

Chapter Four

At fourth beacon the next evening I got out sturdy pants, a long sleeved shirt, and short boots, all black. I filled a small bag with the disguise, desert clothes, and food, and water I'd taken from the kitchen. I took a bath to calm my nerves and pass the time.

Planting a foot in the water, I caught sight of the Tyger on my belly in the mirror. I studied the Mark that had caused all this trouble. I'd never been a big eater, and the Mark rippled sharply over my ribs. It wasn't orange like the real Tygers, but sometimes I thought I saw a hint of color beneath the silver, especially around the slanted eyes.

Tygers were extremely rare in Celidom, but I'd seen one three times. Finn told me it was because of my Mark, that Eloi was trying to speak to me, but I couldn't believe it. Eloi had never spoken to me. He'd never done anything for me. All the Mark did was endanger me and Brend.

I felt guilty for protecting it, but the thought of burning or cutting it away set my heart pounding. It was part of who I was, if a dangerous part.

I stayed in the water until it was lukewarm. Then I got out and dressed, sat on my bed to wait. At seven and a quarter beacons I went to Brend's room. He was dressed the same as me, his bag ready to go. I met his eyes, tried to look steady. He nodded.

We crept into the hall and down two flights of stairs to the first floor without meeting anyone. Maddox was on duty tonight, as I knew he would be. He and Darcy were the only ones I could rely on to let me sneak out alone. The lamps were turned up too high for us to climb out of my window. The only way out was through the main door.

He raised his eyebrows as we approached.

"Tell them we must have climbed from the windows," I said. "I left a rope behind." He nodded and slid the door open just enough for us to pass. I hesitated, considered telling him where we were going.

The less he knows, the better.

The whole journey down the stairs and across the courtyard to the timetower took fifteen minutes. We were dressed like Temptors on patrol and we tried to move with purpose. We found Finn on the crumbling steps near the shore of the River Shaeth, in the deep shadows. I handed him his disguise and we helped each other position the wigs. My stomach was knotted.

Finally, a few minutes after the sixth beacon flashed, two pairs of footsteps crunched behind us. I froze until they showed themselves.

“Ready?” Shannon asked. Mikal stood silent behind him.

“Yes,” I said. I squeezed Brend’s hand as we crept around the tower and up onto the Monurol Bridge. We kept close to the sides, moving fast. Mikal led us without looking back. I avoided looking at him. His cold dark eyes made me shudder.

I tried to move smoothly, like a Temptor would. I kept my hair around my face and Shannon told Brend to keep his head down. If a Temptor patrol looked closely, they might recognize us. Brend looked years older beneath the shaggy black wig and mustache. My wig was straight, with long bangs to cover much of my face.

We crossed the Bridge and turned left. The riverfront was lined with tall houses, most of them empty. Wealthy Celidiss kept a house along the Shaeth because it gave them status to be near Vitrel, but none of them wanted to live so near Solon Cald and Ethen Ward. Most of the wealthy lived in Lister, with clean water, lots of light, and parks.

Mikal led us down into an alley between two dark houses. We had just settled against the wall to wait when we heard the rattling of the cart. The traders were the only ones who had horses. They kept them in the family, breeding them carefully each year. The wealthy disdained to ride on animals. They didn’t have far to go, anyway. The Birthings and the Purity Celebration held at the Cald were seen as adventures, since they were forced to walk over a mile to reach the school.

“Shannon, you and I first,” Mikal said.

Shannon nodded. I was relieved one of us wouldn’t have to go and wait alone with Mikal. Shannon bent down and kissed me, his lips hot. I felt a stir of longing to go with him.

“How long will we wait?” I asked.

“Three hours,” Mikal said.

“Where will it take us?” Finn asked.

“To the Black Capital. We’ll find you,” Shannon said. He thumped Brend on the shoulder, turned and followed Mikal up onto the street. I crept up the stairs until I could see the cart, the tired horse standing silent, the driver’s shoulders shrouded in a robe. Mikal and Shannon

climbed into the back and the driver threw sacks over them. He clucked to the horse and they were gone into the shadows.

“Goodbye,” I whispered.

We waited two hours, and the third hour crept by slowly. Curfew was in effect and the streets were silent. Only the river rushed on, unchanged. I was sweating, straining to hear the clipping hooves.

“Finn, what if he doesn’t come? What if they got caught?”

Brend looked at me with wide eyes. Finn reached out and took my hand, held it firmly in his. “Don’t be afraid, Venna. If they don’t come, we’ll find a way.”

I gripped him tightly and pulled Brend closer. For once he didn’t protest.

The third hour passed. The fourth. The fifth. I pushed my pain and fear deep within my heart and closed the door. He was gone. Shannon had left me behind. If we were going to get out, I would have to do it alone.

Chapter Five

Six months later:

Lord Vitrel stood in front of the southern garret with his back to me when I climbed the last step into his white room. I looked around to see if anything had changed. Vitrel occupied the fourth floor of Solon Cald, and the glass garrets at each corner could be seen from roofs to the end of Celidom. The ceiling above met the Ambitus seamlessly. Since the Cald itself was a support to the Ambitus, the view from the windows was clear of pillars.

Vitrel's slender white fingers were clenched behind him, tight like ropes. "Ah, Ravenna," he said, turning toward me. I bowed. Ever since Shannon left six months ago, I'd had the feeling something was building.

"My lord." My knees got in their own way, so I stopped several yards from his massive writing desk. He had sent a servant to summon me before supper. I lost my appetite entirely.

"Please." He wore a glove on his hand. There were whispers that the glove hid a scar he'd received during the raid on Renorth Enya. Others said he and his brother Ashleigh had once gotten in a deadly fight. Ashleigh didn't try to hide his scars, so if the latter were true, I would he assume he won. "Have a seat."

