my own internal collapse.

When I finally rose to look at her, her eyes were clouded, her lips parted. I felt the ache in my own groin, a heavy, throbbing demand that I could no longer ignore.

"I want you inside me," she whispered. "Now."

I positioned myself, the head of my cock brushing against her entrance. I paused for one heartbeat, looking into her eyes to ensure we were still in this together, still consenting to the chaos. She nodded, a small, frantic movement.

I pushed into her slowly, savoring the way she tightened around me, the friction creating a heat that felt like it could ignite the very air. I was thick in her, filling her completely, and for a moment, I simply stayed still, letting the sensation wash over me. It was not the cold precision of the Court; it was something messy and visceral and honest.

"You're shaking," she whispered, her voice strained.

"I am," I admitted. "I have never... I have never felt this."

She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me down so our chests were flushed together, skin to skin, heart to heart. "Then don't think about it. Just feel it."

I began to move, a slow, deep rhythm that drove the air from my lungs. Every thrust was a confession, every slide of skin against skin a breaking of a vow I hadn't known I was keeping. I watched her face, the way her expression shifted from pleasure to something more profound, a recognition of sorts.

The pace accelerated as the tension coiled tighter in my gut. I stopped being the man who managed the room and became the man who was undone by it. The sounds we made were raw, uncurated things: the wet slap of our bodies meeting, the ragged cadence of our breathing, the way she whispered my name like a prayer or a curse.

I shifted my weight, driving deeper, finding the angle that made her breath hitch and her toes curl into the mattress. She met every thrust with an equal force, her hips rising to meet me, refusing to be passive in the act. We were fighting for something here, wrestling with the proximity of it all, as if the physical union was the only way to bridge the gap between our worlds.

"Lucian," she gasped, her voice breaking. "Right there. Don't stop."

I didn't. I pushed her further, my movements becoming frantic, driven by a sudden, terrifying realization that this moment was the only thing in my life that felt real. The Patron, the audit, the blood vowing... they were all ghosts. This, the heat of her skin and the way she clung to me, was the only truth I had ever possessed.

The climax hit us almost simultaneously, a violent, crashing wave that left me blind for several seconds. I groaned into the crook of her neck, my body shuddering as I spilled myself into her, the release so intense it felt like a physical purging of everything I had suppressed for twenty five years. She clung to me, her internal muscles pulsing around me in rhythmic waves, her own release shaking her entire frame.

I collapsed against her, my weight supported by my elbows, breathing hard. The silence that followed was not the heavy, oppressive silence of the library or the undercroft. It was a soft, shared quiet, filled only with the sound of our hearts slowing down in unison.

I stayed inside her for a long time, unwilling to break the connection. I felt the dampness of our sweat cooling in the October air, but I didn't move. I couldn't. If I moved, the world might rush back in and remind me that we were still in danger.

Slowly, I withdrew, the sensation of leaving her almost as jarring as the act of entering. I pulled the duvet over us both, shielding us from the drafts that crept through the stone walls.

Wren shifted, sliding closer to me until her head rested on my chest. She didn't speak for a while, and neither did I. The emotional cost of the last hour was beginning to settle. It wasn't just the sex; it was the surrender. For the first time in my life, I had allowed someone to see the wreckage beneath the architecture.

I thought about the vow in my blood, the invisible threads that tied me to the Court. For a few minutes, those threads had felt thin, almost transparent. I wondered if they had broken, or if I had simply learned how to pull against them without snapping.

"You're thinking again," she said, her voice muffled by my skin.

"I can't help it."

"Stop it for five minutes," she murmured. "Just be here. With me."

I closed my eyes and listened to the rhythm of her heart. I thought about the way she had looked at me when I told her I loved her, the lack of surprise in her eyes. She had seen it before I had. She had watched me struggle with it,

watched me hide behind my formality and my lists and my strategic maneuvers, and she had waited for me to catch up.

The vulnerability was terrifying. It felt like standing on the edge of a cliff with no one holding the rope. But as I held her in the dim light of the dying fire, I realized that I would rather fall with her than stand safely alone in the cold.

We lay there in the wreckage of my composure, the room smelling of salt and spent passion, while outside the walls of Blackthorn continued to loom, waiting for us to fail. But for once, the weight of the building didn't feel like it was crushing me. It felt like a challenge.

* * *



LATER: THE FIRE BURNED low. The room smelled of candle smoke and old stone and her. The campus beyond the window was cold and still and watched.

She was lying with her back against my side, not quite asleep. I could tell because her breathing was still uneven in the particular way it went when she was thinking quickly, short and deliberate, the kind of rhythm that meant she was assembling something.

"I realized," I said, "that I love you. I am telling you so that it is said plainly, without the vow in the way, because I am choosing to say it and I want you to know I am choosing."

She was quiet for a moment. Long enough that the old control began to reassemble itself at my edges.

Then she said, "I know."

I looked at the ceiling.

"I've known for a while," she said. "I was waiting to see if you'd figure it out."

"That," I said, "is the most Wren Calloway thing you have ever said."

"Is that a complaint."

"No," I said. "It is a fact." A pause. "I love you back is what I was hoping for."

She turned her head. Her expression was unguarded in a way I understood was rare, the wry surface down, just her. "I love you back," she said. Simply. "That's

terrifying."

"Yes," I agreed.

"The timing is catastrophic."

"Objectively."

She turned onto her stomach to look at me directly, her chin on her crossed arms. "We're going to fix this. What they did to Cora. The Reaping. All of it."

"We're going to try," I said.

"No." Her voice was quiet and final, the way it went when she had stopped entertaining alternatives. "We're going to *fix it*. Not try. I didn't come this far to try."

I looked at her in the low light. She meant it the way she meant everything, entirely, with her whole weight behind it, no reservation held back for the version of events where it didn't work.

"No," I said. "Neither did I."

* * *



SHE WAS STILL THERE when the windows went gray.

I lay awake and watched the light change, and I catalogued, the old habit I could not stop, everything that had shifted. The Patron expected resolution. He would not have it. That would carry consequences. The audit closed Friday and we had three days to manufacture something plausible while using the time for its actual purpose.

Three days.

Crane's key. I had been thinking about Crane's key since Wren had told me about it. The east wing had rooms sealed since my father's last year, locked under a charter clause with no explanation offered, which meant the explanation was the reason for the seal, which meant whatever was inside could ruin someone who mattered.

There was a room with no ledger entry. I had noticed it once, seven years ago, and been efficiently redirected by a man who was very good at efficient redirection.

Crane's key had a stamp I recognized. 1997. The year before my father became Patron.

I turned my head. Wren was already awake. Looking at the ceiling. The expression of someone who had moved three steps past the conversation.

"Crane's key," I said.

"East wing," she said.

"The room with no ledger entry."

She turned her head. "You know about it."

"I know it exists. I have never been able to reach it." I paused. "The stamp on the key. Did you look closely?"

"1997." She sat up. Something settled in her face, the open quality of the night before resolving back into the version of herself that had come to Blackthorn to collect a debt. She wore both versions honestly. I had learned, without meaning to, to love them equally. "Why 1997."

I told her. My father's last year. The charter seal. The reorganization of the east wing that no one had been able to fully account for in any document I had access to, which was most documents.

She listened completely and when I finished was quiet for a moment.

"He knew," she said.

"Yes."

"And the Patron..."

"Was there," I said. "Whatever happened to your sister. Whatever the Reaping actually is, beneath the ritual, he was present for its construction. He has been present for all of it."

She got off the bed. She moved around the room with purpose, her jacket, the half-burned page, the thread of a plan I could watch forming the way her plans always formed: not from feeling but from sequence, from what was available and what it could be made to do.

"Here is what we're going to do," she said. "You go back to the Patron and tell him you're handling it. Give him something plausible. Tell him I'm leaving voluntarily, or I'm being managed, or there's a wrinkle in the timeline, whatever reads. Buy us three days."

"And while I'm doing that."

"I use the key." She looked at me directly. "Whatever's in that room, if it's what I think it is, it proves Cora was murdered. Not suggests. *Proves*. And once we have proof, we take it somewhere the Court cannot make disappear."

"They will know," I said. "When I fail to resolve it on schedule, the Patron will know."

"Yes," she said. "He will." She held my gaze, steady and clear and fully arrived. "That's not a reason not to do it. It's what it costs."

I thought of my father. Of the vow in my blood, the founders' architecture, the debt called a legacy, the cage dressed as inheritance. I thought of Cora Calloway who had carved her initials under a desk in my library three years ago and been killed before she could walk away. I thought of Wren on her first day here, holding up a brass key, telling me it was her room like she had already decided to last.

She had lasted. Against everything this building had aimed at her, she had lasted.

"All right," I said.

"All right," she said.

The light came the rest of the way in. Outside, Blackthorn woke, bells from the hall chapel, gravel under the groundskeeper's cart, a building that had run on the same rhythms for two hundred years and was very good at looking as though it would continue indefinitely.

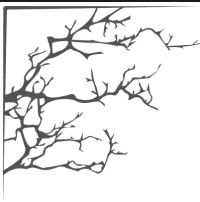
We were going to interrupt the pattern.

I found I was, for the first time in a very long time, something other than afraid of that. Not unafraid, I knew too much about what the Court was capable of to mistake the shape of what we were walking into. But beneath the fear, something else. Something I did not have a formal word for that felt, in structure, something like the opposite of alone.

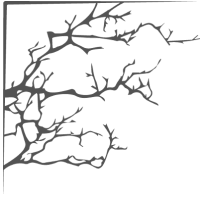
I had been alone in this for nineteen years. I had not known it until I wasn't.

She was already thinking about the ledger room, already constructing the sequence, already two moves ahead. I watched her and felt the vow move in my arm, low, and constant, and no longer the defining fact of my existence.

I let it move. I was done letting it decide.



PART 3: The Reckoning



Chapter 21: The Ledger

The fog was in the room before I was.

It pressed against the tall windows of Lucian's quarters in slow, gray coils while I lay completely still and did what I always do when I'm not sure I'm safe: I catalogued. The ache across my shoulders. The cold air above the warm sheets. The beeswax-and-smoke smell I'd been pretending for weeks I didn't associate with safety. The fact that the man I'd arrived at Blackthorn to destroy was lying three inches to my left, breathing with the deliberate measured patience of someone who was absolutely not asleep.

The plan was going to get us killed. That had been true for six hours now and I'd had a lot of time to sit with it.

I'd meant to stay sharp all night. I'd managed maybe two hours before I stopped managing anything.

"You're running the plan," I said.

"Refining it."

"There's a difference?"

Lucian turned his head on the pillow. Without the Court watching, without the ice he kept himself packed in (the precise posture, the calibrated distance), his face did something I was still getting used to. It went *still*. Not shut down. Present. Like he'd stopped performing and started existing.

I found it more terrifying than the ice.

"The key," he said.

"Yeah." I'd been thinking about Crane's key since I'd fallen asleep and since before I'd fallen asleep and since Crane had pressed it into my palm in the corridor outside the forbidden wing, his thin fingers closing mine around it: *your sister would have wanted you to have it*. Helpful. Possibly a trap. At Blackthorn, those were usually the same thing.

"We should move today," Lucian said. "Before the audit cycle closes. Before Sebastian..."

"Before Sebastian notices you didn't sleep in your own bed."

A pause. "That too."

He didn't move, but the air between us shifted. It went from the static of a conversation to something heavy and pressurized, like the moment before a storm breaks over the valley. I could see the pulse in his throat, a quick, rhythmic beat that betrayed the stillness of his expression.

I knew that look. I'd spent weeks studying it from across libraries and lecture halls, trying to figure out if it was hunger or hatred. Now, with the fog blurring the edges of the room and the sheets tangled around our legs, I realized it was both. It was the kind of wanting that felt like a collision.

I shifted closer, the movement slow and deliberate. My skin felt too tight for my body. "We have time," I whispered. "A little bit."

Lucian's hand came up, his fingers barely grazing my jawline. He didn't grab me; he waited, his touch a question. The precision was still there, but it was fraying at the edges. His eyes were dark, the pupils blown wide enough to swallow the iris.

"You are a distraction I cannot afford," he said, his voice a low, rough rasp. "And yet, I find I am entirely incapable of ignoring you."

"Stop talking," I said.

I leaned in and closed the gap. The first kiss was tentative, a testing of boundaries, but it didn't stay that way for long. He tasted of mint and something darker, something like old books and cold rain. He groaned into my mouth, a sound of genuine surrender, and his hand slid from my jaw to the back of my neck, pulling me flush against him.

The heat was immediate. It was a shock against the chill of the room, a sudden, violent warmth that made my head spin. I wanted everything. I wanted to erase the distance he always kept; I wanted to break the composure he used as armor.

He pulled back just an inch, his breath hot against my lips. "Wren. Tell me you want this. Not because we're running out of time, but because you want *me*."

I didn't have a witty retort for that. I didn't have a defensive wall to hide behind. "I want you," I said, the honesty feeling like a bruise. "God, Lucian, I want you so badly it's making me crazy."

He didn't wait another second. He moved with a sudden, focused intensity, pinning me back against the pillows. His mouth found the sensitive dip of my collarbone, and I arched my back, my fingers digging into his shoulders. He was solid, a weight that finally grounded me in a house where everything felt like it was floating away.

He stripped me with a frantic sort of efficiency, his hands shaking just enough to let me know he wasn't as composed as he wanted me to believe. When the sheets were the only thing between us, I reached for him, pulling his shirt over his head and pushing the duvet aside. He was lean and hard, all corded muscle and pale skin, a statue that had suddenly come to life and decided to claim me.

I guided his hand down, my breath hitching when his fingers found me. I was already slick, my body reacting to him with a desperation that terrified me. He touched me with that same precision he applied to everything else; he found the center of my pleasure and circled it with a slow, agonizing pressure that had me gripping the headboard.

"Look at me," he commanded softly.

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, his expression raw, stripped of every layer of Court etiquette. He looked haunted. He looked like I was the only thing in the world that made sense to him.

"You're so beautiful when you're undone," he murmured.

He shifted, moving between my thighs, and for a moment, we just stayed there, chest to chest, heartbeats hammering a frantic rhythm against one another. The air was thick with the scent of us and the dying embers of the fireplace.

"Is this okay?" he asked, his voice tight. "Do you want me inside you?"

"Yes," I breathed, my legs wrapping around his waist to pull him closer. "Please. Now."

He entered me in one slow, deep push that felt like a completion. I let out a sharp, broken sound, my eyes fluttering shut as the fullness of him filled the void I'd been carrying since I arrived at Blackthorn. He stayed still for a heartbeat, letting us both adjust to the friction and the heat, his forehead resting against mine.

Then he began to move.

It wasn't the polite, measured pace of a man who liked control. It was rhythmic and punishing, a steady drive that pushed me further and further into the mattress. Every thrust felt like a question being answered. *Are you real? Are you here? Do you belong to this world or just to me?*

I clung to him, my nails marking his back, my voice reduced to incoherent whimpers. I focused on the sensation of him; the way his skin felt against mine, the sound of his ragged breathing in my ear, the sheer, overwhelming presence of him. I'd spent so long being the only person I could trust that having someone else take charge felt like a luxury I couldn't afford, yet I craved it.

"Lucian," I gasped, my voice breaking.

He responded by deepening the angle, hitting a spot that sent a jolt of electricity straight to my toes. I tightened around him, my muscles pulsing in an instinctive attempt to hold onto him and never let go. The pleasure was building, a tide that was becoming too high to contain, pulling me under.

He felt it too. His movements became faster, more desperate. He wasn't just fucking me; he was trying to merge with me. He gripped my hips, his fingers bruising my skin, and drove into me with a finality that left me breathless.

I peaked first, a violent, shuddering release that ripped a scream from my throat. I saw white light behind my eyelids, the world dissolving into nothing but the sensation of him and the heat of the room. Seconds later, he followed, his body stiffening as he groaned my name, a sound of absolute defeat, as he came deep inside me.

For a long time, neither of us moved. We stayed locked together, our breathing the only sound in the quiet room, the fog still pressing against the windows like a silent witness.

The aftermath was the hardest part.

As the heat faded and the cold air began to seep back into the space between us, I felt the familiar urge to pull away, to put the armor back on before he could see how much this had actually cost me. But Lucian didn't let me. He shifted his weight, rolling onto his side but keeping me tucked against him, his arm draped heavily across my waist.

He kissed my temple, a gesture so tender it felt dangerous.

"You're shaking," he noted quietly.

"I'm cold," I lied.

"Liar."

I closed my eyes, leaning into him. The silence wasn't the empty kind; it was full of things we weren't ready to say. We had just shared something that went beyond a physical release. There was a vulnerability there, a bridge built in the dark that neither of us knew how to cross in the daylight.

I thought about Cora. I thought about the key on the nightstand and the danger waiting for us in the record room. For the first time since I'd stepped foot on this campus, the fear didn't feel like a weight pulling me down; it felt like a catalyst. Because now, if something happened to me, it wouldn't just be a loss of information or a family tragedy. It would be a loss of *this*.

"We can't do this every morning," I said, though my voice lacked any real conviction.

"No," he agreed, his grip tightening slightly. "Because then we'd never actually leave this room."

I let out a small, huffed laugh and finally relaxed into him. The cost of this moment was high; it was the risk of losing my edge, the danger of trusting a man who was essentially a stranger with a fancy title. But as I lay there in the gray light of the morning, listening to his heart slow down against my ear, I decided that the risk was worth it.

I sat up slowly, the cold air hitting my damp skin and making me shiver. The reality of the day came rushing back: the ledger, the Court, the lies.

Lucian watched me, his gaze steady and unnervingly perceptive. He knew exactly what I was doing; he knew I was trying to find my center again, to move from *Wren the woman* back to *Wren the infiltrator*.

"Don't shut it out," he said softly. "The feeling. Keep it. You'll need it when we go inside."

I didn't answer, because I didn't know how to tell him that keeping it felt like carrying a piece of glass in my pocket; it was beautiful, but it cut whenever I moved too quickly.

I sat up. The room was high-ceilinged and cold in that old-stone way: the kind of cold that lives in the walls, that no amount of heating ever quite dispels. The light through the fog was still more gray than white. Early. The kind of early that felt borrowed.

I sat up. The room was high-ceilinged and cold in that old-stone way: the kind of cold that lives in the walls, that no amount of heating ever quite dispels. The light through the fog was still more gray than white. Early. The kind of early that felt borrowed.

Lucian watched me locate my clothes with the focused attention he gave to things he was trying to memorize, and I made myself not think too carefully about that.

"You understand what we're walking into," I said, pulling on my sweater. It wasn't a question.

"I've been inside the Court's record room before." He sat up too, the duvet falling to his waist, and I looked very deliberately at the window. "It's different from being in it with intent."

"We have Crane's key."

"We have *a* key. We don't know what Crane intended us to do with it."

I turned. "Crane gave me the key to what his key opens. That's what keys are for."

Lucian's mouth did the thing it sometimes did: the almost-almost of a smile that never quite arrived. "The record room is behind the warden's corridor. If we're caught..."

"If we're caught, the Court decides we're the leak they've been hunting, and the Patron gets exactly what he wants without lifting a finger." I shrugged on my jacket. "So let's not get caught."

He looked at me for a long moment. Something moved in his expression, complicated, and warmer than anything I'd planned for when I'd booked a six-hour bus ticket and packed Cora's photo and told myself I was coming here to collect the truth, not to acquire feelings about a person who was in the ledger's debt up to his jaw.

"All right," he said quietly.

* * *



WE SPLIT UP TO AVOID the cameras and met at the east wing entrance twenty minutes later, both dressed for a regular morning, people with perfectly ordinary reasons for being near a restricted corridor at seven a.m. The fiction required no discussion. We'd both been performing this school for too long.

The corridor was carved into the oldest part of Blackthorn, older than the tower, older probably than the fiction that this place was a school. The walls were the real black stone that gave the building its name, and they smelled of something I could never quite name, not rot, not quite damp, something more deliberate. Like the stone had been treated to repel curiosity.

Lucian walked beside me without touching me, which was the right call and also, distantly, a disappointment I noted and filed away for later self-interrogation.

"Crane's given keys to people before," I said, keeping my voice down. "That's what his 'helpful' gesture is. A pattern."

"He gave your sister something," Lucian said. He didn't look at me. "I don't know what."

"You watched her die and you don't know what she had."

The muscle in his jaw moved. "I know what she knew when she died. I don't know what she'd found."

I let that sit. There would be time to unpick it later, in whatever *later* looked like, a concept I was trying not to count on too hard.

The corridor ended at a door I'd catalogued on my third day and dismissed as storage: low lintel, iron hinges, a lock so old it had gone black with age. I'd dismissed a lot of things in my first week here that had turned out to be load-bearing.

I held up Crane's key.

Lucian's hand closed over mine: steadying, or warning. "If anyone finds us..."

"We're doing a research project on archaic furniture storage."

"Wren."

"I know." I looked at him. "I know what it costs if we're found. I've been running those numbers since October."

A beat. He let go.

The key fit. Of course it fit. Crane didn't do anything accidentally.

* * *



THE ROOM WAS COLD IN a different way than the corridor: drier, more deliberate. Preservation cold. The kind of temperature maintained not by stone and neglect but by intention.

It was larger than the door suggested. Shelves ran floor to ceiling on three walls, packed with ledgers, thick-spined and serious, stamped on their spines with dates. The dates went back farther than I'd expected. The oldest I could read from the doorway said 1847.

A single table in the center. An unlit lamp. One chair.

It was the room of an institution that kept records not because anyone required accountability, but because the act of recording was itself a form of power. *We know*

what was done. We have always known. We will always know.

I let out a breath.

"When did you know this room existed?" I asked.

"I've always known." Lucian moved to the shelves. His voice was careful. "I was brought in here at fourteen. Part of the heir's induction." He pulled a ledger from the shelf (recent, 2010s) and turned it in his hands without opening it. "I was told it held the record of the Court's benefactions. Fellowships funded. Buildings donated. The case for why what we do matters."

"But."

"But I was fourteen and not yet good at lying to myself." He set the ledger back. "I didn't look at what was actually in them until I was older. By then I had the vow, and the vow..." He stopped.

"The vow forbade you from acting on what you found."

"It's more elegant than that." His voice flattened with something I'd learned to read as self-contempt, controlled into shape. "It doesn't forbid action. It ensures any action carries a price. The founders built the vow to tether, not to chain. A chain can be cut. A tether..."

"You keep pulling on it and it reminds you it's there." I moved to the far shelf. "Which year did the Reaping start?"

"Based on what I've found," he said quietly, "it never wasn't."

* * *



THE LEDGERS FOR THE current decade were at eye level. I started there, with a year I recognized, then pulled one from the shelf marked 1991 to 1995, because the present needs context.

The format was consistent. Each page covered a year, each year a list. Names formatted last-name-first, the same as any institutional roster. Student names, for the most part. Ages. Enrollment dates.

And next to some of them, not all, but some, scattered across each page with the casualness of a procedural notation, a single word.

Reaped.

The ink was different for those entries. Darker. Applied with more pressure, or a different hand. Even across decades, even in ledgers kept by people long dead, the Reaped entries had a quality that set them apart. Intentional. Ceremonial.

I counted the 1991 roster. Forty-seven students. Three were marked *Reaped*.

I turned to 1993. Forty-four students. Four marked.

Then 1985. Then 1972. Then, hands moving faster now, not careful anymore, just *looking*, 1958.

The ratio held. Always roughly three to eight percent of any given year's pledge class. Always the same word. Always the same deliberate weight of ink.

"It's not a metaphor," I said. My voice came out stripped of everything I usually pack it with.

"No." Lucian had pulled a ledger from the 1970s shelf and was standing with it open, very still.

"It's a quota." The word tasted like something I wanted to spit out. "There's a *quota*. Every year they take..."

"Between three and six," he said quietly. "In the early records it's closer to six. It's been shrinking."

"Progress," I said.

"The Patron calibrates." He set the ledger down.
"Whoever holds the title keeps the percentage sustainable. Enough to matter. Not enough to attract attention."

I flipped to the current decade. Steady hands, I was very focused on keeping my hands steady. Last year's roster. The year before. Two years before.

I found the year Cora enrolled.

I found the year Cora died.

I went down the list. Last-name-first, the same as always. Names that meant nothing to me: children of dynasties, people whose families had been told the same thing my family had been told. *Accident. Tragedy. Our deepest condolences.*

Midway down the third column:

Calloway, C.

Reaped.

* * *



I DIDN'T MOVE FOR A long time.

Lucian said my name once, carefully. I didn't answer. He didn't say it again.

The thing about certainty is that you think you want it. I'd wanted it for three years, since the call that didn't come, since the box, since my mother's face when she said *these things happen at schools like that*. I'd wanted to know, with the hard-edged clarity of a fact that could be testified to, that Cora hadn't chosen this. That I hadn't missed a sign. That *call you tomorrow* wasn't a girl saying goodbye but a girl who'd actually planned tomorrow.

She'd planned to call. She'd planned tomorrow.

I pressed two fingers to *Calloway, C.* on the page. The ink was slightly raised under my fingertip, old enough to have dried with texture, like a scar.

"She was in this room," I said.

"What?"

"Crane's key. He gave it to her too, didn't he? That's what you couldn't tell me: she had access here, she found this. She *saw* her own name before..." The sentence collapsed. I let it.

Lucian crossed the room. He stopped close enough that his shoulder was an inch from mine, not touching, but present. The way he'd been present all morning: warm and careful and not performing anything.

"I don't know what she found," he said. "I know she found something. I know that was why..." He stopped.

"Why they Reaped her." I said it for him. Flat. A fact. The fact I'd crossed six counties to collect.

"Yes."

"Good." I closed the ledger. My hands were steady. This was the part where I was good at grief: the pivot, the sharpening, the moment where everything that hurt folded into the category of *useful*. "Then we take the whole thing down."

He was quiet for a moment. "We'll need more than one ledger."

"We'll need proof the current Court is running the same program. Not historical: current." I looked at the shelves. Three walls of evidence, decades deep. "But this tells us the shape of it. The pattern. Which means the current year's ledger should have a shortlist..."

"The current year's ledger is kept in the Patron's suite until the Naming." His voice went careful in the specific way I recognized: information delivered against the resistance of the vow. "I've never been in that room."

"Crane has."

"Crane gave you a key to *this* room."

"Crane gave me a key that fit this lock." I turned. "Why this room and not that one?"

Something complicated moved across Lucian's face. "Because this is where you prove the crime. The Patron's room is where you end it. Those are different operations."

"He's sequencing us."

"Or he's using us." He held my eyes. "We don't know which. We need to behave as if it's both."

I nodded. That was the mode I trusted: assume you're being played and plan around it. I'd arrived at Blackthorn in that mode. The difference now was that I wasn't planning alone.

I pulled out my phone and started photographing pages. The Calloway entry. The three decades on either side of it, showing the pattern, the ratio, the same word repeated in that deliberate heavy ink. The oldest legible pages, where the handwriting shifted through different keepers of this record, evidence that no single hand had maintained this, that the institution continued across deaths and departures, that it was structural, not personal.

A Court crime. Not a person's crime. The distinction mattered, legally and otherwise.

Lucian watched me work, and then reached for a ledger I hadn't touched, upper shelf, 1960s, the spine dark with age, and opened it on the table. Something in his posture changed. A stillness that was different from thinking; sharper, more arrested.

"What?" I said.

He didn't answer immediately. His eyes moved over the page the way I'd seen him read difficult things, slowly, like he was quarantining what he found before he let it into the rest of his mind.

"Lucian."

He turned the ledger toward me.

The page was the same format as the others: names, dates, the Reaped notation spread across the roster. But this one had something the others didn't. In the margin, running the length of the left column in cramped, precise handwriting, were annotations: a different hand from whoever had kept the formal record. Notes in Latin I couldn't fully parse. A sketch of a symbol I recognized from the undercroft floor. And numbers: sequences, dates, a code that would need time to read.

Someone had been using this as a working document. Not just a record. A map.

"Do you know the handwriting?" I asked.

He stood very still.

"Lucian."

He reached out and touched the margin the way I'd touched Cora's name, careful, like the page might change if he pressed too hard. His jaw was tight. A muscle moved in his throat.

"We need to go," he said. His voice had gone somewhere flat and airless I hadn't heard from him before. "Right now. Take what you've photographed."

"Tell me who wrote in the margin."

He closed the ledger. His hands were perfectly steady, which meant he was working very hard.

"I'll tell you outside," he said. "I need us out of this room first."

I photographed the margin on the last visible page before he got the cover shut. Fast, silent. He either didn't notice or didn't stop me.

We were back in the corridor in under a minute, the door locked behind us, the records room swallowed by the black stone as if it had never had a door at all.

The fog outside the narrow corridor windows had thickened while we were inside. It pressed against the glass, patient, full of whatever it had come to confess.

* * *



LUCIAN'S FACE, IN THE gray corridor light, was stripped to something I'd never seen before.

I'd thought this morning, in the warm borrowed early-ness of his room, the plan taking shape between us, the weight of the night before still present and real, that I was starting to read him. That six weeks of orbit and opposition and the thing that had finally cracked open between us had given me some real access to what happened behind the ice.

Standing in the corridor outside the oldest evidence of the worst thing either of us had ever suspected, I understood I hadn't seen this face yet.

"Tell me," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment. The way he'd looked in the undercroft the night of my initiation, like a man counting a cost he'd always known was coming. Like someone arriving at a door they'd been walking toward for years and discovering they didn't want to open it as much as they'd thought.

"The handwriting in the margin," he said.

"Yes."

"I've seen it on letters. On Court documents. On a birthday card when I was seven years old."

The fog shifted against the glass. The stone ticked with cold.

"It belongs to my father," he said. "Who has been dead for six years."

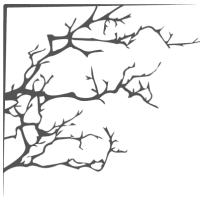
He turned and walked away from me down the corridor, and I stood there holding a phone full of photographs and understood, for the first time, that the thing we were trying to bring down had roots that went deeper than I'd come here prepared to find.

The ledger didn't just confirm the Reaping was real.

It confirmed who had designed it.

And somewhere above us, in a set of private rooms I had no key for yet, the current Patron was already deciding what to do about the Calloway girl, and the Thorne heir who had stopped performing loyalty.

I followed Lucian into the fog.



Chapter 22: His Father's Hand

The ledger smelled like my father's study.

I did not notice it immediately. I was too careful for immediacy, too trained in the art of processing without reacting, of reading without expression. I had taken the book from Wren's hands while she slept, which required a particular species of stillness, the kind one develops when one has spent a lifetime being watched by people who catalog weakness the way entomologists catalog pinned moths. She had finally surrendered to exhaustion around four in the morning, curled against my shoulder with the ledger still open across her knees, and I had eased it free page by page, millimeter by millimeter, breathing through my nose.

Now I sat at my desk with the book open before me in the gray nothing before dawn, and I let myself smell it properly for the first time.

Cedar. Old paper. And beneath that: the particular mineral sharpness of ink mixed from a private formula, a recipe some Thorne ancestor had apparently considered so important it had survived in the household records for

two hundred years. I had grown up breathing that smell without knowing it had a source. I had associated it with my father's closed door, with the sounds of scratching pen that meant I should walk past and not knock.

I turned to the first page and began to read.

* * *



THE LEDGER WAS NOT (as I had initially assumed from Wren's description) a simple list of names. Simple was never the Court's vocabulary. What they had built here was a *system*, and I recognized its architecture the way you recognize the handwriting of someone who taught you to write: with a kind of queasy fluency, the body knowing before the mind consents.

Each page represented a cohort year. Going back, I counted, to 1887, the founding year, the year three men who had made their fortunes through methods that did not survive the century shook hands over a plot of land in the mountains and called it education. Each cohort had an

enrollment column (the pledges who entered), a rites column (initiations passed and failed, annotated in dry administrative shorthand), and a final column with a heading that had been changed at least three times over the decades. They called it *Elevation* in the early years. Then *Consignment*. After the 1940s someone had settled on the Greek letter that now adorned the Court seal, as though a symbol carried less weight than a word.

It did not.

The names in the final column averaged two to four per year. Not every year: there were gaps, drought years, perhaps when scrutiny had been too close or the Court had judged the risk too great. But the pattern was consistent enough to be unmistakable, and I was an economist's son with an economist's education. I understood what sustained, cyclical extraction looked like. I understood harvests.

The word lodged in my throat and stayed there.

I turned to the most recent decade and began cross-referencing what I knew. I knew a great deal. I had spent the last six years being groomed for exactly this room, which meant I had been given maps of the Court's power and told they were invitations. I read them now differently.

The Hargrove family. I had been at school with their youngest son, a soft-spoken boy who was excellent at chess and worse at everything else. The Hargrove name appeared in the ledger eleven times across four generations, always in the secondary column, never in the final one. Architects of the system. Never offered to it. That was the founder's covenant: your blood builds the house, your blood does not burn in it.

The Crane family. I stopped.

I made myself keep reading.

The Aldermoor trust, which three separate pledges had told three separate inspectors they had never heard of, and which had funded the undercroft restoration in 1974 and the east library extension in 1991 and at least two of the quieter legal unpleasantnesses that had followed particularly complicated cohort years. The Aldermoor had sent daughters here for four generations and gotten them back changed in ways their families had apparently been willing to absorb.

The Patron's name was not in the book.

But his signature was, or what I recognized as a signature: the notation system, the particular way that allocations were categorized, a habit of using the archaic abbreviation *cf.* that I had encountered in exactly one other context, in documents so buried in the Thorne

family archive that I had found them by accident at fourteen and spent six months deciding I had misread them.

I had not misread them.

* * *



THERE IS A PARTICULAR sensation that comes when something you have long suspected becomes something you can prove. It is not relief. The therapists and the philosophers have got this wrong, I think, or at least I have never experienced it the way the literature suggests: as unburdening, as light. What I felt in that moment was the opposite of lightness. It was the feeling of a structure you have been leaning against finally resolving into weight.

The Court had been killing people. Not metaphorically. Not in the way that institutions kill things: curiosity, ambition, the softer parts of the self that survive only with careful tending. *Literally*. With methods the ledger

did not specify but whose results were noted in the final column beside each name, in the same dispassionate administrative hand that had recorded enrollment figures and dues payments and the annual budget for candles.

I had known this the way one knows things one cannot afford to know. A managed suspicion. A theory kept soft and unproven, its edges never pressed.

Cora Calloway's name was not in the ledger.

I turned the pages three times before I accepted what the absence meant. She was not recorded in the final column. She was not, officially, a Reaping. What she was (what she had been, what I had watched her become in the last hours of her life from a doorway I had not been permitted to pass) was something the Court had decided not to formalize. A warning, then. A correction. The kind of problem one resolves quietly and without creating paperwork.

I had not moved to stop it. The vow held my feet and my tongue and my hands, and I had stood in that doorway and I had watched, and afterward I had walked back to my room and I had been sick into the basin and I had written, in the private cipher I kept for thoughts too dangerous to speak, *I am what they made me*.

I still believed that. I was beginning to understand it was not the absolution I had meant it to be.

* * *



THE INK ON THE MAIN text of the ledger was, as I have said, standardized: a house mixture, applied with a consistency that suggested the entries were made by someone who considered their penmanship a form of institutional record-keeping. Precise. Small. The particular handwriting of a person trained to minimize their own presence on the page.

The margin notes were different.

I had noticed them peripherally on the early pages and catalogued them as later additions: corrections, perhaps, or annotations from a subsequent reader. The penmanship was different: larger, less restrained, with a particular habit of slanting hard to the right in moments of apparent emphasis and correcting back to vertical for the more neutral observations. Whoever had written in the margins had not been writing for the record. They had been

thinking. The notes had the quality of a person arguing with themselves in private, which I recognized because I had spent thirty-one years doing the same thing.

I turned back to the 1990s and read the margin notes properly.

The first ones were analytical. Observations about patterns in the cohort selection: notes on which family lines were producing "instabilities" (the word was their word, not mine, though I was distantly aware that I had heard it before), and recommendations for how the selection criteria might be refined. The handwriting was not alarmed by this. It approached the question with the clean dispassion of a man accustomed to making decisions that required clean dispassion.

Then, around 1997, the notes changed.

Not the handwriting. The *register*.

Protocol inadequate for candidates with investigative instincts, read one note, beside an entry that I calculated would correspond to the year I was seven years old, the year I had asked my father why the south door was always locked and he had put his hand on my shoulder with a pressure that was not quite comfort and said that some rooms were for keeping things safe, not for going

into. *Standard rites produce observable affects in the general population. Consider alternative approach for flagged entries.*

Flagged entries. Two words. Neat, economical. The language of management.

My hands had gone very still on the page.

I was aware of this as a separate observation, the way one is aware of weather: my hands were still, my breathing had slowed, the pre-dawn quiet of the room had taken on an acute quality, every small sound arriving with unusual clarity. The radiator ticking. Wren's breath from the bedroom, slow and even. The sound of my own pulse, which was very loud.

I turned to 2003, because that was the year I needed to check, and I knew it, and I had known it for the last several minutes in the way one knows things that the body processes before the mind catches up.

* * *



THE ENTRY FOR THE 2003 cohort was unremarkable at first glance. Fourteen pledges. Ten initiations completed. Two departures noted (one voluntary, one described as *health-related*, which had a particular sound in this context). And in the final column, two names I did not recognize, early enough in the ledger's history that they predated anyone I might have known personally.

But it was the margin I was reading.

And in the margin of the 2003 page, in the handwriting I had been trying not to recognize for eleven pages:

The boy is ready. Bring him forward in the autumn cohort. He has his grandfather's precision.

The boy.

I was eleven years old. I had been brought into my first Court observation (not a rite, just an observation, just the standing-in-the-doorway-watching that was apparently how the Thorne family introduced their heirs to the

institution that owned them) in the autumn of that year. I had stood in the south gallery and I had watched the candles and the circle and the Latin, and I had thought, with the cold clarity of an eleven-year-old who had been raised to think clearly, *this is what we are*.

I had assumed my father was a reluctant participant. I had constructed, over fourteen years, a careful portrait of a man caught in an institution he had not chosen, performing the functions required of him with the minimum of genuine investment. A man like me, I had told myself. A man going through the motions because the alternative was worse.

His grandfather's precision.

The pride in those three words was unmistakable. I am an excellent reader of tone; my survival has depended on it. The man who wrote that annotation was not burdened. He was not reluctant. He was *pleased*.

I sat with that for a long moment.

The study smelled like cedar and old paper and that particular ink, and I understood now why my body had registered it before my mind could resist: because the smell was the same. Because my father had mixed his ink at that desk, in this building, on visits I had understood as administrative and had apparently entirely

misunderstood. Because the study I had grown up beside, the room with the closed door and the scratching pen, had been where he brought the ledger home.

He had brought the ledger home.

* * *



MY FATHER DIED WHEN I was twenty-four. A cardiac event, sudden, in the early morning hours of a Tuesday. I had been in London for a conference; I received a call at six in the morning from the Blackthorn administrator and was on the first available flight by seven. By the time I landed, the decision-making had already been done: the decisions, I mean, about what would be said publicly, about how the Thorne succession would be managed, about which of my father's papers would be preserved and which would go into the incinerator that served the west wing for exactly these occasions. I had been twenty-four and grieving and had understood that this was what grief looked like in this family, which was to say:

efficient, invisible, directed outward toward the management of perception rather than inward toward whatever actual feeling required.

I had not been permitted to read the papers. I had been told they were technical, financial, administrative, dull in the way that institutional inheritance is always dull. I had been given a role and a title and a set of expectations, and I had performed them, and I had told myself that this was my inheritance, and I had been correct in every way except the one that mattered.

He had left me the vow. He had left me the cage. He had left me the shape of a man who runs the apparatus, and no one had seen fit to tell me what the apparatus was for.

Or perhaps they had assumed I knew. Perhaps, to the Court, a Thorne not knowing was simply a Thorne performing not-knowing, which was a very different thing and had its own uses.

I turned the final pages slowly.

The last margin annotation in my father's hand was dated three years before his death. It was also the first time the Patron's influence appeared clearly, not merely in notation style but in explicit reference (a single line, underlined once, in the careful slant that corrected back to vertical):

The Patron requests final authority on this year's elevation. Agreed. This is how it was always meant to be.

This is how it was always meant to be.

I sat with that sentence for a long time. The gray before dawn was beginning to lighten at the edges of the curtains. Somewhere in the city beyond the campus walls, the first delivery trucks were beginning their rounds, ordinary life conducting itself without reference to ledgers or vows or the specific, precise shape of my father's letters, which I would have known anywhere, in any ink, in any margin.

The boy is ready.

I had been so certain, for so long, that I was a prisoner of this institution. That the vow had been done *to* me. That the cage had been built by other hands and I had simply been placed inside it, an inheritance I had not consented to.

My father had consented to it. My father had, by the evidence of his own hand in these margins, *wanted* it, had refined it, had strategized about it, had taken pride in my precision as evidence that I would be a suitable instrument of it.

The ledger made the shape of my entire life into something I didn't recognize.

I heard Wren move in the other room: the small shift of someone surfacing toward waking. I had perhaps forty seconds before she would call out or come to the doorway, and I needed to decide, in those forty seconds, how to hold what I was holding.

I closed the ledger.

I put my hand flat on the cover and I breathed, slowly, the cedar-and-ink smell of a room that was my inheritance, and I thought about what it meant that everything I was (everything I had been built to be) was documented in my dead father's handwriting on the margins of a kill list.

Then I opened it again, because I was a Thorne, and Thornes did not look away from the things they had to see.

When Wren appeared in the doorway, sleep-soft and watchful, I did not put it down.

"I know whose handwriting this is," I said.

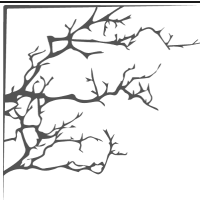
She came to me. She read my face the way she always did (fast, comprehensive, missing nothing) and she sat down in the chair across from me and waited, which was one of the things I loved about her, that she knew when to wait.

"It's my father's." The words tasted like the ink smelled. "He didn't inherit the Court. He *designed* the modern version of it." A pause. "I think the Patron gave him the mandate and he executed it. Literally." I looked up at her. "He brought me here when I was eleven to show me what I was for."

Her hand came across the desk. She put it over mine on the cover of the ledger.

"Then we're going to make sure this is the last year it matters," she said.

I turned my hand over and held hers and thought about Cora's name, which was not in the book. I thought about where her final words might be. I thought about the last page she had written, somewhere in this building, and whether the name on it would be one I recognized.



Chapter 23: Cora's Last Page

The ledger was still open on the table between us, and Lucian hadn't moved in four minutes.

I know because I counted. I count things when the world starts to tilt: exits in a room, faces in a crowd, seconds of silence before something breaks. Four minutes of Lucian not moving while his father's handwriting curved across the margin in faded ink. I'd checked whether it was blood. Of course I had. It wasn't. Old enough, though, that the distinction felt thin.

"Lucian."

His eyes came back from wherever they'd been. The control resettled across his face like fog dropping over cold water: smooth, immediate, thorough. He was terrifyingly good at that. I was starting to understand it wasn't coldness, the way I'd thought in those first weeks. It was a scar that had grown over something still raw underneath.

"I know," he said.

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"You were going to say we need to keep moving."

He was right. I didn't like that he was right. I pressed my thumb to the bottom of the page and turned it.

His hand covered mine.

"One more second," he said. Not a request, more like something he needed to say out loud to make himself believe it. I left my hand where it was. Outside the study window, fog pressed against the glass, and Blackthorn's bells marked three in the morning with the kind of sound that doesn't echo so much as *settle*, like it's making itself comfortable in your chest.

One more second. Then his hand lifted, and we kept moving.

We'd been at the ledger for two hours, cross-referencing dates against names against the margin notes his father had left in a cramped, slanted hand nothing like Lucian's precision. Three names confirmed Reaped. Seven marked with a symbol I'd seen once in Cora's partial pages: a closed eye, ink drawn fast. A notation in the current year, near the back, that stopped us both: *Calloway pending*.

Pending.

I'd stared at that word long enough to memorize the way the ink had bled into the paper's weave. Then I'd turned the page, because you can't afford to unravel in enemy

territory, and because the word I needed was still somewhere we hadn't looked.

"The final entry," I said. "Cora had... she had a full final entry. The pages I found in the library were torn. Middle section. She'd hidden something else, somewhere else, and I never..." My voice did something I didn't authorize it to do. I stopped. Breathed. "She was methodical. She would have hidden the most dangerous part where only someone who knew her would think to look."

Lucian was already thinking. I could see it in the way he'd gone still again, but a different stillness now: the one that meant his mind was working three layers down.

"She was in Wexford," he said. "Fourth floor, north end."

"My room."

"Before your room."

I hadn't thought about that. The room that had *been* Cora's, three years before it became mine. The slant-ceilinged room with the window that looked out over the quad toward the building with no handle on the door. The matron had given me the key with her priced-my-coat look, and I'd been so certain there was significance in the assignment: some message from the universe, or from the Court.

Maybe it had been neither of those things. Maybe it had just been Cora, hiding something in the one place she could guarantee would eventually be searched by someone who shared her blood.

* * *



WE USED THE SERVANTS' stairs, Lucian's idea, because he'd grown up moving through Blackthorn the way water moves through stone, finding every gap. I followed close enough to feel the warmth of him ahead of me, and I tried not to think about how three weeks ago I'd have called that a tactical error and now I just called it *true*.

Wexford Hall at three a.m. was different from Wexford Hall at any other hour. The old building breathed differently in the deep dark: woodsmoke settling into the walls, stone contracting in the cold, the occasional sound of something I'd decided was the architecture and not the building watching me back.

My room. Key in my pocket, because I'd stopped leaving it behind after the third time someone had gotten in while I was away.

Inside, it smelled like my things now: the cedar of my coat, the particular dustiness of the books I'd stacked against the east wall. Not Cora's anymore. But once.

"The window seat," I said.

Lucian raised an eyebrow.

"Cora and I had the same hiding spot growing up. Mom's house, the window seat in the reading room. Loose board on the left side, second from the hinge." I crossed to the window without looking at him. "Worth checking before I start pulling up floorboards."

The window looked out over the quad, fog-thick now, the black building invisible but present the way a held breath is present. I pushed the seat cushion aside and pressed along the left edge of the wooden panel.

The second board from the hinge shifted.

Lucian made a sound behind me, not a word, just an exhale, and I understood it, because I felt it too. That cold, sick certainty when a theory stops being a theory.

Inside the hollow: a small notebook, bound in dark cloth, soft with handling. Not the journal I'd found pieces of. This was smaller. A field notebook, the kind with an elastic closure and a ribbon marker.

My hands were steady. I was proud of that in the way you're proud of something that costs you nothing because you've already spent everything that would make it hard. Three years of carrying this particular weight. I'd gotten better at it. That's different from it getting lighter.

I opened it.

* * *



CORA'S HANDWRITING was smaller than I remembered.

That was the first thing. I don't know why I expected it to look bigger (she'd always been bigger than any room she walked into), but the journal handwriting was careful and

compressed, each letter formed like she was conserving space. Like she knew she was running out of it.

I sat down on the window seat. Lucian sat beside me without asking. I didn't tell him not to.

Most of the notebook was notes. Dates, initials, cross-referenced symbols. She'd been running the same kind of investigation I was running, three years earlier, with whatever she'd been able to find. Three months of work condensed into a hundred pages of careful handwriting.

Then, near the back, the tone changed.

November 14.

I'm going to write this down because I'm not going to make it to tell anyone in person. I know that's dramatic. I know it sounds exactly like the thing you write the night before something terrible happens in a film, and then the person turns out to be fine. I'm not going to be fine.

He told me what the Reaping is. Not the mythology version: the real one. They take a person, always someone smart enough to be a threat, always someone without the right surname, and they perform a ritual in the undercroft that's been in the founding documents since 1847. It's not metaphor. It's not symbolic. You go in and you don't come out, and the Court records it as an accident. A jump. A fall. A fit. The ledger has names going back a hundred and twenty years.

I found a copy of the ritual. It uses hemlock: a specific preparation, diluted enough to incapacitate but slow enough to be staged. The symbol they mark on the offering is a closed eye. I found it on the back of my Tithe coin three weeks ago and didn't know what it meant then.

I know now.

They call the person who performs it the Deliverer. Always a member of the founding families. Always done under compulsion: the blood vow makes refusal impossible once you're named. The Patron chooses. The Deliverer delivers.

The one who told me all of this, who explained how it worked and what it meant and why I needed to run, I trusted him. I did trust him. That's the part I keep snagging on.

His initial is S.

I'm writing that down because I need to say it outside my own head, where I can't talk myself out of it. The person who sat with me in the library and walked me through the ritual and told me I was in danger is the same person who marked my coin.

I don't know if he realized I'd figured that out. I don't know if the warning was a genuine attempt to help me or if he wanted me to know exactly how it was going to

happen before it did. I don't know which version is worse.

His initial is S. I'm leaving this for Wren, because she's the only one who'll look, and she needs to know: it wasn't an accident. It was S. Whatever happens to me, it was S.

The handwriting got rougher near the bottom of the page. The last line was underlined twice.

Tell her I wasn't afraid.

* * *



I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I sat there before Lucian said my name.

Not Calloway. Not *Miss Calloway*. Just Wren, quiet, like he was trying to call me back from somewhere.

"She named her killer," I said.

"I know. I read it."

"It's not you."

A pause. Then: "No."

Three years. Three years of *Lucian Thorne*, it must be *Lucian Thorne*, his name starts with L. I'd built such a careful architecture in my head. I'd planted myself next to him like a trap, watched his face for tells, found something in every controlled expression and talked myself into reading it as evidence. I'd kissed him in a ritual circle and told myself I was still working.

The relief that hit me now felt like an indictment.

"I suspected you," I said.

"I know that, too."

"I came here to..." I stopped. The words felt stupid and important at the same time, which is where all the real things live. "*You watched her die.*"

"Yes." His voice didn't change pitch, but something in it thickened. "I was present. I was seventeen and newly vow-bound, and I did not perform the rite. But I was there, and that is something I intend to spend the rest of my life accounting for. I'm not asking for absolution. I'm not offering it as one."

I thought about Cora writing *tell her I wasn't afraid*. I thought about her sitting across from someone she trusted while that person described exactly how she was going to die, and the question of whether the warning had been real or just the cruelest possible final intimacy.

"She trusted S," I said. "Whatever else is true, she trusted them. That's why it worked. They warned her under the pretense of helping her, and she was smart enough to catch on, and too late."

"And then marked her coin."

"And then marked her coin." I looked at the final line again. *Tell her I wasn't afraid*. Cora, who was afraid of the diving board. Cora, who always wanted me to think she was braver than she was, because she knew I needed her to be. "S."

The problem with S was that it was obvious.

Sebastian. Sebastian, with his second-glass-of-wine warmth and the watchful calculation underneath it. Sebastian, whose loyalty to Lucian had been wearing thin in a way that felt less like friendship under pressure and more like patience running out. Sebastian, who had been at Blackthorn three years ago. Sebastian, whose name began with exactly one letter.

I'd been half-building a case against him for weeks.

S. It was almost too clean.

* * *



"WHAT'S CRANE'S FIRST name?"

Silence.

Not the calculating kind. The kind that meant the answer was something Lucian didn't want to hand me.

"Lucian."

"Silas," he said. "Silas Crane."

The air in the room changed. Not dramatically: Blackthorn didn't do drama, it did *atmosphere*, slow and accumulating, the way damp does. But I felt it in the back of my teeth, the particular chill of a word landing in the wrong place.

Silas.

Silas Crane, who had given me a key to a ledger full of a hundred and twenty years of murder. Silas Crane, who had been quietly useful at every turning point, showing up when I needed him with exactly the right resource at exactly the right moment. Silas Crane, who had pressed a key into my hand after the staged pledge death and said *your sister would have wanted you to have it* in a voice so warm and so certain that I'd taken it and said thank you without asking one important question.

How he knew what Cora would have wanted.

How he knew what she would have wanted when I had never, not once, discussed my sister's preferences with him. Not in those terms. Not with that intimacy. Not as though they'd been close.

She trusted S.

"He was here," I said. "When Cora was here."

"Third year. Court member by then." Lucian's voice was flat in the way that meant he was working to keep it level. "He was kind to her. Wren, 'kind to her' and 'not her killer' are not the same sentence."

"I know." I'd learned that lesson before the first frost. Kind was a currency here. It bought access; it bought trust; it bought the particular vulnerability of someone who thought they'd finally found an ally.

I thought about the key. The timing of it, slipped into my hand with that gentle certainty: your sister would have wanted you to have it. Like he knew what we'd find in the ledger. Like he'd needed us to find it.

Or (and this was the part that kept folding back on itself), like he was trying to help me the only way he could, from inside an institution that would destroy him if he said the truth out loud. Cora had thought the warning was real, at first. She'd trusted the person who warned her. Right up until she turned her Tithe coin over and found the closed eye.

"Sebastian was also here three years ago," Lucian said. "His family enrolled him early. Seventeen."

"I know."

"They both fit."

"I know." I closed the notebook. The last line was still in there, still underlined twice, and I didn't need to look at it to see it. *Tell her I wasn't afraid.* "She left me the initial, not the name. Either she didn't know the full name, or she didn't want to write it. She was protecting herself. A single letter is deniable in a way a full name isn't."

"Or she wasn't certain enough to destroy someone who might have genuinely tried to warn her."

I looked at him.

"She sounds like someone with a careful mind," he said.

"She sounds like you."

That one landed somewhere it didn't have permission to land. I pressed my thumb against the ribbon marker and held it there.

Silas. Sebastian. The letter *S* sitting in my chest like a splinter I couldn't reach.

One of them had sat with my sister and explained to her exactly how she was going to die. One of them had marked her coin. One of them had been in that undercroft, as witness, as Deliverer, as something, and had watched her delivered.

One of them had given me a key.

One of them was still giving me things, still showing up, still being precisely useful enough to keep me from looking too hard at the hand doing the giving.

"If I confront the wrong one," I said.

"The right one has time to run." Lucian finished it without hesitating, which meant he'd already been thinking it. "Or destroy what's left to find. Or warn the Patron."

"So I can't confront either of them yet."

"Not yet."

I set the notebook on the window seat between us and looked out at the fog. Somewhere past the quad and the invisible black building, Blackthorn was asleep, or pretending to be. In my experience, the two were indistinguishable.

S.

Cora had been certain. One person. One initial. She'd staked her last legible hours on the belief that I would find this, that I would understand it, that S would mean something to me that it hadn't meant to her until too late.

What I had now was proof of murder. A ritual described from the inside. A pattern confirmed across a hundred and twenty years.

What I didn't have was a name I could use.

* * *



THE FOUR O'CLOCK BELLS were starting when Lucian said, quietly, "We need to move."

"I know."

"Wren."

I looked at him. In the predawn dark, with the fog at the window and the notebook between us and three years of my sister's careful thinking in my hands, he looked like what he actually was: someone who had been caged inside the worst version of this place his whole life and was only now deciding whether the bars were worth breaking through.

I understood the calculation. I'd been making it for three years myself.

"I'm going to find out which one of them it is," I said. "And then I'm going to bring this whole institution down from the inside."

"That's not a plan."

"It's the skeleton of one."

Something moved in his expression: the fracture in the formal surface, the thing underneath that wasn't cold at all. "Then let's give it bones," he said.

I tucked the notebook into the inside pocket of my coat and stood. The floor was cold through my socks. Outside, the fog was thickening toward dawn, and somewhere

below us Blackthorn was already beginning to wake, its slow machinery of secrets and smiles and power dressed as tradition grinding back to life.

Silas. Sebastian. The letter *S* lodged behind my sternum like a coal.

I didn't know which one of them had killed my sister. But I knew something I hadn't known six hours ago: Cora had named them. Cora had left a trail. She'd looked at the person who was about to destroy her and had thought of me with enough clarity and enough love to set one final problem for me to solve.

I wasn't going to waste it.

We moved through Wexford's dark corridors and down the servants' stairs, and I thought about Silas Crane's warm, certain voice (your sister would have wanted you to have it) and Sebastian's watchful eyes across every room, and the particular dread of trusting people whose motives you cannot see.

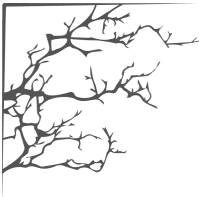
At the bottom of the stairs, Lucian touched my arm briefly. Not to stop me. Just: contact. Acknowledgment. The wordless version of *I know*.

I exhaled.

Somewhere in the Court's oldest rooms, at an hour neither of us could see yet, something was already being decided. A name being written in ink rather than pencil. A date being set.

We had a letter that fit two people.

We had until someone used mine.



Chapter 24: The Naming

The summons arrived at two in the morning, slid under my door on paper that smelled of beeswax and old stone: the specific combination the Court uses when it wants you to know the message is not a request. I had been awake already, which I chose not to read as omen.

The note contained three words in Crane's handwriting:
Convocation. Immediate. Undercroft.

I dressed in the dark. There is a specific discipline to this: jacket, cufflinks, the Thorne signet ring that I had not worn in three weeks, ever since I realized I was keeping it in my desk drawer and not on my hand and could not account for when that had started. I put it on now. The metal was cold. It stayed cold, which was either a function of the ambient temperature or something the vow was communicating. With the vow, the distinction was rarely meaningful.

Wren was three floors above me in the east wing dormitory, asleep, presumably, or doing whatever she did in the small hours when I was not watching her do it. The thought of her (horizontal, unguarded, the careful architecture of her expression finally offline) arrived in my chest at exactly the wrong moment. I pressed it flat. I had eleven minutes to cross the quad and reach the undercroft before the absence would be noted, and I did not have the luxury of standing in my own doorway thinking about a woman who had spent the last week systematically dismantling everything I had spent years building.

Focus. My father had said that to me so many times the word had lost its meaning. What he actually meant was: *stop feeling*. I had become very good at the translation.

I went out into the fog.

* * *



THERE IS A PARTICULAR quality to the undercroft at two in the morning when a convocation has been called: different from the ordinary rite, different from the formal sessions that observe their own stately rhythms. Emergency gatherings carry a specific pressure, something architectural in the way the air thickens. I had attended four in my lifetime. The last one had been the night my father died, and the Court had needed to formally transfer the Thorne obligation before his body was even cold.

I counted nineteen faces as I took my place in the outer ring. Crane stood nearest the altar stone, his expression carefully neutral in the way of a man who knows that neutrality is itself a performance. Margot was to his left, arms folded, her gaze doing the slow circuit of the room that meant she was already running numbers. She had a habit of assigning threat levels: a numerical shorthand she'd explained to me once at sixteen and which I had not

forgotten, partly because she had been the most frightening person I'd ever met at that age and partly because she had been correct every time.

Sebastian was standing in the very center of the circle, where no one stood except during active rites.

That told me everything I needed to know about the shape of the evening.

He looked up when I entered, and he smiled: the smile he wore in rooms where he had already counted the votes and liked the total. I had known Sebastian for eleven years. I had liked him for most of them, before I understood what he was. Not evil, exactly; the Court bred very few people who were actually evil. Mostly it bred people who had decided that convenience was a moral framework.

"Thorne," he said.

"Vane." I took my position at the east point of the circle, the Thorne station, and let nothing cross my face. The Thorne station gave me the altar stone at my right and a full view of the room. My father had taught me to always stand there first and think about it second. *Ground first*, he'd said. *Deliberate later*. Another thing I had learned to translate: positioning was the first argument, and the best arguments happened before anyone started talking.

Crane stepped forward and struck the floor once with the ceremonial staff: ironwood and bone, which I had always found excessive and which the founders had apparently considered understated.

"The Court is assembled," he said. "Vow to convocation holds. Speak to the rite."

Around the circle, nineteen voices said what nineteen voices were required to say. I said it with them, the Latin exact in my mouth, the old words that tasted like rust and obligation. The vow is not metaphor. It took its customary toll on the speaking: a faint constriction below my sternum, a reminder that the debt the Thorne name carries is also a leash, and that the leash has teeth.

"An emergency convocation has been called," Sebastian said, before Crane could direct what came next, "under Article Eleven, subsection four. The Patron requires the Naming completed before the autumn close. We are seventeen days from the threshold."

I watched Crane's jaw tighten by approximately two millimeters.

"The Patron's timeline is noted," I said. "The Naming requires proper preparation under full protocol: documentation, confirmation of the shortlist, the Thorne heir's formal endorsement. Rushing the rite compromises the rite."

"The Thorne heir," Sebastian said pleasantly, "has had three weeks to prepare the endorsement and has not done so."

"The Thorne heir has been occupied managing the audit that *this Court* initiated, at *this Court's* request, when *this Court* found itself with a dead pledge and an exposure problem." I kept my voice exactly level. "Shall I produce the documentation trail, or shall we agree that the last month has been somewhat demanding for everyone?"

A murmur ran the circle. I tracked it: three in Sebastian's column, two still unread, the rest either neutral or vaguely inclined toward procedure. Margot's mouth had compressed into the expression she wore when she respected a tactical choice and was still going to oppose it.

"The shortlist," Crane said, cutting through the murmur, "can be reviewed tonight. The endorsement can follow in forty-eight hours, within the emergency window." His tone shifted fractionally. "Sebastian, the Article Eleven provision does not abrogate the Thorne heir's right to process."

"Of course not." Sebastian spread his hands, entirely reasonable. "I only raise the timeline because the Patron is not known for patience regarding delay."

The Patron. The name that lived behind everything, the hand that had written in my father's margins, that had signed the ledger in ink that matched the ink of a man forty years dead. I had not yet told Wren that I knew who the Patron was. I had not yet decided whether that information made her safer or more likely to do something I would spend the rest of my life regretting.

"The shortlist," I said. "Let's review the shortlist."

* * *



CRANE PRODUCED IT FROM the altar stone: a document sealed with the hemlock mark, which I had spent two years as a child tracing with my fingers, convinced it was a family crest that meant something noble. It meant something, certainly. *Noble* had never been the accurate word.

The shortlist contained seven names. Seven pledges, all in their first or second year, all selected by the Court's traditional criteria: marked by the rite, carrying some

quality the Patron's office had deemed appropriate for the Reaping, bound by the hemlock seal against any act of disclosure.

I took the document. I read it slowly, which was not because I needed to read it slowly but because slow reading bought thirty seconds, and thirty seconds was a resource.

Six of the seven names I had reviewed before. The seventh was new.

Written in a different ink. A different hand from the rest, added after the original document had been sealed, which was a breach of protocol I could have called out, which Sebastian knew I could have called out, which Sebastian had therefore prepared for.

The name was Wren Calloway.

I held the document at the angle I had been trained to hold documents at: relaxed grip, slight downward tilt, expression professionally neutral. My father had made me practice this in front of mirrors, holding papers that contained progressively worse news, until looking at catastrophe looked like looking at a grocery receipt. I was grateful for the practice, at this moment, in a way that I had not expected to be grateful for anything my father had given me.

"Objection," I said.

"The Thorne heir has the floor," Crane said.

"The seventh name was added after the document was sealed. The hemlock mark on the seal is broken: not the customary break for legitimate amendment, the clean quarter-turn, but a fracture pattern consistent with unauthorized access followed by attempted reseal." I set the document on the altar stone and turned it so the room could see. "I invoke the Founding Provision: no name added in breach of protocol may stand. The seventh name is struck."

The silence that followed had the quality of a very expensive thing about to break.

Sebastian said, "The amendment was authorized by the Patron's office."

"Then the Patron's office can produce that authorization in writing, countersigned, within the forty-eight hour window that Crane has already granted. Until then, the seventh name is struck from consideration."

"You're protecting her." Sebastian's voice had shifted, barely, but I had known him for eleven years and I knew every frequency his certainty operated on. This was the frequency he used when he'd decided to stop being pleasant. "You know the Court sees it, Lucian. You know I see it."

"What you see," I said, "is a procedural objection. Unless you've developed a method for reading something into Roberts' Rules of Order that I'm unaware of, your seeing doesn't constitute evidence."

"The Thorne heir is attached." He said it directly to the circle now, turning slowly, working the room. "The forced proximity. The interventions. The audit, which, yes, Lucian managed capably," a small, gracious nod, a knife inside it. "But which also, curiously, drew scrutiny away from this specific pledge in particular."

I kept my eyes on a fixed point above Crane's left shoulder. Neutral. Unmoved.

Inside, something that was not calm was keeping very still.

"These are serious accusations," Crane said. "They require..."

"I'm not making accusations," Sebastian said. "I'm making an observation. The Court has made the same observation. The Thorne heir has compromised his function through attachment, and the Patron's office has acted accordingly by ensuring the appropriate offering is named, because the Thorne heir was clearly not going to do it himself." He let that land. "The amendment stands under Patron authority. The seventh name is valid."

* * *



I HAD TWO MOVES LEFT and I knew it.

The first was to invoke the Blood Privilege: a provision so old it appeared only in the founders' original charter, which I had read in its entirety at fourteen because my father had told me to and I had been too young to understand that reading it would feel like reading the terms of a sentence. The Blood Privilege allowed the Thorne heir to unilaterally remove any name from the offering list, at personal cost. The cost was the vow's tithe, collected in full, for willful overreach. I had felt what the tithe felt like when I switched the cups in the initiation rite. That had been the small tithe, for a small interference.

My father had told me, in the last year of his life, that the Blood Privilege would likely kill the person who invoked it. He had said this calmly, the way he said most things, and then he had said that the Thorne name did not invoke

the Blood Privilege for *persons*, which was his way of saying: not for anyone who isn't worth the name dying for. He had meant it as a warning.

It had not functioned as one.

The second move was to let the vote proceed, lose it (which Sebastian had already won) and use the forty-eight hours I'd negotiated to get Wren out.

I took exactly five seconds to choose.

"The Court will vote on whether the Patron's amendment overrides the Founding Provision," I said. "The vote will be recorded, countersigned, and entered into the permanent ledger. Every member of this Court will have their name attached to this decision." I looked at Sebastian. "Shall we proceed?"

A different kind of silence. Shorter.

He had the numbers. He knew he had the numbers. But having numbers in a vote that would put your name in a permanent record, in a Court already under audit, in a ledger that had already been found once by people who were not supposed to find it...

"The forty-eight hour window," Sebastian said, "is sufficient for the Patron's office to produce authorization. We can table the formal vote until then."

Which meant he needed forty-eight hours to get seventeen people to sign something that would be in writing. Which meant I had forty-eight hours.

"The Court agrees," Crane said.

The ironwood staff struck the floor. Convocation closed.

* * *



THE ROOM DID NOT EMPTY quickly. Rooms like this never do: there is a period of recomposition, of people resuming the faces they wear in hallways, of the sacred and the political unstickling themselves from each other. I waited until Margot had gone before I moved toward the door. She had looked at me once, near the end, with an expression I could not read and did not try.

Sebastian caught my arm in the corridor. Not a grip: a touch, almost gentle, the kind of thing that would look like collegial conversation to anyone glancing from the end of the hall.

"Forty-eight hours," he said quietly. "We've been friends a long time, Lucian. I'm going to tell you something as a friend."

"I find that framing concerning."

"The Patron knows about the journal. Cora Calloway's journal. He knows she made a record and that her sister found it." Sebastian's eyes were steady, mild, the temperature of a man in a room with all the exits covered. "He's not going to let the investigation close without resolution. If it's not Wren in the offering, it will be someone who gets there first, and then Wren, after."

I looked at him. At eleven years of something that had been friendship until I understood what friendship cost in this house.

"What do you want?" I said.

"The Court wants what it's always wanted. The rite completed. The offering made. The Patron's appetite satisfied for another year." He released my arm. "You're the Thorne heir, Lucian. This is what the name means. You know it. You've always known it." A pause, calibrated. "Deliver her. That's all. Deliver her and this ends. For you. For her. For the sister, finally laid to rest."

He walked away down the corridor, hands in his pockets, unhurried, the way men walk when they've already decided the question.

I stood in the stone hall for a moment: the candles burning low in their iron sconces, the fog pressing against the high windows, the cold that lives in these walls like a tenant who has paid enough years of rent to claim the place.

Then I went upstairs.

* * *



I DID NOT GO TO HER.

I had not yet decided what I was going to do, which was unusual; I have spent my life as a man who makes decisions the way other men breathe, automatically, before the cost is fully apparent. What I was going to do required a precision I did not yet have, and thinking required a kind of stillness that Wren, at three in the morning, three floors away, somehow prevented simply by existing in the same building.

I sat at my desk.

The Thorne signet ring caught the lamp, throwing its small crescent of light across my papers.

I knew what I was going to do. I had known it in the undercroft the moment I saw her name in a different ink, the moment I held the document with a neutral expression and felt something in my chest that was not the vow's pain but was indistinguishable from it in terms of where it lived and how much of me it occupied. I had known it before that, if I was being honest with myself, which I was making a practice of only lately, under her influence, against my better judgment and apparently without limit.

I was going to use the forty-eight hours to get her out. And then I was going to find the evidence we had been building together, and I was going to use it, and what remained of the Court after would not be the Court's problem, because it would not be the Court anymore.

The vow registered this decision the way it always registered things it did not approve of: a low hum of warning in the blood, the architecture of the oath taking inventory before the act was even committed. The vow's design was punitive and preemptive. It did not wait for transgression. It began collecting the moment intention crystallized.

I welcomed the pain. That frightened me, the same way it had frightened me in the undercroft when I switched the cups and felt the first tithe run down the inside of my arm like a wire drawn tight. A man who welcomes the price is a man who has stopped calculating whether the price is worth it. A man who has stopped calculating has made a different kind of decision entirely.

Below me (through stone, through dark, through nineteen floors of the Court reassembling itself above its own ledger), the convocation had adjourned. And somewhere in the formal record, in the secretary's transcription that would be filed by dawn and sealed by noon, the Court had formally named this year's offering.

Wren Calloway.

And the record would show, in clean and legible script, that the Thorne heir was to deliver her.

I looked at the ring for a long time. Then I took it off, and put it in the desk drawer, and did not examine what that meant. I already knew what it meant. I had known for longer than I was willing to admit, sitting here with the fog at the windows and the vow running its quiet inventory of everything I was about to forfeit, and her name in a ledger one floor below, written in someone else's hand, waiting for me to ratify it with mine.

I would not.

The cost of that would come. The vow was very clear about costs.

I picked up a pen and began to write down every name from the undercroft: who had voted, who had stood where, who had looked at whom for how long and with which expression. Margot's two millimeters. The specific quality of Crane's neutrality. The moment Sebastian's pleasantness had calcified into something older and harder. Evidence was only evidence if you were looking at it correctly; Wren had taught me that, in the particular way she had of teaching things without knowing she was teaching them, by being exactly what she was in close proximity until I could not pretend I was something else.

Forty-eight hours. She did not know any of this yet.

She would wake in a few hours and continue closing the distance between herself and a name that fit two people, and one of those people had already looked her in the eye today, and one of those people would do it again tomorrow, and she would not know that the Court had already moved the wall she was running toward.

I wrote faster.

She needed to know, and she could not know, because if she knew she would act before we had the proof to make the action stick, and if she acted without the proof they would simply close the wall around her before she

cleared it, which was the design, which was why the timeline had been accelerated, which was what Sebastian had been engineering since at least the night of the staged fall, probably longer.

He had planned this. The amended shortlist had not been improvised tonight. It had been prepared, biding its time until the moment I was most exposed, the moment after the journal had been found and the full weight of what we knew had made us feel, briefly, like we were winning.

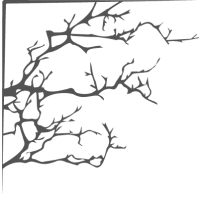
I set down the pen.

Outside, the fog had thickened against the windows until the quad below was invisible and the black building across the courtyard was only an outline, a memory of architecture in the grey.

Somewhere in that grey, three floors above me, she was asleep and unknowing and named.

I had forty-eight hours.

I picked the pen back up, and I started planning the kind of betrayal that looked, from the outside, exactly like compliance.



Chapter 25: The Lie She Catches

The letter was C.

Three days I'd been sitting with it: Cora's handwriting in the deliberate careful mode, not the wild margin-scrawl she used when excited. The precise kind. Every word selected. Every comma considered.

C was there.

C made me feel safe here for the first time.

I trusted C the way I used to trust you.

That last line hit different every read. She'd written it to me: the entry addressed like all her journals, the private second-person she'd used since we were twelve, already composing the story she'd tell me later. Except there was no later. There was only the page, and the initial, and the two men who fit it.

Two people fit it.

Crane, first. Soren Crane: the surname an exact match, the easy answer, and easy answers were the ones Cora had taught me to distrust. Professor for twenty years, Court member for eleven. His signature was all through the ledger Lucian and I had photographed page by page one freezing midnight and locked back in its cabinet with the careful dread of people handling something that could kill them.

And Sebastian. Not for his name: Cora hadn't always used names. Half her journal ran on a private code we'd built as kids, where a person got the first letter of what they *were* to her instead of what they were called. I'd been her *W* long before I was Wren. So *C* could be Crane, plain as a label sewn into a collar. Or it could be whatever Cora had decided Sebastian was, in the last months, when she'd stopped writing his name at all.

Thirty-seven photocopied sheets on my floor in date order. Three columns: name, date, function performed. The ritual Cora described in her journal matched the third

column exactly: not approximately, not suggestively. Exactly. Eight names in twenty years. The last one was Cora's.

Crane had signed on four of those nights. Sebastian on two. Lucian's father on all eight, which told me everything about lineage and nothing about who had stood in front of my sister and called it safe.

What I needed was which of them had stood in front of my sister and told her she was safe.

I'd spent yesterday ruling out the things I could rule out. Sebastian had been in Edinburgh the week before Cora's initiation; I'd found his name in a guest register from a Court-affiliated event, cross-referenced with the ledger dates, and the timeline didn't align cleanly. That didn't clear him. But it pointed somewhere.

Crane pointed somewhere too. The ledger, yes. But also the key he'd given me and the warmth he'd had with me from the first week, and the specific way Cora had written about trust: not as a concept but as a practice, something learned, something modeled.

I put the papers back in the lining of my textbook at seven in the morning with cold fingers and a headache behind my left eye. Outside, Blackthorn wore November

the way it wore everything: like the fog and the cold and the wet stone were the natural state of things and the rest of us were just visitors.

I had an idea about where to start.

* * *



I FOUND HIM IN THE east chapel at ten in the morning.

He was reading by one of the high lancet windows, pale light catching the gray in his hair, looking exactly the way he always looked: composed, warm, entirely at home inside himself. Book in hand, a thermos on the ledge, the small domestic evidence of someone who'd been there a while. Prepared, or someone had told him I might come.

I told that thought to sit down.

"Wren." He closed the book on his thumb, marking his place, not losing it. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I was in the neighborhood." The east chapel was a deliberate five-minute walk from anywhere a student had reason to be. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"For you, always." He gestured to the chair across from him and the smile he offered was the same one that had handed me a brass key three weeks ago: the same warmth, the same specific temperature. *Your sister would have wanted you to have it.*

I sat down and made myself look like someone who was just visiting.

"I've been going through some of Cora's things," I said. Half the truth wrapped around the rest of it. "Old journals. Letters. She wrote about a few people here that she trusted."

Crane's expression didn't shift. I waited for the micro-expression: the small flash of surprise a person shows when they hear they've been named in something private. Nothing. He just waited, attentive, head tilted slightly in his listening posture.

"She wrote about someone here specifically," I said. "By initial. She said this person made her feel safe. That she trusted them the way she used to trust me." A beat. "That's significant language, for Cora."

"No," he agreed quietly. "She didn't give trust easily."

I kept my face neutral. "How did you know that?"

"She struck me that way." He said it smoothly, without a pause. "Careful. Considered. The students who end up in difficulty here tend to be the ones who trust too fast." A small sad smile. "Or not at all."

"Did you know her well?"

"Not particularly." Easy. No hesitation. "I knew her to see, of course. She was on my academic committee's list that year; we spoke several times. She asked very good questions. But well?" He shook his head. "I wouldn't claim that, no."

"She didn't mention anyone by name," I said. "Just the initial. I've been trying to work out who she meant."

Something moved in his eyes. Quick and controlled, there and gone before I could classify it. "I hope whoever it was provided some comfort to her. That first year can be a very dark time." He paused, and his voice dropped into something more confidential. "I always thought she seemed like a girl who needed someone in her corner. It troubled me when I heard... afterward. That she'd been struggling."

The word *afterward* did something I noted and did not react to.

* * *



WE TALKED FOR ANOTHER twenty minutes. He asked about my coursework, said he'd heard good things from Professor Halloran, who was difficult to impress. He poured tea from his thermos (Earl Grey, slightly bitter, exactly the right temperature) and told me the dining hall hours were impossible for independent study students and had been for years, someone really should address it.

He used Cora's name twice more. Easy and unguarded, the way you use a name from a comfortable distance. *Cora was like many of the students who come here with something to prove. Cora, if I remember right, was in the north dormitories that year.*

I drank the tea.

I noted the temperature of it. I noted the blend: bergamot-forward, slightly more bitter than the grocery version, the kind you buy from a specific shop, the kind that had preferences built into it.

Cora didn't drink tea. My mother had said so when the school sent her things back: a canister of Earl Grey in the sealed box, and my mother had said *I don't know where this came from, she never drank tea*. I'd filed it. I'd been filing everything for months, and the file was getting very full, and I had a rule about not opening things until I had the context to understand what I was looking at.

I was starting to understand what I was looking at.

Crane's hands were easy in his lap, gesturing occasionally, entirely unclenched. The hands of a man with nothing to hide, or a man who'd had a very long time to practice. At Blackthorn, I'd stopped assuming those were different things.

Before I stood, I pulled one thread. I'd promised myself I wouldn't: testing him here, on his ground, in a chapel with one door, was exactly the kind of impatience that got girls arranged at the bottom of balconies. But I have never once managed to leave a thread unpulled.

"Can I ask you something strange?"

"Strange is the only interesting kind." He refilled my cup without asking, the bergamot rising bitter between us.

"If you'd had to guess: the kind of student Cora was. What would you have said?"

A man who barely knew her would reach for the drawer where everyone keeps the same three words. *Bright. Dedicated. A terrible loss.*

Crane considered the high window for a moment, the gray light moving on his face, and said, "Restless." Gently. Almost fondly. "The kind who couldn't bear to sit with a question once she had it in her teeth. Brilliant girls often can't. They mistake patience for surrender." A small, sad smile. "I'd have told her the waiting was the work. Whether she'd have listened..." He spread his hands. "Well."

I kept my face the face of a girl receiving comfort.

Inside, in the cold clean room where I do the actual thinking, something went very quiet and very bright.

Not particularly, he'd said, ten minutes ago. *I knew her to see.* And now, without a blink, he'd handed me the precise interior architecture of a girl he claimed to have known only across a committee table: her restlessness, her quarrel with patience, the exact shape of the thing that had made her dangerous. You don't read that off an attendance sheet. You learn it the long way, across time, from someone you have decided to *manage*.

He'd done it the way I'd been doing it to him all morning. That was the private horror of it: recognizing my own technique in another set of hands, performed more

smoothly, performed on me.

I drank the bitter tea he'd poured and said something grateful and ordinary, and filed the rest where I file everything: somewhere cold, somewhere I wouldn't open until I had the context to survive what was inside.

When I stood to leave, he stood too, the automatic courtesy of old money and older manners.

"Come to me anytime," he said. "Your sister would have wanted someone looking out for you. That was always Cora's instinct: to make sure the people she cared about were looked after."

I thanked him.

I buttoned my coat, said something appropriate, and walked into the corridor.

The door closed behind me, heavy oak, the latch settling into its frame with a sound like something sealing shut.

* * *



I MADE IT TWELVE STEPS before I stopped.

Here is what Cora wrote. Third page, final entry, the careful handwriting that meant she was being exact:

I know C won't like what I'm about to do. C is going to say I should wait, gather more, be patient; that's always been C's word for me. Patient. Like I'm a very slow fire that just needs to be tended. But I've been patient for two years and I've seen what happens to the people who wait too long here.

Patient.

C's word for her.

I stood with my back against the stone wall and heard Crane's voice, twenty minutes ago, easy and warm, right before I'd stood to leave:

"Patient work, Wren. Patient work pays off here."

He'd said it like a parting gift. Lightly. Not *careful*. Not *methodical* or *thorough* or *rigorous*: the words a professor reaches for when he wants to encourage a student.

Patient.

With the pause before it. The weight on the second syllable. The specific rhythm that Cora had put in quotes because it was his word, not hers (*C's word for me*), the phrase of a person who recognized a habit coming from outside themselves, something given, something they'd been receiving long enough to name it. *That's always been C's word for me*. The way you say *that's a Mom thing to say* or *that sounds like you*. The recognizing of a pattern in someone who was close enough to pattern you.

He'd told me he barely knew her.

He'd used her word. The word she'd documented as specifically, particularly, recurringly his.

The cold from the window at the end of the corridor was sharp enough to cut. The gargoyle above the east arch stared down with the expression all the Blackthorn gargoyles had, which I'd decided months ago meant *you are not the first person to stand here and understand exactly this*.

I breathed through it. Logic first.

One word. One possible coincidence. *Patient* was not a rare word: teachers used it, advisors used it, it appeared in motivational posters in language classrooms across the English-speaking world. One data point was not evidence. One data point was a hypothesis, and hypotheses needed testing.

Then the other part. The part that grew up in the same house as Cora and knew the difference between the words she put in quotation marks and the words she didn't. She had been an annotator. She had been careful and specific and when she put something in quotes it was because she was marking it as external: *his word, not mine, this is something that comes from outside me*. She had named this specific word as belonging to this specific person the way you name a gift. The way you say *that's from C, C always said that*. The recognizing of a thing that had been given to you often enough to belong to you.

He'd said he barely knew her.

He'd used her word.

My legs started moving before I'd fully decided where I was going. The administrative records office (the Court's official pastoral files, the faculty oversight assignments) would be in the east administration building. Different from the ledger. A different system, less protected because it was bureaucratic rather than ceremonial. Every

initiate had been assigned a faculty point of contact. If Crane had been assigned to Cora, his name would be there. And if his name was there, next to Cora's, in an official record that documented exactly the kind of close ongoing contact that would explain the tea and the word and the trust...

My phone buzzed.

Lucian.

Where are you. Not a question. Two words pressed into efficiency.

East corridor, I typed back. *Why?*

The pause before his reply was two seconds. I had four months of Lucian Thorne's patterns: he answered fast when everything was fine. The pause meant something had shifted.

Come to the study. Please.

I read it twice.

In four months (in texts, in notes, in the low early-morning register he used when he was asking something he didn't know how to ask directly), Lucian had never once written *please* in a message without it carrying specific weight. The please of this message was different

from all of those. It had the shape of something being contained. The word of a man who was deciding, even as he wrote it, how much to tell me.

Something had happened.

I put my phone away and started walking. Faster than I'd walked in, and I'd walked in fast.

I was carrying two things: Crane's word, still working itself out of my chest like a splinter, and the unfamiliar shape of Lucian's *please*, which had no category yet but sat at the back of my throat like the beginning of something I hadn't swallowed.

Cora's last entry ended three lines below *patient*. The handwriting changed there, faster, the margin scrawl, thoughts outrunning her hand:

I know what I saw. I know whose voice that was. I'm going to the bell tower tonight because that's where the proof is. By morning I'll have a name.

She went to the bell tower for proof.

She never came down.

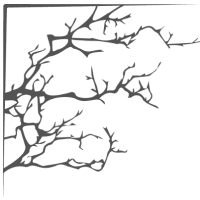
I had half a name now (the edge of one, the shape of one) and I was walking toward whatever Lucian needed to tell me, and the stone corridor stretched out ahead cold and

gray and entirely uninterested in what I was carrying. The gargoyles watched me go. The fog pressed against the windows.

I'd caught one lie.

I walked faster. The *please* was waiting at the end of the corridor, and I already knew, in the part of my brain that had learned not to argue with itself, that it was going to change everything.

It always did.



Chapter 26: Chosen

The vow had a sound when it tightened. I had learned this the night of the cup-switch: a fine, bright wire of pain drawn through the center of the chest, like a suture

pulled from the inside. I had catalogued the sensation the way I catalogued everything I could not afford to feel: precisely, from a distance, in the third person.

Tonight it was not a wire. It was a fist.

I stood outside Wren's door for four minutes before I knocked. I know because I counted, which is what I do when the alternative is losing the thread of myself entirely. Four minutes in which the vow rang its warning through every nerve it owned: *not this, not this, this is the line*, and I stood there and breathed and decided to walk through it anyway.

Four minutes is a long time to commit a crime against a two-hundred-year-old blood compact. Not long enough, it turned out.

I knocked.

* * *



SHE OPENED THE DOOR already dressed, which meant she had not been sleeping. Wren rarely slept anymore. She existed in the tight, combustible state of a person who has made a decision and is waiting for the world to catch up to it. I recognized it the way you recognize your own reflection after a long time away from mirrors.

"Lucian." Not a greeting. A measurement.

"May I come in?"

She stepped aside. The room was evidence of her mind: books colonizing every flat surface, paper stacked with the erratic logic of active investigation, one window cracked despite the November cold because she always needed an exit she could see. My father's rooms had never looked like this. My rooms had never looked like this. Order had always seemed like the same thing as control.

Watching her, I was no longer sure they were related at all.

I stepped inside. She closed the door and stood with her back to it: not blocking, positioning. Giving herself options. Even now, even with me, she kept her exits visible. I found I could not decide if that was practical or heartbreaking and settled on both.

"You have something to tell me," she said. "You have the look."

"What look."

"The one that costs you something just to hold." She crossed her arms. "I've been cataloguing them. You have four. This one's the expensive kind."

I had spent twenty-six years mastering a face that gave nothing away. She had catalogued four expressions I apparently wore without knowing it.

The vow twisted. Not in warning this time: in what I could only call contempt. It had been designed by men who believed love was a weakness to be excised like rot from timber. They had built it to read intent, and my intent tonight was legible to it the way fire is legible at a distance.

I had meant to begin somewhere neutral. An approach vector that would manage the information without detonating it. I had planned, on the four-minute walk here, precisely how I would arrange the facts into a shape she could absorb.

I looked at her face and all the arrangements fell apart.

"The Court named their offering last night," I said. "For the Reaping."

The word landed. She had learned enough, by now, to know what it meant in practical terms: not metaphor, not theater, a real extraction of a real life, disguised and laundered through ceremony until it looked like consent. Cora had learned it too, at the end.

Wren did not move. "Who."

Not a question. She already knew. That was the thing about Wren Calloway: she always already knew, and the question was never *whether* but *when the person she was looking at would stop lying to her*.

"You," I said. "They named you."

* * *



THE VOW DID NOT LET me finish the sentence cleanly.

It began at the sternum: a pressure, not pain, the way the first sign of a storm is not wind but stillness. Then the pressure became weight. Then the weight became a hand

closing around the inside of my ribs and squeezing, patient and methodical, the way someone might press the water from a cloth.

I put one hand on the back of her desk chair. Not for balance. For somewhere to put the grip.

Wren saw it. She covered the distance between us before I could recalibrate my expression, and she took my wrist in both her hands, and she turned it palm-up the way a doctor turns an arm to read a vein.

There was nothing visible. There never was. The vow took its toll in interior currency: pain without bruise, damage without record. Designed, I suspected, precisely so that the men who wore it would have no evidence to show.

"Tell me exactly what's happening," she said. Low, controlled. She used that voice when she was afraid and could not afford to be. I had learned this. I had learned her the way I wished I had learned everything: not as an exercise in strategy, but because I wanted to.

"The vow has terms," I said. "You know the basic architecture: it binds the Thorne heir to the Court's purposes. It reads intent, not action. I can *do* certain things if the intent is right. What I cannot do is act

against the Court's purposes knowingly, deliberately, without sanction." I paused. "Telling you this counts as against."

"Then stop..."

"I'm not going to stop."

She looked at me. That look: the fourth one, maybe, the one I had no name for yet, the one that made me feel legible in a way I had never been and could not decide if I wanted to survive.

"The price scales," I continued. "Small defiances (the cup, small silences, information withheld through omission) are fines. This is different. Naming the intention." I breathed. The pressure at my sternum was changing character, becoming something sharper, something with direction. "This is not a fine."

"What is it."

I did not have a clean answer for that. What I had was the sensation of a debt being calculated by a creditor who had been waiting two decades for the principal.

"A question," I said finally, "of how far it can go before the question becomes moot."

Wren translated this faster than I'd wanted her to. "You mean it could kill you."

"The founders built it to ensure absolute loyalty. They made the price of disloyalty sufficient to deter it." I looked at her hand on my wrist. She hadn't let go. "It has never been fully called in. There are no records of what happens at the limit."

"Because anyone who hit the limit is dead."

"That would be the inference, yes."

She made a sound: not quite a word, not quite a breath. Something jagged. She let go of my wrist and turned away, and I watched her take four steps toward the window, four steps that I recognized as the ones she took when the alternative was breaking. Wren did not permit herself to break in front of people. I suspected she barely permitted herself to break alone.

"They want you to deliver me," she said. Her back was to me. Her voice was flat in the way that meant it was containing something.

"Yes."

"And if you don't."

"There are consequences for that as well. Different kind."

"But if you tell me." She turned. "If you choose telling me over the vow, that's the version that might kill you."

"It seems so."

She stared at me for a long moment. Then she said, "You knocked on my door anyway."

"Yes."

"That's either very brave or very stupid."

"I've been reliably informed," I said, "that with you, the line doesn't exist."

* * *



SHE DID NOT CRY. I want to be precise about this, because it matters to understanding Wren: she did not cry. She gathered. There is a quality she has when new, terrible information arrives: a slight narrowing, a recalibration, the rapid interior filing of *what this means and what it requires*. I had watched her do it when Margot told her about the stages of the Reaping. When the hospitalized pledge deteriorated. When we found the ledger entries with dates and names.

She did it now. She gathered herself around this information and she organized it.

"Okay," she said.

"Wren..."

"I said okay." Not dismissal. Commitment. "Tell me the rest. All of it. What does delivering me mean, mechanically? Date, location, protocol."

I told her. The vow struck every clause like a mallet finding a seam: not enough to stop the words, but enough to mark them. I felt each sentence extract its tax from somewhere below the lungs, somewhere organs don't have names for. By the time I finished, my hands were cold, which had not happened to me since I was nine years old and terrified in the undercroft.

She was taking notes. She had produced a pen somewhere in the middle of my explanation and was writing in her small, precise hand in the margins of a page she'd already covered. The page was a list of names. Suspects. She had been building her case even here, even tonight, even as she absorbed the news that the case had already decided on her as its next casualty.

"Wren."

"I'm thinking."

"I can see that."

"Then let me think."

I let her think. The cold in my hands was spreading, creeping toward the wrist. I pressed my palm flat against the desk and concentrated on the sensation of the wood (solid, temperature-stable, real) and waited for it to recede.

It receded. Slowly.

What the vow could do, I was learning, was accelerate entropy. Pressure on a system until something yielded. It could not kill instantly (that would have been too merciful for the founders), but it could degrade. Wear. Make a man unequal to the next thing required of him.

I had spent my life being equal to every required thing. Competence as armor. Excellence as proof that the cage had a comfortable interior.

I watched Wren write and thought: *not this. I will not be equal to this and call it survival.*

"Three weeks," she said.

"Twenty-two days."

"We have twenty-two days to bring the Court down before they take me." She tapped the pen against her list.

"Margot knows something she's been holding back. I

could see it in how she warned me: she was measuring it out, giving me just enough to keep looking without giving me enough to finish it."

"I know."

"Sebastian." Her voice didn't change. Only her eyes did, briefly. "He's been positioning himself. Watching both of us."

"I believe so. I can't prove it."

"I think I can." She looked up. "Cora's last page. The initial. It could be him or Crane; I know that. I haven't been able to close it." A pause. "But the lie I caught tonight. It wasn't from Crane."

The sentence landed quietly and then opened up, the way a sentence does when you understand it a beat after it's spoken.

"Tell me," I said.

She told me. I listened. The cold continued its slow survey of my extremities while she laid out the shape of it: the specific statement, the specific impossibility of the claim, the moment she'd seen the seam between what he'd said and what the evidence required to be true. She laid it out with the precision of someone who has been building toward a conclusion she did not want to reach.

When she finished, I said: "That's enough to confront him."

"It's not enough to destroy him. Not yet." She looked at the list. "I need the ledger's companion document. Whatever the Patron uses to authorize each Reaping: there has to be paperwork. The Court runs on paperwork; it's the only thing that makes me believe it was actually founded by scholars."

The corner of her mouth moved. Not quite a smile. The kind of humor that surfaces when the alternative is despair; I had watched her use it as a tool for eighteen months and only recently understood it as armor rather than pleasure.

"I know where the authorization documents are kept," I said.

"I assumed you would."

"Getting to them requires..."

"Getting to them requires the heist," she said. "I know. I've been planning it for three days." She met my eyes. "I was going to do it without you if I had to. I want you to know that."

"I do know that."

"I'm saying it out loud because I need you to understand this is my choice. If the risk falls somewhere it shouldn't..."

"It falls where it falls," I said. "I stopped calculating the distribution of risk sometime in the last month and I am not going to start again now."

She looked at me for a long moment. Then she put down the pen.

* * *



SHE CAME TO ME. NOT with the charged, combustible quality of before: not the weapon of intimacy she'd wielded in the early weeks when everything between us was still tactical. She came the way she'd started to come, recently: as herself. No performance. No strategy.

She put both palms flat against my chest, over the place where the vow had been tightening, and she looked up at me.

"Does this hurt?" she asked.

"Not when you're touching me." Which was not something I had planned to say, and the vow, reading the honesty in it, chose that moment to release one full, shuddering measure of pressure, like a fist unclenching without disappearing. The relief of it was close enough to pain that I inhaled sharply.

"What was that," she said.

"The vow deciding I'm not lying."

"Can it tell the difference?"

"It can tell intent. Genuine intent reads differently than performed." I covered her hands with mine. Cold palms to warm ones. "When I told you I was choosing this, choosing you, it took the measure of that and found it true. The penalty for truth is less than the penalty for strategic honesty."

She made a small, careful sound. "That is the bleakest sentence I've ever heard."

"I grew up in a very bleak institution."

"Lucian." She said my name the way she'd started saying it recently: not as a handle, not as a warning, but as a word she was choosing to mean something. "If this kills you."

"It won't."

"But if it does."

I looked at her hands under mine. She had ink on her right index finger from the note-taking. She had a small scar at the base of her left thumb from a lock-pick that had slipped, three weeks ago, in the basement corridor. She had twenty-two more days of Blackthorn ahead of her that I intended she live through.

"If it does," I said, "the proof still exists and you know where it is. The ledger is in the loose stone in the east wall of the lower undercroft: fourth from the column base, press and lift. The companion document I'll identify tonight and get to you before the heist. If I can't..." The vow flexed, briefly, at this clause, and I breathed through it. "...Margot knows the Court's structural weaknesses better than anyone still alive. Use her."

"I'm not planning your post-mortem contingencies."

"You're planning everything else."

"This is different."

"Why."

She looked at me. The look she hadn't named. The one I was beginning to understand as the one she showed me in the moments when she had stopped pretending to herself.

"Because I didn't come to Blackthorn for you," she said quietly, "and somewhere in the last eighteen months you became the thing I'm most afraid to lose. And I'm not going to plan around losing you. I'm going to plan to keep you."

The vow, reading this, did something I had no precedent for. It went still. Not the stillness of waiting; the stillness of a held breath. As though it had found, somewhere in its two centuries of coded blood-compact architecture, a clause that addressed this specific arrangement of loyalty and could not decide which way to read it.

I had spent my entire life inside its grammar. I had never found a sentence it could not parse.

She had managed it in one.

The silence that followed her words was not empty. It was heavy, thick with the sudden, terrifying realization that we were no longer merely allies in a cold war. We had crossed a threshold into something far more dangerous: mutual necessity.

I looked at her, and for the first time in my life, the precision of my internal world failed me. I could not categorize the way she was looking at me, nor could I find a formal word for the vacuum that had opened in my chest. I only knew that the air in the room had become insufficient.

I reached out, my fingers grazing the line of her jaw. Her skin was warm, a startling contrast to the lingering chill in my fingertips. She did not pull away. Instead, she leaned into the touch, a small, subconscious movement that felt like a surrender.

"Wren," I whispered. The name sounded strange in my throat, stripped of its usual tactical utility.

"I'm tired of thinking, Lucian," she said. Her voice was low, rough around the edges. "I'm tired of calculating the cost of everything."

She moved then, closing the final inch between us. She didn't kiss me so much as she collided with me, her mouth finding mine with a desperation that mirrored my own. It was not a gentle thing. It was a collision of two people who had spent eighteen months pretending they were not drowning in each other's orbit.

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her flush against me, the impact knocking the remaining breath from my lungs. She tasted of coffee and something sharp,

like ozone before a storm. I felt the frantic beat of her heart against my ribs, matching the erratic rhythm of my own. For a man who prized control above all else, the feeling of being completely undone was an intoxication that bordered on vertigo.

I pulled back just an inch, my forehead resting against hers. My breath was jagged. "Are you sure? Now? With everything we just discussed?"

Wren reached up, her fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of my neck and pulling me back down. "Especially now," she murmured. "I want to feel something that isn't a strategy."

"I want you," I said. It was the simplest sentence I had ever spoken, and it felt the most honest. "I have wanted you since the moment you looked at me as if I were a puzzle you intended to solve."

She let out a short, breathless laugh against my lips. "You are a puzzle. A very frustrating one."

"Allow me to be simple for a while," I said.

I lifted her, her legs instinctively locking around my hips, and carried her the few steps to the bed. We fell back onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs and hurried breaths. The room was dim, the light from the single lamp casting

long, amber shadows across the stacks of books and loose papers that surrounded us, but my focus had narrowed to the singular point of her existence.

I paused, my hands hovering over the hem of her shirt. "Is this okay? Do you want this?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes dark and focused. "God, yes, Lucian."

I stripped her with a focused intensity, my fingers trembling slightly as I pushed the fabric over her head. She was lean and lithe, her skin pale in the amber light, marked by the small scars and ink stains that I had come to associate with her resilience. I followed suit, discarding my jacket and shirt with a haste that felt almost violent.

When we were finally skin to skin, the sensation was an electric shock. I had spent my life avoiding touch, treating it as a vulnerability to be managed. But as I pressed my body against hers, I realized that this was not a weakness. It was a reclamation.

I kissed her throat, the sensitive dip where her collarbone met her shoulder, and I felt her shudder beneath me. She arched her back, her fingers digging into the muscles of my shoulders, pulling me closer as if she were afraid I might vanish if she let go.

"Slow down," she whispered, though her hands were telling me to do the opposite.

"I cannot," I admitted. "I have spent too long being slow."

I moved lower, my mouth tracing a path across the curve of her breast. I took one nipple into my mouth, tasting her, and heard a low moan escape her that sounded like a prayer. The sound fractured the last of my restraint.

I shifted my weight, moving between her thighs. I looked at her, wanting to see every flicker of emotion on her face. "Tell me what you want."

"Everything," she breathed. "I want everything."

I reached for the small bedside table where a kit was kept, and after a brief, shared look of confirmation, I prepared us. The act was clinical for a moment, a return to the precision I knew, but as soon as I entered her, the world dissolved into a blur of heat and friction.

She gasped, her eyes snapping shut, her head falling back against the pillows. I froze, waiting for her to settle, my muscles straining with the effort not to lose myself completely.

"Don't stop," she whispered, her voice strained. "Please, don't stop."

I began to move, a slow, rhythmic push that felt like it was aligning something deep inside me. Every slide of skin against skin was a revelation. I watched the way her expressions shifted, the way her lips parted and her breath came in short, sharp hitches. She looked fragmented, broken open, and the sight of it filled me with a protective hunger that was almost overwhelming.

The friction built, a coil of tension tightening in my gut. I increased the pace, the sound of our breathing filling the small room, drowning out the distant noise of the university corridors. We were no longer the heir to a cursed vow and the girl who had stumbled into a conspiracy. We were just two bodies trying to merge into one.

"Lucian," she gasped, her legs tightening around my waist, pulling me deeper.

I leaned down, capturing her lips in a kiss that tasted of salt and desperation. I felt her internal muscles tighten around me, the first ripples of a climax that was already inevitable. I pushed harder, faster, chasing the edge with her.

When she broke, it was a violent, beautiful thing. She cried out my name, her body shaking under mine, her fingers clutching at my back as if she were trying to anchor herself in a storm. The sight and sound of her pleasure triggered my own release, a sudden, crashing

wave that left me breathless and blind. I collapsed against her, my face buried in the crook of her neck, my heart hammering against hers like a trapped bird.

For several minutes, neither of us spoke. The only sounds were our ragged breaths and the ticking of the clock on her desk. The air in the room had cooled, but the heat between us remained, a lingering glow that felt more permanent than any physical sensation I had ever known.

I didn't move away. I stayed draped over her, my weight supported by my elbows, watching as the color slowly returned to her cheeks.

Wren reached up and traced the line of my jaw with one finger. Her touch was light, almost tentative. "You're shaking," she observed.

"I suspect it is the aftershock," I said, my voice sounding foreign to me. "I have never... I have never felt that level of disorientation."

She smiled, a genuine, soft expression that reached her eyes. "Welcome to the world of not having everything under control, Lucian. It's terrifying, isn't it?"

"Utterly," I said.

I shifted, rolling onto my side but keeping her tucked against me, her head resting on my chest. The silence was different now. The tension had transitioned from the

combustible energy of desire to something quieter and more profound: a shared vulnerability.

"Do you think the vow noticed," she asked softly, "that for once, you weren't doing something because you were told to?"

I thought of the stillness I had felt earlier, the way the pressure had vanished when she touched me. "I suspect it didn't know how to react. It is a tool for obedience. It has no vocabulary for this."

Wren was silent for a moment, her fingers tracing small circles on my skin. "Twenty-two days," she whispered.

"Yes."

"It feels like twenty-two seconds now," she said. "Knowing what we have to lose."

The admission hit me with the force of a physical blow. Throughout my life, loss had been an abstract concept, something that happened to others or was managed through mourning rituals and formal attire. But looking at her now, seeing the way she looked at me with such raw openness, the thought of the Reaping felt like a blade held to my throat.

"We will not lose it," I said, and I meant it with a conviction that surprised me. "I would burn the Court to the ground before I let them take you."

Wren pulled back slightly, searching my eyes. "That sounds dangerously like a vow of your own."

"Perhaps it is."

She leaned forward and kissed me again, a slow, lingering touch that felt like a seal on a contract. Then, with a sigh, she shifted and sat up, the reality of their situation rushing back into the room along with the cold draft from the window.

The aftermath was not clean. I could feel the familiar thrum of the vow returning to my consciousness, a low-level hum of warning that reminded me that my time was being measured. The pleasure had been a reprieve, but it had not erased the debt. If anything, by giving myself to her, I had simply increased the stakes of the game.

Wren noticed the change in my expression. She didn't ask; she already knew. She reached out and took my hand, squeezing it tight.

"We can handle it," she said. "The documents, Sebastian, the Court... we just have to move faster than they do."

I looked around her room, at the chaos of her research and the stubbornness of her spirit, and I felt a strange sense of peace. I had spent twenty-six years trying to be the perfect instrument of my father's will. For the first time, I felt like a man.

"You are right," I said. "We move faster."

She leaned over and kissed me one last time before sliding out of bed. The transition back to the tactical world was abrupt, but as she reached for her clothes, I realized that something fundamental had shifted. The distance between us had vanished, replaced by a bond that the Court's architects could never have predicted.

They had built a vow to ensure loyalty to a bloodline, but they had forgotten that the strongest loyalties are not inherited. They are forged in the fire of shared desperation and chosen in the quiet of a bedroom in November.

* * *



"HERE IS WHAT WE'RE going to do," she said. She stepped back (not away, back; there was a difference she'd taught me without intending to) and she picked up her list. "Twenty-two days. We need the authorization

documents, Cora's killer confirmed, and a way to distribute the evidence widely enough that the Court can't contain it. Three problems. We run them parallel."

"Margot for the distribution network," I said. "She has contacts outside the Court who still remember what it used to be."

"I'll approach her tomorrow. She's been waiting to be asked properly." She made a note. "Sebastian: I'm going to let him think I don't know. It's safer if he's watching someone who seems oblivious, and I want him watching me instead of watching you."

"That's a dangerous strategy."

"Most of my strategies are." She looked up. "You get me the companion document. Whatever access that requires, whatever the vow costs you, get me the document, and we have the mechanism. We can prove the Reaping is murder with authorization."

"If we prove it."

"When." She said it clean, no hesitation. "When we prove it."

The vow was still quiet. I did not trust the quiet, but I was learning that there were categories of action it could not anticipate: too human, too specific, too tangled with the particular gravity of this particular room and the

person standing in it. The founders had built it to manage loyalty to an institution. They had not, apparently, accounted for the specific quality of weight that a person acquires when they have decided to live for something.

"The date is set," I said. "Twenty-two days is not much time."

"It's enough." She met my eyes. The certainty in her was not bravado: I had learned the difference. It was the quality she wore when she had done the math and found the path. "We've survived the Court's worst surprises for eighteen months. We know where the bodies are buried. We know the mechanisms." A breath. "They named me because they think I'm a liability. I'm going to be the last thing they see coming."

I looked at her. Ink on her finger. Scar on her thumb. List in her hand, map of the next twenty-two days taking shape in real time.

I had spent my whole life serving a purpose assigned to me before I could speak. I had called that duty. I had called it order. I had mistaken the cage for the life.

"I'm with you," I said. Simply. The vow read it and did not flinch.

It had decided, apparently, that this was where I lived now.

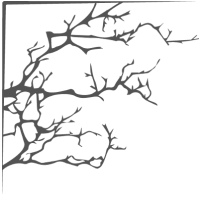
"I know," she said. "You've been with me since you knocked." She turned back to the list. "Get some sleep. We start tomorrow."

I did not tell her that the vow, now that it had registered my intention as permanent, had begun its slow calculation of the full debt: that the cold in my hands was a preview, not a peak, and that somewhere in the blood-bound mathematics of the founders' design, a clock had started that I could not stop without betraying her.

I would deal with that tomorrow.

Tonight, I was chosen. And for the first time in twenty-six years, the word did not feel like a sentence.

It felt like something I had done myself.



Chapter 27: The Heist

The plan was Lucian's. The stupidity was mine.

He'd drawn it on the back of a laundry receipt (the only paper I'd had in my coat pocket) in handwriting so precise it looked typeset. Three entrances, two guard rotations, one window on the east corridor that the Court had never bothered to retrofit with sensors because it faced a sheer wall and no one sane would use it. He marked the archive vault with a small *X* and the word *primary*.

"Primary," I said.

"The Court keeps three sets of records. The one we've seen is the ledger, operational. What we need is the *primary* archive. Founding documents. Patron correspondence. The full Reaping taxonomy, going back to the beginning."

"And if we have that..."

"We can prove the murders were policy, not aberration." He looked up from the receipt. "We can prove the institution designed them."

I looked at the *X*. Thought about Cora, who had probably stood somewhere like this, maybe exactly here, in Lucian's rooms, or maybe alone in hers, and come to the same conclusion, and what that conclusion had cost her.

"Right," I said. "Let's go steal a hundred and fifty years of crime."

* * *



SHE MET US AT THE SERVICE entrance at midnight and had the grace not to look surprised.

"I had three days," she said, by way of greeting. "After Lucian's confession, I mean. Three days to decide if I was going to help you or report you."

"And?" I said.

"I'm here, aren't I." She handed me a folded diagram: hand-drawn, professional, like an architectural draft she'd memorized and reconstructed from memory. "My mother was on the shortlist in 1999. They told us she withdrew voluntarily. I was seven. I didn't ask what that meant until I was old enough to know the answer."

I took the diagram and didn't say anything, because there wasn't anything to say. Margot's hostility suddenly read differently, not cruelty, but armor. The same gear I wore.

"The guard rotation has a four-minute gap," she said, moving past sentiment with a speed I recognized. "Southeast corner. That's your window. The window itself is the one Lucian marked; I can confirm it opens from inside with a standard secondary key. I have one."

"How?"

She gave me a look that said *do you actually want to know* and I decided I didn't.

Lucian was already checking his watch. "Four minutes is tight."

"Three, if you're slow." She looked at him. "I'll pull the guard on the east rotation. There's a filing discrepancy in the training logs I've been saving for exactly this kind of occasion. It buys you the gap."

"That's a liability on your end," he said.

"Yes." Her jaw set. "Don't waste it."

Sebastian had wanted to come. I'd said no.

That was the first smart thing I'd done all night.

* * *



THE WINDOW WAS SMALLER than the diagram suggested, or I was less graceful under pressure than I liked to think. Either way, I went through it sideways and caught my hip on the latch and managed not to swear out loud, which felt like a personal victory.

The east corridor smelled like stone and old paper and the kind of cold that accumulates in places people are only supposed to visit formally. Emergency lighting threw everything into dim amber. The kind of light that makes shadows look like they're breathing.

Lucian landed behind me without a sound. Of course.

"Catalogued by year or by subject?" I breathed.

"Year and cross-indexed. We want the Patron correspondence: it will be filed under *P* in the lateral archives, but the physical box will be marked with the hemlock seal."

I knew that seal. I'd seen it in Cora's journal. I'd seen it carved into the floor of the undercroft.

"Lateral archives," I said. "Which is..."

He moved past me, two steps ahead. I followed.

The corridor branched twice before we reached the archive vault, and I spent the whole walk cataloguing exits and measuring the silence and trying not to think about what four minutes actually feels like when you're counting them from the inside. Answer: they feel like they're melting. You can never find the edges.

Lucian pressed his palm to the vault door and I watched him breathe (one long, controlled exhale) and then he produced a key from his coat pocket that I hadn't known he had.

"You had a key," I said.

"I am, technically, still an officer of this Court." He didn't look at me. "The vow hasn't revoked my access. Yet."

Yet. The word sat in the dark between us like a stone thrown in deep water.

The vault opened.

* * *



THE PRIMARY ARCHIVE smelled different from the corridor. Older. Like something had been sealed here long enough to develop its own atmosphere: like the documents were breathing out a hundred and fifty years of careful, careful violence.

The lateral archives took up one full wall. Lucian went straight to *P* and I went to the secondary index, looking for anything cross-referenced with *Reaping* or *Reaped* or any of the euphemisms Cora had catalogued: *chosen*, *transitioned*, *fulfilled*.

Three minutes left, probably. I didn't check my watch.

"Here." Lucian's voice was very flat. He had a box on the table, hemlock seal and a date range pressed into the cover. He was already wearing gloves (he'd planned that much, at least) and he lifted the lid with the careful hands of someone who expected the contents to bite.

Patron correspondence. Neat stacks of it, rubber-banded by decade, the paper so old at the bottom of the stack that it was the color of old teeth.

I photographed while he read. The camera was a good one (Margot's, actually, pressed into my hand at the service entrance without comment). Small. Quiet shutter. I worked systematically, box by box, stack by stack.

"This one," Lucian said, and his voice had gone strange, and I looked up.

The letter was on Court letterhead, dated eleven years ago. It was signed by his father.

I didn't read it. I photographed it and moved on, because if I stopped to watch his face I would lose count, and we could not afford to lose count.

"Wren." His voice broke very slightly on my name. First syllable cracked, second one held. "This is the authorization. The formal authorization for the Reaping cycle. It's not... it was never the Patron acting alone. The officers signed off. Every cycle. Every name on the shortlist was approved by the standing officers."

His father had been a standing officer for twelve years.

I photographed the letter. "Keep going," I said, because he needed to, and because the alternative was watching Lucian Thorne discover what his grief was made of and I

wasn't sure either of us could afford that right now.

He kept going.

One minute, maybe less.

We pulled six boxes. Not all of them. Enough. Names, dates, authorizations, the Patron's identifying correspondence, and (in the very last box, tucked behind a divider labeled *miscellaneous correspondence* the way you'd label a wound) a single sealed envelope addressed in handwriting I recognized.

For whoever finds this: Cora Calloway, Year 3.

My hands stopped.

Lucian put his hand over mine on the envelope. "We take it," he said. "We take it and we go."

We took it. We went.

* * *



HE WAS WAITING IN THE corridor.

Not lurking: Sebastian didn't lurk, he was architecturally incapable of it, which was one of the things that had made me trust him too long. He was simply standing in the amber light with his hands in his coat pockets and an expression I recognized too late as the one people wear when they've already made their decision and are waiting for you to catch up.

"I called ahead," he said. "I'm sorry."

I looked at him. I thought about the ten weeks I'd spent at Blackthorn before I'd understood what the Court actually was, and how much of those weeks I'd spent standing near Sebastian in a way that felt like safety, and how grief makes you stupid about safe harbors.

"Sebastian..." Lucian started.

"They were going to find out," Sebastian said. He had the audacity to sound genuinely sorry. "They *were going to find out*, and then it wouldn't just be Wren on the shortlist, it would be all of us. It would be Margot. It would be..."

"It would be you," I said.

He didn't deny it. That, at least.

"Give me the materials," he said. "If you give them to me, I can... there's a way through this where the worst doesn't happen. Where Wren gets out of this semester alive and the Court treats this as a..."

"A what." My voice came out very quiet. "An experiment? An aberration? A *lesson*?" I could feel Lucian beside me, still and controlled, waiting for my lead. "My sister thought there was a way through too."

Sebastian's face did something complicated. "Cora's situation was different."

"Yes," I said. "She didn't have three people with her." I looked at him for one more second, really looked, the way I should have been looking since September, cataloguing the tells I'd filed as charm. "Walk away, Sebastian."

He didn't walk away.

The door at the corridor's end opened instead, and that was when I understood the architecture of the betrayal: he hadn't just called ahead. He'd given them the timeline. He'd given them the *window*. He'd let us do the work of finding the proof, and now he was going to let the Court do the work of taking it.

Three of them. Not the guards: Court officers, which was worse, because officers knew which rules to break quietly and which to break loudly.

Lucian moved first. He stepped forward, between me and the officers, and his voice came out so completely controlled it sounded inhuman, which meant he was either very afraid or beyond it.

"Stand down," he said. "I am still an officer of this Court, and I am invoking..."

"Your officer's standing was formally suspended," the senior officer said, "this afternoon. I'm sorry, Thorne."

He didn't sound sorry. None of them ever did.

* * *



THEY TOOK THE BOXES.

They took them neatly and efficiently, the way institutions take things when they've had practice, and the one thing I managed (the only thing) was to tuck Cora's sealed envelope inside my coat while the lights were still dim and nobody was looking at my hands.

I kept my face very still. I was good at that now.

Sebastian retrieved Margot's camera from me personally, which was when I noticed he was wearing gloves, which meant he'd planned on touching things, which meant this was not a morning decision. This was Sebastian's plan for weeks, maybe longer.

"I am sorry," he said again, and met my eyes, and I believed him, which was the worst part. You can hate someone and believe them simultaneously. Grief is like that. So is betrayal.

We were escorted to the main corridor and told to wait. Court-speak for: *we need to confer about what to do with you*. Which meant we had minutes, maybe less, before someone made a decision that couldn't be unmade.

"Margot," I said. Quietly, so only Lucian heard.

"I know," he said.

She'd been on the east corridor. She'd pulled a guard rotation to give us our window, which meant she'd also been inside the building when Sebastian called ahead, which meant she'd been caught in the net he cast.

The junior officer came back. He didn't look at either of us.

"Ms. Laurence is being detained," he said, "pending a Court review of her access credentials."

Lucian's hand found mine in the dark, under his coat.

"Detained where," I said.

"Ms. Calloway, I'd strongly advise..."

"Detained *where*."

He told me.

* * *



WE STOOD IN THE COLD outside Blackthorn's east entrance with exactly one piece of evidence between us (a dead girl's sealed envelope inside my coat) and the proof we'd spent weeks building in the hands of the institution we'd been trying to bring down.

Margot was in the Court's holding rooms.

Sebastian was presumably explaining himself to people who'd already decided what they wanted to hear.

And Lucian was standing very close to me in the fog, not touching me except for the one point of contact at my shoulder, like he was offering balance rather than comfort, which was more useful anyway.

"They'll move her before morning," he said.

"I know."

"If we go in officially..."

"They'll take us too." I looked up at the building: black stone, the gargoyles crouching along the roofline exactly as they'd been the first day I dragged my suitcase up this drive and told myself I'd get this right. "The gala." I said it before I finished thinking it. "The founders' gala. It's in three days."

Lucian was quiet for a moment. I felt him working through it.

"The entire Court in one room," he said, slowly. "Every officer. Every Patron affiliate. The press, if we could get them there."

"Everyone who would need to see it," I said, "to make it undeniable."

I touched the envelope inside my coat. Whatever was in it, Cora had written it knowing someone might need to use it. Knowing, maybe, that she wouldn't be there to use it herself.

Call you tomorrow, she'd texted.

I was going to be that call.

"We need new proof," Lucian said. "The documents..."

"I have something." I pulled the envelope out. His name was on it, or whatever name she'd given her killer, sealed inside until someone cracked it open under the right light.

"And I have the gala."

"And Margot."

"And Margot," I agreed, "who is, when she's not actively resenting my presence, extremely good at things I am not." I looked at him. His face was doing the thing where it was almost blank but not quite: the fractures at the edges, the places where the control thinned. "She's not going to break," I said. "Not in three days. She's been building walls longer than I have."

He didn't say anything. He was either believing me or choosing to.

"We need formal wear," I said, "and very good forged invitations, and some way to get a message to Margot that we're coming."

Lucian looked at me for a long moment in the fog.

"The invitations," he said, at last, "I can manage."

"The formal wear?"

"Also manageable."

"The message to Margot?"

He almost smiled. It was the kind of smile that only existed because the alternative was something worse.

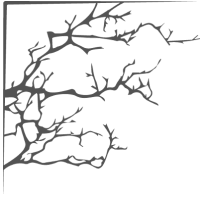
"That," he said, "may require you to trust me."

I looked at the envelope in my hands. I thought about the boy who had switched the cups in the undercroft without telling me, who had paid the price of that mercy in a bright wire of pain down his arm, who had said *I didn't kill your sister* and followed it with something worse.

I tucked the envelope back inside my coat.

"I already do," I said.

We walked back into the dark.



Chapter 28: The Gala

There is a particular cruelty to a masked ball that I have always understood better than most.

The masks are not for concealment. They never were. Everyone in this hall knows exactly who is standing beside them: the names are sewn into the seating charts and the centuries, embossed on invitations that arrive sealed in black wax. The masks are a permission slip. An agreement, collective and silent, that for one evening the Court may do what it does in the undercroft with the lights on. Under cover of velvet and gold leaf and the particular music that carries just far enough to drown out whispers, you may ruin someone and call it dancing.

I had arrived early. This was strategic. The man who arrives first to a battlefield chooses the ground.

The Grand Hall of Blackthorn had been transformed, though "transformed" implies it was ever anything other than what it was now: a room built for exactly this kind of civilized savagery, waiting patiently between occasions. Hundreds of candles in the wrought iron chandeliers overhead. White orchids on every surface, already browning at the edges in the heat of too many bodies. The string quartet positioned in the east alcove, playing something baroque and bloodless. And the Court of the Hemlock (every family, every legacy, every creditor in the ledger I had found my father's hand in) assembled in their finest, with their faces half-hidden and their teeth not hidden at all.

I accepted a glass of champagne from a passing tray and did not drink it.

Sebastian was already here. I had known he would be. He was standing near the east pillars with Hargrove and two members of the Patron's household staff whose faces I had memorized the way you memorize potential weapons: shape, weight, range. He had not seen me yet, or he had seen me and was performing the theater of not seeing me. With Sebastian, the distinction had ceased to matter.

He had taken the proof from us. He had taken *Margot*, and that word, that small fact I could not yet afford to feel, sat in my chest like a splinter I was leaving in because removing it would open a vein.

One thing at a time.

I scanned the room with the systematic patience my father had drilled into me before I understood what I was being trained for, the same way he had drilled the Latin rites and the blood vow and the particular smile that said *I am not threatened* in a language the Court had spoken for two hundred years. Section by section. Exits noted. Patrol rhythms logged. The Patron's envoy (Aldric, cadaverous and composed in deep burgundy) stationed near the dais at the north end of the hall, which meant the Patron himself was present somewhere in this building. That was new. That was not good.

I did not let any of this show.

Then I found her.

* * *



WREN WAS NEAR THE SOUTH windows in a borrowed gown, and the sight of her almost made me spill the drink I wasn't having.

The gown was dark green (not hers, probably Margot's from before, from the life we'd been living a week ago when Margot was still free and the proof was still in our hands) and she wore a mask of gilded leaves that didn't cover enough of her face to fool anyone who had spent months learning the exact angle of her chin when she was furious. Which was the angle it was at now.

She was working the room.

I recognized the technique because I had taught her some of it, in the weeks between the rite and the heist, in the quiet hours when we had built something so careful I was still not accustomed to touching it. She moved through clusters of legacy names like she belonged there, which she did not, not by their accounting, and which she had decided was not her problem. A smile here. A glancing comment there. Her eyes moving to every face the way they always moved to every face, cataloguing, pricing, looking for the exit that was also the entrance she needed.

She was gathering intelligence at a party thrown by the people trying to kill her.

I had loved her before this moment. I was aware that what I felt now was something structurally different, and I did not have time for it.

The vow had been biting at my wrist since morning: a low, constant pressure that had been escalating since the day I told her about the naming, the day I chose her over it. Breaking the vow's obligations did not happen all at once; it was more like debt, accruing interest in the bones. My father had called it *the tithe*. He had been a man with a talent for making cruelty sound inevitable.

I circled the room.

Sebastian found me first. He always did; it was one of the things I had once considered a virtue in him.

"Lucian." He materialized at my left shoulder, champagne in one hand, the mask pushed up on his forehead like he'd already stopped needing it. His smile was the smile I had watched him use on three separate occasions to walk someone into a room they did not walk out of. "You came."

"It's a mandatory assembly." I kept my gaze on the middle distance. "Did you expect otherwise?"

"I expected you might be indisposed." The word was very deliberately chosen. "Given events."

"I am not indisposed."

"No." He studied my profile. "You look well, actually. Considering."

Considering that I had spent two days watching everything we built shred itself into pieces. Considering that Margot was somewhere in this building or this campus and I did not know in what condition. Considering that the vow had left a bruise the shape of a fingerprint on the inside of my forearm this morning, and that I had looked at it and thought, *fine, take it, take all of it.*

"Sebastian." I turned to look at him then. "Whatever you've been promised, whatever Aldric offered you, the Patron has paid it before. To someone else. For something else. You know how this ends."

Something shifted in his face: not guilt, not quite, but its less reputable cousin. "I know how *this* ends," he said, and his eyes moved briefly to Wren across the room. "That's rather the point."

I watched him drift back toward Hargrove.

The string quartet changed to something in a minor key. The candles were very bright.

* * *



I HAD SPENT THE HOUR before the gala with a piece of paper and a very cold mind, gaming every path.

The Court's purpose tonight was clear: the Reaping was in four days. The naming had been formalized. What remained was the delivery: me, presenting Wren to the Patron's envoy, fulfilling the obligation the vow had carved into my bones a decade before I understood what it was asking for. This was the architecture of it. This was how it always went. The gala was the last formal occasion before the rite; it was where the Court sealed the arrangement in public witness, where the thing became irrevocable not because of law but because of the two hundred pairs of eyes that had watched it happen.

The Court's power was not in its rituals. It was in its consensus.

This was the thing that mattered. This was the crack.

I had found it at two in the morning, alone in the room Wren had fallen asleep in, watching the line of her shoulder and doing what I was best at, which was cold assessment of impossible situations. The Patron controlled the vow and the rite and the ledger and the physical architecture of fear that had run this institution for two centuries. What the Patron did not control (what no single person could control, because it required everyone) was the consensus. The silent agreement of two hundred names to look away.

If I could make it impossible to look away.

If I could do it publicly enough, formally enough, in the correct language...

The vow would bite. It had already been biting. I had made a kind of peace with the idea that it would keep biting until it killed me, which my understanding of the founders' magic suggested was somewhere between possible and probable. What mattered was that it would take time. Long enough.

I had told Wren the shape of it this afternoon. She had listened without interrupting, which was not her usual mode, and when I finished she'd said: *They'll turn on you too.*

Yes, I'd said.

And you're doing it anyway.

I had not been able to explain it to her satisfaction, or perhaps to my own. I had said something inadequate about ledgers and fathers and the specific, inherited quality of complicity. She had looked at me for a long moment with that expression she wore when she was recalibrating, measuring the gap between the person she'd expected and the person in front of her, and then she had put her hand against my jaw and said nothing, which had been more than enough.

The vow had bit hard at that, too. It bit at mercy. It had always bitten at mercy.

Aldric moved toward the dais. The music shifted: a subtle cue, Court ceremony dressed as coincidence. Around the room I watched backs straighten and conversations cease, the mass unconscious choreography of people who had been trained since birth to recognize a signal.

It was beginning.

* * *



THEY CALLED IT A PRESENTATION. The Court always named its mechanisms as if they were gifts.

Aldric stood at the dais in his burgundy, his face composed in the particular blankness of someone who has spent so long in service that their own reactions have atrophied. He did not need to raise his voice; the room had already assembled.

"The Court of the Hemlock acknowledges the completion of this year's selection," he said, "and calls for the formal presentation of the Chosen before the witness of the assembled families."

Two hundred people looked at Wren.

She didn't flinch. I was watching her. She stood very still in the green gown and the gold mask and she did not flinch, but her right hand had found the seam of the skirt, and I knew what that meant: her hand went there when she was readying herself for something.

The Court's eyes moved from her to me. Expectant. Patient with the patience of people who have never needed to hurry because everything has always come to them eventually.

I was supposed to cross to her. Take her arm. Present her to Aldric as the vow required. Simple. I had watched my father do it once. I had been seven years old and I had not understood, and then I had been twenty-three and understood everything, and now I was standing in this hall with my father's bruise on my wrist and two hundred names watching me, and I was thinking about a girl who had walked up this drive with her grief in a suitcase because her sister had been murdered in this place and called something else.

I set down the champagne glass on the nearest surface.

I walked to the center of the room.

"The Thorne bloodline," I said, into the silence, in the formal register the Court used for oaths, "invokes Right of Claim."

The silence changed quality. It became a different kind of silence: surprised, and then rapidly rearranging itself into something harder.

Aldric's composure flickered. "Thorne. This is not the..."

"Right of Claim has been in the charter since the founders," I said. "It predates the Patron. It predates the vow. A senior bloodline member may claim a Chosen as ward, removing them from the year's Reaping, in exchange for a commensurate tithe from the claiming house." I let my eyes move across the room: Hargrove, the Voss family, the assembled names. "I am invoking it. Now. Before witnesses."

The Court's charter was not secret. Everyone in this room had read it. The Right of Claim had not been invoked in forty years because no one with a senior bloodline had ever been willing to pay the price: the tithe that came from the claiming house was significant. It was designed to be. It was designed to make people decide that other people's lives were not worth the cost.

I had spent most of last night determining what I could liquidate.

"This is irregular," Aldric said. His voice had acquired a new temperature.

"It's legal," I said. "Which I believe is the word the Court prefers."

Somewhere in the room, very quietly, someone laughed: a single involuntary sound, quickly stifled. I did not look for the source. I kept my eyes on Aldric.

"The Patron..."

"Is not in this room." I let the observation sit. "The charter requires witness of the assembled families. The Patron's household holds no vote in a charter invocation. This is a matter of bloodline law, not hierarchy." I paused. "I'm happy to wait while someone sends for him, if the Court would prefer to do this with him present."

I would not, in fact, have been happy to wait. The longer this took, the more time Sebastian had to work the room, and the more time the vow had to decide this was the breaking point. The pressure at my wrist had moved to my arm in the last ninety seconds and showed every sign of intention.

But they didn't know that.

Aldric looked at Sebastian. Sebastian's face had gone very careful.

And then (because the Court is, at its rotten core, a committee, and committees run on precedent, and the precedent was forty years unbroken but the *charter* was two hundred) Hargrove spoke.

"Let the record show," Hargrove said, in the reluctant tone of someone who hated agreeing with me more than he hated doing the correct thing, "that the Right of Claim has been vocalized before witnesses."

The room exhaled.

Wren's hand came away from the seam of her skirt.

It worked.

* * *



FOR PERHAPS FIFTEEN seconds, it worked.

Then Aldric said, very quietly: "The Patron will hear of this."

And the room changed.

I had calculated this. I had known the invocation would stop the immediate machinery: the charter was ironclad, and the Court's institutional reflexes were strong enough that even Aldric would not simply override it in front of two hundred witnesses. What I had underestimated, or chosen to accept the cost of, was the speed at which the room would reorganize itself.

The Patron's household staff moved first, both of them, positioned, which told me the layout had been planned before we arrived. Sebastian was crossing the room. Hargrove's expression had shifted from reluctant compliance to something more careful, more personally concerned, the look of a man doing a rapid reassessment of which side of a line was safer.

The Court was not turning against me. Not yet. But it was *turning*: a shift in the gravitational field, gradual and unmistakable, like a tide reversing. Two hundred years of accumulated authority and fear and debt doesn't undo itself for a charter invocation. It absorbs it. Digests it. Considers the person who made it and begins to ask what they're worth.

I had always been worth quite a lot to them. I was the Thorne heir. I administered the vow. I was the mechanism by which certain uncomfortable obligations were fulfilled at one remove, which allowed the Court's older families to feel clean.

I was worth considerably less now.

Wren reached me through the crowd. I don't know how she navigated it so fast: she had a talent for moving through spaces that didn't want to accommodate her, which I had noticed in the first week and which I had

been watching ever since with the specific attention I usually reserved for problems I couldn't stop thinking about.

"That was very public," she said, low, by my shoulder.

"That was the point."

"They're regrouping."

"Yes."

Her eyes moved across the room with the quick tactical efficiency I had watched her develop, or perhaps she'd arrived with it (I'd never been quite sure). "The two by the east door are cutting off the exit."

"I know."

"Sebastian is talking to Hargrove."

"I know."

She turned to look at me. The gold mask framed her eyes, which were doing the thing they did when she was running calculations she didn't like the answers to. "Lucian. The vow."

She had noticed the way I was holding my arm. Of course she had.

"It's manageable."

"You're white."

"I'm always..."

"*New* white," she said, clipped.

Aldric was ascending the dais again. The string quartet, with the impeccable timing of people employed to smooth over social disasters, had resumed playing: something louder now, designed to complicate conversation, to layer ambient noise over anything that might otherwise carry to unfriendly ears.

"The Court of the Hemlock acknowledges the Thorne invocation," Aldric said, with precisely the tone of someone reading a death warrant who wants everyone to understand they find it distasteful. "And calls for a formal convening to review the invocation's validity and assess the tithe. Pending that review..." A brief pause, weighted. "The selection remains intact."

The room absorbed this.

Pending that review. Which would not be convened tonight, or tomorrow, or at any speed the Court did not control. Which meant the naming stood. Which meant we were back where we'd started, except now every person in this hall knew I had tried to stop it and failed, and the Court's collective attention (that slow, patient, implacable consensus) had settled on us both.

"That," Wren said, "was the detonation."

I looked at her.

"I heard it go off," she said. "In about thirty seconds they're going to make a move, and whatever exit we want we need to take *now*, before the room finishes closing."

She was right. She was always right about timing in a way I found philosophically irritating and practically invaluable.

"South corridor," I said. "Behind the musicians. Leads to the east wing passage."

"Margot used it."

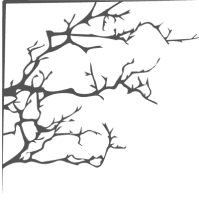
"Yes."

She looked at me again: a look that contained something I was still learning the vocabulary for, something that lived between *I trust you* and *this is insane* and a third thing I didn't have words for yet, something that felt like the future. "Together, then."

"Together," I agreed.

The vow bit to the bone. I welcomed it.

We moved.



Chapter 29: Proof

The gala had forty seconds left to be a gala.

I know because I counted. I'd started counting the moment Lucian stood up in front of the Court, mask off, voice like a blade being drawn, and said the names. All of them. The ledger names, the Reaping names, his father's name.

The room had gone so still I could hear the candles.

Then one of the Court elders knocked over a chair reaching for Lucian, and forty seconds was over.

* * *



HE GOT US OUT THROUGH a wall.

Not a metaphor. An actual wall: a seam in the wainscoting that moved when he pressed his palm flat against the third panel from the left and pushed in a specific way that meant he'd done it before, many times, in the dark. The passage beyond was black and smelled like centuries of secrets: stone dust, old candle smoke, the particular cold that lives in walls that have never once been warm.

I went through first because he held it open, and that was somehow the most Lucian thing he'd ever done.

Behind us, the ballroom descended into what I can only describe as rich-person chaos: overturned chairs, crystal shattering, the sound of very expensive heels on marble moving very fast. Margot's voice cut through it all, high and commanding, and I didn't know if she was helping us or managing the scene for her own purposes. With Margot, those two things had never been mutually exclusive.

"Keep moving," Lucian said against the back of my neck.

The passage bent right, then dropped three steps, then opened into a junction where four corridors met under a single guttering wall sconce. He didn't hesitate. Turned left without breaking stride, and I followed him through passages that wound through Blackthorn's guts like old veins: between floors, under stairwells, around the edges of rooms I'd walked through a hundred times without knowing the walls had teeth.

We came out in a sub-basement, a level below the undercroft.

I hadn't known there was a level below the undercroft.

I really needed to stop being surprised by Blackthorn.

"They'll seal the exits first," Lucian said, pressing against the stone while we caught our breath. His mask was gone, collar open, bow tie hanging loose: the look of a man who had just burned down a house and was deciding how he felt about it. "Then the gates. Ten minutes, at most."

"I need Crane's room first."

He looked at me like I'd suggested we stop for tea.

"The key she gave me." I held it up, still warm from being gripped too hard for the last three minutes. "She said Cora would've wanted me to have it. The Court took her. Whatever she was protecting is still here."

A muscle worked in his jaw. Calculation, not argument. "Second floor, east corridor."

"I know where her room is."

He didn't say *then why ask*. He said, "You have seven minutes," which was worse.

* * *



CRANE'S ROOM WAS THE kind of room people kept when they expected to leave in a hurry or not come back. Bed made with tight corners. Books shelved by size, not subject. On the nightstand: a glass of water, a leather bookmark, nothing else.

The key didn't fit the door.

Of course it didn't.

I looked at the key: brass, old, the kind of small that said *box* not *door*. Looked at the room. Thought about what Crane had said. *Your sister would've wanted you to have it*. Cora, who had been here before me. Cora, who had been smart and careful until she wasn't.

Where would Cora have put it?

Books. Shelf behind the books. Under the bed. The desk drawer, locked. The nightstand, just a drawer, open, the bookmark and a pen.

I checked under the desk.

There: taped to the underside of the center drawer, a small brass lockbox no bigger than a hardback novel. The key fit.

Inside was a digital voice recorder. Small, gray, scratched from years of use. Beneath it, folded in thirds, a single sheet of paper.

My hands had stopped shaking somewhere between the ballroom and the servants' passage. They started again now.

I unfolded the paper first, because I am the kind of person who reads the last page to steel herself for the ending.

A ledger entry. Not the main Court ledger: the other one, the parallel record that tracked what official documents were careful never to say. Handwritten in a precise, formal script. Dated three years ago.

Calloway, Cora M.; Year Three Initiate; Selected: Reaping Protocol; Patron Authorized; Administered.

Below that: three signatures. One I didn't recognize. One in the careful curlicue I'd been seeing on official Court documents all year: the Patron's proxy.

And one that was familiar. One initial. Just the one. The same letter Cora had written in her journal, the one that could mean two different people, still maddening, still not enough.

Administered. The word sat in my chest like a coal.

Not *jumped*. Not *fell*. Not *found*.

Administered.

I photographed it four times before my hands were steady enough to get a clean shot.

* * *



THE RECORDER HAD A single file. Forty-seven minutes long.

I hit play and crouched on the floor with my back to the wall and the door in sight.

Silence at first. Breathing. The specific kind of breathing someone does when they're holding very still, trying to be quiet, not sure if they're succeeding.

Then my sister's voice.

Okay. Okay, I have... I don't know how long. I need to say this clearly.

She sounded like herself. That was the thing that undid me: she sounded so completely like herself, quick and a little sharp, the voice I'd grown up with, the voice I'd been trying to reconstruct from fragments for three years.

I pressed my fist to my mouth and kept listening.

My name is Cora Calloway. I'm a third-year student at Blackthorn Academy. Tonight is the twenty-second of October. I've been... they told me I'm the Reaping candidate for this year. I thought it was symbolic. It's not symbolic.

The recording skipped: corrupted, or she'd stopped and started. When it resumed, her voice was lower.

They gave me something in the cup. I've been trying to catalogue the effects but my hands aren't working properly. I found the recorder in the library. I've had it for two weeks. I thought I was going to find something I could use and walk out of here.

A long pause. A sound that might have been a laugh.

I found something, all right.

She described it methodically (Cora was always methodical, more engineer than literature student) and the methodical quality of her voice in that recording is the thing that broke me open. Not tears. Something past tears. She described the Reaping protocol. The selection criteria. The way the chosen candidate was told they were honored, elevated, given a private ceremony while everyone else attended a gala overhead. The way the "ceremony" involved a compound and a bell tower and a story everyone had agreed to tell afterward.

It's a system, she said, and she sounded almost awed. It's not chaos, it's not cruelty for cruelty's sake, it's a system. The Court has been doing this since the founding. Every five to seven years. One candidate. High enough to look like a choice, low enough to avoid scrutiny. And the Patron...

Static. Long, bad static.

I bit down on a sound I would not make.

When the recording cleared, she was mid-sentence.

... so if anyone finds this, if Wren finds this, my sister Wren, hi, Wren. I'm sorry. I know you're going to come looking. You've always been too stubborn not to.

The coal in my chest cracked through.

The person who... the one who was in that room with me, who handed me the cup, who's going to...

Static again. Shorter this time.

... the initial is...

Three seconds of white noise. Where her voice should have said a name.

Then silence. Then nothing.

I replayed it four times.

The same three seconds of nothing, every time.

The file was corrupted: not cut, but partially overwritten, the way digital recordings degrade when someone knows just enough about them to damage without obviously destroying. Someone had gotten to the recorder at some point. Had stripped those three seconds and left everything else standing, because everything else proved nothing definitive.

I photographed the recorder. I photographed the ledger sheet again. I found the USB port on the recorder's side and I took out my phone (thank god I hadn't left my bag at the coat check, thank whatever dark principle runs this place that I am constitutionally incapable of checking my coat) and I transferred the file.

Forty-seven minutes of my sister's voice. A ledger entry with *administered* in a dead man's hand.

More than enough to prove a murder.

Not quite enough to prove who.

* * *



I WAS ON MY WAY OUT when I heard the door.

Not Crane's door. The adjacent room: the one that shared the secondary servants' access that I'd only been half-aware existed. A click. Careful. The kind of click you make when you're trying not to be heard.

I was behind the door before I'd finished the thought, back flat to the wall, recorder in my coat pocket, phone screen dark.

The door opened three inches. Stopped.

Silence: the listening kind. I breathed through my nose and did not move.

It opened the rest of the way.

A figure, still masked. White. The same white as the men from the ballroom: Court. Medium height. Moving with purpose, not panic: this wasn't someone fleeing the chaos. This was someone who had left the chaos behind to come here specifically.

To find the box. To make sure what Crane had hidden stayed hidden.

They crossed to the desk. Crouched. Ran their hand along the underside of the drawer and found nothing.

The pause they took was eloquent.

They turned.

I was already moving: door open, into the corridor, three steps before they'd processed the sound. Behind me I heard the door slam back, and I ran.

The corridor was longer than I remembered. Everything at Blackthorn was longer under pressure. I went left at the junction because Lucian had said left, and I had learned to trust his knowledge of these bones even when I hated everything else about the architecture.

The figure was fast.

Faster than the heels suggested. I could hear them gaining, and I turned into the next passage and took the three steps down too quickly and caught myself on the wall with both hands and kept going.

I came out through the tapestry into an empty side corridor.

Lucian was there. He had found a coat somewhere, dark, practical, not his, and he had his hand out before I'd stopped moving. I took it.

The figure who had followed me stopped at the tapestry.

I looked back once.

They had not come through.

White mask in the dark of the servants' passage, watching us go. Too far for features. Too far for certainty. A height, a build, the specific way someone holds still when they're deciding whether to follow or let you go.

They let us go.

That was the thing I couldn't parse, couldn't file, couldn't make sit flat, as we moved through the last back passage and out through a service exit I'd never known existed and into the cold November dark beyond the walls.

They had let us go.

Either because we were already clear and pursuit wasn't worth the risk.

Or because they already knew we weren't getting far.

* * *



THE COLD OUTSIDE BLACKTHORN was different from the cold inside. Less intentional. The grounds stretched dark and wet, fog sitting low over the grass, and somewhere across the quad the gala lights were still going: muted now, the kind of low illumination that means incident management, not celebration.

We moved along the wall. I told Lucian what I'd found.

Not all of it. Not Cora's voice yet, not the specific things she'd said, because I didn't have the architecture for that and we were still moving, but the ledger entry, the word *administered*, the recording's existence and its gap.

His grip on my hand went very tight and then deliberately loose.

"Three seconds," he said, after a long moment. "Gone."

"Someone knew about the recorder. They didn't destroy it, probably couldn't, without it being obvious. So they corrupted just enough."

"Just the name."

"Just the name."

He was quiet. We crossed the last stretch of ground to a gap in the wall he clearly knew about and I didn't, and went through.

"Crane built a copy," I said. "They took her before she could give it to me directly, so she left it where I'd find it. She bet on the key. She bet on me."

"She was right."

"She usually was."

We were outside the grounds now, on the road that curved along the edge of the estate, and the fog was heavy here. I could not see back through it to Blackthorn's towers. I was glad I couldn't see them.

"The ledger entry," Lucian said. "The three signatures."

"I photographed it."

"One was the Patron's proxy."

"Yes."

"And one..."

"Fits two people." I looked at him. "You know it does. I'm not there yet. Neither are you."

He stopped walking. Turned to face me in the fog, and whatever he'd looked like in the ballroom, open, blazing, choosing, was folded back under the control he kept himself packed in. But the cracks were still there. You could see the heat behind them if you knew where to look.

I was starting to know where to look.

"We have proof," he said. "Real proof. Shareable."

"Cora's voice on a recording describing the Reaping protocol in detail. A ledger entry with three signatures calling her death *administered*. Yes."

"That's enough."

"To prove it was murder." I looked at him steadily. "Not enough to name the architect. Not yet."

The word *yet* hung between us in the fog. It was a long word when you were standing outside with a dead sister in your phone and two hundred Court members behind you who had just reclassified you as problems to be solved.

I thought about Cora: methodical and afraid, speaking into a recorder she'd hidden herself, leaving a trail because she'd known there was a chance she wouldn't get to leave it any other way.

I know you're going to come looking. You've always been too stubborn not to.

She'd been right. She'd been right and she'd counted on it and she'd built me a path to follow even at the end, even when she was running out of time. I had her voice on my phone and a ledger with *administered* in ink that didn't lie, and there was no quantity of cold money or old Latin or secret corridors in all of Blackthorn that was going to make me stop.

"I know someone outside these walls who can host the files securely," I said. "Once it's up, it's up. They can't un-ring it."

Lucian looked at me for a moment. Something in his face I didn't have a name for yet: the expression he made when he was surprised by himself.

"All right," he said.

We walked into the fog.

Behind us, Blackthorn disappeared into the dark like it had never been there at all. I kept waiting to feel something clean. The finality of an answer, the satisfaction of proof. Cora had been murdered; I had known it for months, and now I could prove it. That was supposed to feel like something.

It felt like finding her all over again.

It felt like three seconds of static where her voice should have said a name.

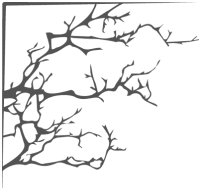
I had what I came for. The question had been answered.

But whoever had handed my sister the cup was still alive somewhere in that building, wearing a face I almost recognized, breathing air that my sister no longer could.

And through the fog, somewhere behind us, a white mask had watched us go and made a choice.

I didn't know yet if it was mercy or patience.

I suspected I was about to find out.



Chapter 30: Hunted

The vow's bite had gone quiet sometime before dawn.

That was how I knew we were still alive, not the gray light pressing through the shutters, not Wren's breathing from the cot across the room, but the absence of that particular pain. The blood vow only collected what it was owed. When I stopped fighting it, it stopped feeding.

I sat at the gatehouse table and watched the candle burn to its last half-inch and thought about the accounting.

Everything I had done wrong. Everything I had done that might, if measured from a precise enough angle, be called right.

The gatehouse belonged to the Thorne estate in the technical sense that everything within five miles belonged to the Thorne estate, a fact my father had reminded me of at every occasion it could possibly serve him. I had not been here since I was twelve years old. The lock still recognized my key. Some things are loyal past their reason.

Wren shifted on the cot. I heard the specific rustle of someone waking who has been asleep in an unfamiliar place: the cautious stillness before she decided whether to trust the room.

I had memorized that sound. I had memorized the whole vocabulary of her caution.

"You didn't sleep," she said.

"No."

"Did you eat?"

I looked at the table. I had made tea, at some point, from packets I'd found in a dust-filmed cupboard. "I made tea."

"That's not what I asked."

"No," I said. "I didn't eat."

She sat up. Her hair was loose and tangled and there was a cut along her jaw, from the gala, from the running, from some moment in the chaos I had not been close enough to prevent, and she looked at me the way she had been looking at me since the rite, since the confession, since the moment the accounting became mutual. Like I was a problem she had solved but wasn't sure she trusted the solution.

"Come here," she said.

I went, because I had stopped finding reasons not to. That was the thing about truth: once it took root, every wall you'd built against it looked exactly like what it was. Scaffolding over nothing. Somewhere in the night, mine had come down.

I sat on the edge of the cot and she put her hand on my face: the flat of her palm against my jaw, checking for injury, or checking that I was real; with her, those were

often the same gesture.

"The vow," she said.

"Is manageable."

"Is it hurting you right now?"

"No."

She studied me. The candlelight was in her eyes and she looked like every piece of evidence I had ever tried to suppress. "Lucian."

"It is not hurting me right now," I said, and managed to keep my voice level through most of it. "It will. Later. When I have managed the situation more completely, the debt will... it collects on its own schedule. I'm aware of that."

"And you decided to be aware of it without mentioning it to me."

"I was managing the situation."

She made a sound that was not quite a laugh. "You are the worst at accepting help."

"I have not, historically, had reliable access to it."

That landed somewhere. I watched her jaw tighten, just barely, the way it did when something got in under the wry armor and she was deciding whether to let me see. She let me see.

"Neither have I," she said.

* * *



THE CANDLE GUTTERED in some draft that had no right to be there, in a room with the windows shuttered and the door latched. The estate had its own opinions about things. My father used to say that, *the house has opinions, Lucian; you'd do well to listen*, and I had spent twenty years learning to ignore advice from that quarter.

This morning I was less certain.

"Tell me what you found," I said. "In the records room. Before the Court closed on us."

She was quiet for a moment. Not reluctant: I had learned to read the difference between her silence-as-deflection and her silence-as-processing. This was the second kind.

"Enough," she said, finally. "I found enough to destroy them. The confession is on the recording. The initials, the rite, the specific words he used: it's all there. It's real, Lucian. Cora was murdered, and the man who ordered it said so in his own voice, in a room where he thought the walls were loyal."

The walls of Blackthorn, it turned out, had been loyal to someone else entirely. That was the thing about institutions built on secrets: eventually, the secrets became the institution.

"But you don't have a name," I said.

"I have an initial. I have a voice. I have the shape of the thing." She was not looking at me now, her eyes were on the middle distance, on some internal topography I couldn't map. "I'm close, Lucian. We're close."

"We are also hunted," I said, "which complicates the timeline."

That brought her back. "Tell me how bad."

I had spent the hours she slept composing the accounting. Making it precise. That was the only thing I knew how to do with fear: classify it, inventory it, decide what it

meant before it decided for itself.

"The Court has resources," I said. "The Patron has more. What I did at the gala (openly defying a direct order, in front of witnesses, on record) is not a transgression they absorb quietly. They will be embarrassed. Embarrassed men with power tend toward disproportionate response."

"So they'll come for us."

"They are likely already coming."

She nodded. Steady. Wren Calloway had walked into Blackthorn alone with a false name and a grief she'd sharpened into a weapon, and she had survived four months in a place designed to break her, and she did not flinch at *they are likely already coming*. She filed it and moved on.

I had been in love with her since before I had a word for it. I understood that now, with the cold clarity of morning and the vow's quiet and two inches of guttered candle between us. It had not started at the rite, or the stacks, or the night she'd picked a lock she shouldn't have known existed. It had started earlier, and worse, and I had been calling it by other names: *surveillance*, *strategy*, *liability*, because the true name was one the Court would use as a weapon.

They would use it anyway. They already had.

She was watching me watch her.

"Say it," she said.

I had not been aware I was not saying something. That was new; my control over my face was usually better than that. Another wall, come down.

"I love you," I said. "That is not a safe thing to tell you, here, with the Court looking for us and the vow half-broken and no clear path out of this. But you asked, and I have... I have run out of reasons to manage you out of the truth."

The silence that followed was not her deflection-silence or her processing-silence. I did not have a category for it yet. She was building one in real time.

"I know," she said. "I love you too. That's also not safe." She tipped her head back against the wall behind the cot. "We are deeply terrible at this."

"We are attempting something genuinely unprecedented, so some ineptitude is forgivable."

"Taking down a secret society from inside while actively falling in love with one of its reluctant heirs."

"While also being hunted by that society," I said.

"While I'm trying to solve my sister's murder."

"While I'm trying not to die from a blood vow that considers mercy a billable offense."

She looked at me. The corner of her mouth moved.
"High-conflict romance."

"I would have used different phrasing."

"You would have used twelve words where two suffice, yes, I know." But she said it soft, without the usual edge: the sharpness she deployed to keep distance. This was the version of her I only ever got in the dark, when the armor came off by degrees and she let me see the grief underneath, the love underneath that, the girl who had come here for her sister and found something she hadn't planned for.

I took her hand. She let me. After a moment, she leaned into my shoulder, and I felt the vow shift in my chest, not the bite, but a different sensation. Something older. Something the founders had not, apparently, been able to define out of existence.

We sat like that for a while. The candle went out.

The darkness that followed the candle's death was not absolute, but it was heavy, tasting of old dust and the damp salt of the October air. We remained there for a moment, anchored to one another in the silence, our breathing the only rhythm in a room that felt like it was holding its breath.

I had spent my entire life practicing the art of the perimeter. I knew how to keep people at a distance where I could observe them without being touched by them, and I knew exactly how much of myself to reveal to ensure that no one ever held a map of my weaknesses. But with Wren, the perimeter had not just been breached; it had been demolished.

She shifted against me, her shoulder sliding against my chest, and the scent of her reached me: rain, old paper, and something uniquely hers that felt like home and catastrophe all at once. I felt a sudden, violent surge of need that bypassed every logical filter I possessed. It was not the polite desire of a suitor; it was a starving sort of hunger, a demand for proximity that bordered on desperation.

I turned my head, and in the dim light, I could see the silhouette of her profile, the curve of her jaw and the softness of her mouth.

"Wren," I said. My voice sounded foreign to me: stripped of its formality, raw and low.

She turned toward me. Her eyes were dark, searching. She didn't ask what I wanted; she already knew. She had always known exactly how to read the gaps in my composure.

I reached out, my fingers grazing the line of her throat, and I felt the rapid, frantic beat of her pulse beneath my touch. It matched mine. The symmetry of it was undoing me. I leaned in, stopping just a fraction of an inch from her lips, giving her the space to recoil, to laugh, to tell me this was a mistake.

"Is this okay?" I whispered. "Do you want this?"

"I have wanted this since the first time you looked at me like I was a puzzle you couldn't solve," she said.

She didn't wait for me to close the distance. She reached up, grabbed the lapel of my jacket, and pulled me down into her.

The kiss was not gentle. It was an explosion of everything we had been suppressing for months: the fear, the rivalry, the grief, and the terrifying certainty that we were the only two people in the world who mattered. She tasted of salt and defiance. I felt the air leave my lungs as I pressed her back into the thin mattress of the cot, my hands finding the curve of her waist, gripping her with a suddenness that felt like a claim.

I wanted to memorize her. I wanted to inventory every inch of her skin, not as a strategist, but as a man who had finally found something worth keeping.

My hands moved to the buttons of her blouse, my fingers shaking slightly. Precision was my pride, but in this moment, I was clumsy with wanting. I worked through the fastenings, pushing the fabric away to reveal the pale slope of her shoulders and the swell of her breasts. The cold air of the room hit her skin, and she shivered, but she didn't pull away; she arched into me, her hands sliding under my shirt to find the heat of my back.

"Lucian," she breathed, her voice a ragged edge. "Please."

I stripped my clothes off with a haste that would have horrified my father, the fabric of my trousers and shirt discarded on the flagstone floor. When I returned to her, the contact of skin on skin felt like a physical shock. She was warm, so impossibly warm against the chill of the gatehouse, and as I settled between her thighs, the friction of our bodies felt like the only real thing in a world made of ghosts and secrets.

I lowered my head, kissing the hollow of her throat, then the curve of her collarbone. I wanted to leave marks. I wanted there to be evidence that she was mine and I was hers, something the Court could not erase or legislate away.

She let out a low moan as my mouth found the peak of her breast, my tongue swirling around the hardened tip before I took her into my mouth. The sound she made

was guttural, a small, broken noise of surrender that shattered the last of my control. I felt her fingers dig into my shoulders, her nails marking me, and I welcomed it. I wanted the pain if it meant she was this close.

"I want you inside me," she whispered, her breath hot against my ear. "Now. Please."

I paused, looking down at her. Her hair was spread across the rough fabric of the cot like a halo of chaos, and her eyes were wide and dark with a hunger that mirrored my own. I wanted to ensure this was not just an extension of the adrenaline from the night's events; I wanted it to be a choice.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Once we do this, there is no going back to how things were."

She smiled, a small, wry tilt of her lips that was so quintessentially Wren it made my heart ache. "Good. I hated how things were."

I reached for the small bottle of oil on the bedside table, a relic from whoever had stayed in this room decades ago, and used it to prepare her. My fingers worked with a slow, deliberate pressure, watching her face as she reacted to every touch. I wanted to see the moment she broke. I wanted to be the one who caused it.

She gasped, her hips lifting off the bed, her eyes fluttering shut as I found the center of her pleasure. She was slick and tight, her body humming like a live wire beneath my hand. I didn't stop until she was shaking, until she reached for me with a desperation that told me she was on the precipice.

I moved over her, the weight of my body pinning her into the mattress. I entered her in one slow, deep push, a long, steady slide that felt like coming home after a lifetime of exile.

We both froze for a second, the sheer intensity of the connection stealing the air from the room. It was too much: the physical fullness, the emotional weight of the confession we had just shared, and the knowledge that we were hunted. I looked into her eyes and saw the same thing I felt: a terrifying, absolute vulnerability.

I began to move, a slow and rhythmic cadence that built in intensity. Every thrust was an accounting, a way of saying everything I didn't have the words for. *I am here. You are not alone. I will burn this whole place down if it means you stay.*

Wren wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper, her breath coming in short, sharp hitches. She met every movement with a fierce energy, her body clamping around mine, pushing me toward a breaking point I had spent years avoiding.

"Look at me," she commanded, her voice strained.

I looked. I saw the grit in her expression and the love that she couldn't quite hide behind the defiance. She was seeing me too: not as the Thorne heir, not as the Court's golden boy or its disappointment, but as the man who loved her.

The pace accelerated, the sound of our bodies colliding echoing in the small room. The world narrowed down to the point where we touched, a white-hot center of gravity that pulled everything else into insignificance. I felt the tension coil in my gut, a tightening spring that was about to snap.

"Lucian," she cried out, her voice breaking as the first waves of her climax hit her. "Lucian, please."

Her internal muscles pulsed around me, triggering the final collapse of my restraint. I groaned, a sound from the back of my throat, and pushed into her one last time, pouring everything I had into her. The release was violent, a shattering of every wall I had ever built, leaving me hollowed out and completely exposed.

I collapsed against her, my forehead resting against hers, our hearts beating in a frantic, synchronized rhythm. For several minutes, neither of us spoke. We simply existed in the aftermath, the silence no longer heavy, but soft.

As the adrenaline faded, the cold returned to the room, seeping through the shutters and settling in the marrow of my bones. I didn't pull away; I held her tighter, wrapping my arms around her as if I could shield her from the very air.

Wren shifted, resting her head on my chest, her breathing gradually slowing. She traced a pattern on my skin with her fingertip, a slow, absent-minded gesture that felt more intimate than the act itself.

"You're thinking again," she whispered. "I can hear the gears grinding from here."

I let out a breath that was half-laugh, half-sigh. "I am merely contemplating the cost of things."

"And?"

"And I suspect it is a bargain," I said.

She pulled back slightly to look at me. The wryness was still there, but it was softer now, tempered by a tenderness she rarely allowed herself. "We're probably ruined, you know. Emotionally. Logistically. Probably legally."

"Probably," I agreed.

"Good," she said, and kissed me softly, a lingering touch that tasted of peace. "I've always preferred being ruined to being bored."

I lay there with her for a long time, listening to the house creak around us. The act had not solved our problems; it had not removed the Court from our heels or erased the blood vow from my chest. In fact, it had made everything more dangerous. By choosing each other so completely, we had given the world a target to aim for.

But as I held her in the gray light of the dying night, I realized that for the first time in twenty-five years, I wasn't afraid of the accounting. The cost was high, yes, but the value was finally clear.

We were no longer just two people fighting a war in the same trenches. We were a single entity, bound by something far more permanent than a blood vow. We had traded safety for certainty.

Eventually, we dressed in silence, the movements familiar and slow. There was a new gravity between us, a weight that shifted the way we stood in the room. We didn't need to speak about it; the air had changed. The distance I had spent my life maintaining was gone, replaced by a tether that felt unbreakable.

I watched her as she pulled her boots on, her movements quick and efficient once again. The armor was sliding back into place, but I could see the cracks now. I knew what lived underneath the defiance.

She looked up at me, and for a moment, the wry mask slipped entirely. She looked small, and tired, and desperately brave.

"We can do this," she said. It wasn't a question; it was a statement of fact.

"Yes," I said. "We can."

I reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The gesture was simple, but it felt like a vow of its own. We had survived the night, and we had found something in the wreckage that was worth fighting for. Now, all we had to do was survive the day.

* * *



THE DAY CAME IN THROUGH the shutters in gray October slats, and I listened to the estate creak around us, the old wood settling into the cold, and I thought about what came next.

There was a path. It was narrow and it required things of me that the Court would consider treason, because it was: a fundamental betrayal of everything my name had been made to mean. The blood vow would take its price in full when I broke it entirely, and the price for full severance was not small. I had read the founding documents. I knew what it cost.

I had also held her while she wept over her sister's name in a handwritten confession, and I knew what it cost to stay inside a structure that had decided love was a liability and grief was a target.

The accounting was easy, when you laid it out plainly.

We would need allies. Margot, who had helped at the gala and been seen helping, who was now implicated whether she wanted to be. The recording Wren had taken from the records room, small, damning, enough to break the Court's public face if it reached the right ears. The ledger pages I had memorized, line by line, in the thirty seconds I'd had before Sebastian's men had come through the door. The copy of the founding charter with my

father's marginal notes that I had kept because I had always known, on some bone-deep level, that the day would come when I would need it.

We would need to move. The gatehouse was safe for now; it was not on any record the Court maintained, and my name had been systematically removed from the property deed when I was eighteen, in the kind of elegant legal maneuver my father had specialized in. The irony of that gift. He had meant to diminish me; he had given me a refuge.

We would need time. The one thing the Court was specifically designed to deny us.

"I have a list," I said.

Wren didn't move from my shoulder. "Of course you do."

"It's in my head. I haven't written it down because written things can be found."

"Tell me."

I told her. The allies, the evidence, the path through. She listened without interrupting, which meant she was taking it seriously; when she thought I was wrong, she tended to say so mid-sentence, which I had long since stopped finding annoying and had started finding clarifying. Her silence was its own kind of endorsement.

When I finished, she said: "The vow severance. When you break it fully, what actually happens?"

"A great deal of pain," I said. "For a significant duration. And then it's done."

"And you can survive it?"

"The records suggest survival is possible. With the right conditions."

"What are the right conditions?"

I had been hoping she wouldn't ask that particular question. I had also known she would.

"Being with someone you trust," I said, "appears to be the primary documented mitigant."

The silence that followed was of a fourth kind. Something I would need, eventually, to develop new vocabulary for.

"Okay," she said. "Then we'll do it with someone you trust."

* * *



THE AFTERNOON CAME in heavier than the morning: actual October doing what October did in this part of England, laying in fog that smelled like turning leaves and the river and something more ancient underneath, something the land had been doing before there were buildings over it. I had gone to the window twice. Both times the lane had been empty.

I had begun to believe it would stay that way until tomorrow, when I could arrange for safe transport and begin the next stage of the accounting.

This was, in retrospect, the kind of thinking that history tends to correct.

The letter came at four in the afternoon.

Not by post: by hand, slid under the gatehouse door with the particular confidence of someone who knew exactly where we were and had chosen delivery over confrontation. Which was its own message, I thought,

crouching to retrieve it from the flagstone floor. *We know where you are. We could have sent men. We sent paper instead.* The paper was worse.

The seal was the Hemlock Court's oldest mark: the one they used only for formal proceedings, for announcements that were, by the terms of the founding charter, irreversible. I had seen it once before, on the document that had formalized my father's debt to the Patron. I had held that document in my hands at twenty-one years old and understood, for the first time, that some institutions do not issue invitations.

Wren appeared at my shoulder. She had heard me go still.

She looked at the seal. She knew it; she had seen it carved in stone on the undercroft floor, and she had studied the charter pages I'd shared with her, and she had the kind of mind that filed and cross-referenced without being told to.

"Open it," she said.

The parchment was thick under my fingers. The ink was black, formal, the cramped script of the Court's official recorder, a role that had existed without interruption for two hundred and eleven years, because the founders had understood that power needs a scribe. I read it twice before I spoke.

"It's a Choosing notice," I said.

My voice was the steadiest thing in the room.

"The Court, invoking the authority of the founding charter and the emergency provision of Article Twelve, has formally concluded the selection for this year's Reaping." I paused. There was a way to say the next part, and I could not locate it. "The Chosen is..."

"Say it," Wren said. The same words she'd used that morning. Different weight entirely.

"Wren Calloway." I set the letter down on the table because my hands had decided they were done holding it. "The date is set. Twenty-three days."

The room was very quiet.

I looked at the letter on the table, the cramped formal script, the irreversible seal, the specific date written out in full as though clarity were a kindness, and I thought about all the walls I had spent a lifetime building, and how far they were from adequate, and how little it mattered now.

Twenty-three days.

She didn't move for a long moment. Then she picked up the letter herself, read it, set it back down.

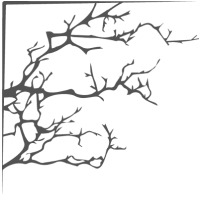
"Well," she said, and her voice was the steady one now, the wry, edged, unbreakable voice she had honed against every person who had ever told her she wouldn't last. "I guess we're not waiting until tomorrow."

The fog pressed against the shutters.

We had twenty-three days to destroy an institution two hundred years old, and the Court had already shown us they knew exactly where to find us, and the vow in my chest had already begun its slow, considered tightening, and the date on that letter was written in the kind of ink that does not smear.

I looked at her. She looked at me.

"No," I said. "We're not."



Epilogue: The Patron

The dossier was thinner than it should have been, which told him more than a thick one would have.

He read it the way he read everything now: slowly, by the lamp, in the room above the room where the others believed the decisions were made. Let them believe it. A table where twelve chairs argue is a useful thing; it persuades clever people that they are the cleverness. He had sat at that table once. He had learned that the only chair worth holding is the one no one has drawn on any map.

Calloway, Wren. Photograph clipped to the corner. The resemblance to the older one was there if you knew to look for it: the same refusal in the jaw, the same eyes that catalogued a room instead of admiring it. The first Calloway had cost them a tower and three weeks of managing a coroner. He had assumed, reasonably, that the family had learned the lesson families learn.

Instead the family had sent its second daughter up the same drive.

He turned the page. The boy's reports were there: Lucian's, dutiful, exactly as detailed as the vow compelled and not one syllable more. The Patron had worn that vow himself, fifty years ago. He knew precisely the shape of the silence it carved into a man,

and he knew how to read the places where Lucian's silence had begun, lately, to curve around the girl like water around a stone.

The boy thought this was new information. The boy thought a great many things were secrets.

He closed the file and sat for a while with his hands folded, listening to the old building settle around its old arithmetic. Somewhere below, a girl who believed she was the hunter was even now congratulating herself on a single answered question (*murder, not suicide*) as though the answer were a door and not the first inch of a corridor with no end she could see.

Let her have it. Let her have the small true thing. The truly damned are not the ones who learn nothing; they are the ones who learn just enough to keep walking forward.

He uncapped his pen. In the ledger that no admissions office would ever cross-reference, on the line reserved for the year's renewal, he wrote a single name in a hand that had outlived four headmasters and would outlive this one.

Then he smiled, very slightly, the way the cold smiles.

The girl thinks she's hunting us, he thought. *Let her.*

Her sister thought so too.

About the Author

Sabine Marlowe writes dark, atmospheric romance about dangerous men, sharp-edged women, and the secrets that bind them. When she isn't lighting candles for ambience and ruining her own sleep schedule, she's plotting the next twist in *The Hemlock Court*. She loves hearing from readers brave enough to walk up the drive.

Also By Sabine Marlowe

Gilded Vows: The Hemlock Court, Book Two

Broken Vows: The Hemlock Court, Book Three (Coming Soon)

Buried Vows: The Hemlock Court, Book Four (Coming Soon)

Blood Vows: The Hemlock Court, Book Five (Coming Soon)

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