I perched on the edge of one of three wooden chairs that faced his desk. The desk was a slab of polished grey rock, a monolith in the white room. The emptiness of the walls wore at my nerves. I restrained myself from cracking a knuckle. After Shannon disappeared, I was questioned here. Maddox hadn't been on duty anymore, and the new guard reported our late arrival the next day.

I told Vitrel what he wanted to hear. Shannon was angry about Antoine, and wanted to get out of Celidom. He asked me to go with him, and I refused. Brend and I had gone to tell him goodbye. No, we didn't know where he went, he wouldn't tell us. He could be anywhere in the desert by now.

I played my part well enough I escaped the dungeon and won some favor from Vitrel. But Shasta was growing restless.

"Many things have been happening, Ravenna. I have left you in ignorance, and that I regret," he said.

I dipped my head again.

“My nephew, Jasper Solivar, has attacked his own father and fled from Ithacus.”

My eyebrows shot up.

“There are reports of him near Solaris Ward, but the search is continuing, and will not cease until he is found.” He was watching my face now. I waited in the silence.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“When he is found, he will be punished.”

“Of course.” If I was concerned about what Jasper had done, I wouldn’t show it.

“If you know anything about his plans, my searching Temptors would be pleased to hear it,” he said. He thought I was his informant now, was that it? I shook my head, and he pursed his lips. “If you think of anything, do let me know.”

“Of course, right away.” I closed my mouth before I babbled with relief. If that was all he wanted, I still had time to finish planning our escape. Finn was exploring the Black Capital little by little, learning the streets. He thought we could make it through if our disguises were good enough. I was glad Jasper hadn’t told me anything. I hoped he wouldn’t be fool enough to come here. Vitrel would have the river guarded like never before.

Vitrel stood and came around the desk, and my chair scraped back as I pushed it. My relief disappeared, my heart tripping over itself.

“Ravenna,” he. He sat in the chair next to me, almost against my leg. “You are very important to me.” He smelled like wet metal. Bile burned in my throat. He took my hands. “Very important. I have not told you all that I have planned for you.” He smiled, but it was only his lips splitting; nothing reached his eyes. “Great things, dear girl.” His fingers were cold, colder than the stone floor. He stood and walked back to his desk. I breathed again.

“Time is running short for these plans. With my nephew unaccounted for in my city, I must move quickly,” he said. Surrealism swept through my stomach. Jasper had been right. Who would stop Shasta from keeping me here forever, if Vitrel ordered the lingas union? I had thought Shasta’s words came from his madness, but perhaps Vitrel did think I was his to keep. If he suspected what Jasper had promised me, he would try to bind me to Shasta before Jasper could steal me away. My neck felt damp.

“What plans?” I asked, because he was waiting.

“My son, Shasta, has asked to join in sacred lingas with you,” he said, “and I have granted his petition.”

I stared, trying to think up words. “What does he want with me?” I asked. I wanted to hear him say it. He settled back in his chair, and I met his eyes.

“It is not what he wants with you, but what *I* want with you,” he said.

“What do you want with me?”

He waited, looked at me hard. I kept my eyes on his. He rose and strode across the room to a chest of drawers against the wall. He pulled a skeleton key from his pocket and opened the bottom drawer. I stood and edged toward the stairs, afraid it was the lingas bowl. What if Shasta was waiting in the hall, and they were going to force me to do it right now?

Eloi, help me.

I prayed the prayer without thinking, but it calmed my breathing. It was a book. He was holding a book. He beckoned me toward him, holding the green book out by his fingertips. I approached slowly.

“The Torrens,” he said.

“I thought you threw them all into the Shaeth?” I asked. My fingers crept forward and he let me touch it.

“All but this,” he said. “I am grateful to the Orates of Solaris for revealing this to me before they fled, at least. They were heretics against Hreth, especially their leader. We cannot let these Prophecies be seen by the populace. They would destroy us, destroy the whole world,” he said. He pulled the book away and bent down closer to me. “There would be nowhere safe for us, even you. Do you understand?”

I nodded, though I didn’t understand.

“You bear the Mark of the servants of the Orate,” he said, gesturing toward my stomach.

My eyes widened, and I stepped back.

Of course. He’s known all along. That’s why he took you in when our parents died.

“I will explain it one day, when you and my son are united. You hold great power, Ravenna,” he said. He said each word carefully. “You do not want to waste that power.”

I put my shoulders back and set my jaw. "It doesn't matter," I said. "I will never bind myself to Shasta."

He slammed a hand onto the cover of the book. Dust puffed out, and I read the silvery inscription. *Torrens-Book of the Seeing God*. "Why not?" he asked.

"You know why," I said.

He dropped the book into its lined drawer, brushing his hands together. The dust left a smudge on the knuckles of his one glove. "It's time you left McTierney behind. There are greater things for you," he said.

"This has nothing to do with him," I said.

"That was the beginning. Shasta is a very focused young man," he said. "Once his desires are stirred, they cannot be neglected."

"He is cruel."

"Enough!" he said suddenly. "This is not about either of you," he said, slamming the drawer in so hard the chest crashed against the wall. "We need the power you will create together. Jasper is rebelling. The city is unsettled. You must take my son's blood within the week."

My ears rang as I staggered back. "I will not," I said.

"I was hoping that you would be inclined to fulfill my greatest wish, after all that I have done for you."

All you've done to me, you mean. He was scolding me, as if I were the one at fault for what he'd allowed to happen to me.

"Ashleigh will attend the Purity Celebration. We will hold the ceremony then."

Three days. "I can't do it," I whispered, gripping the back of the chair until a splinter sank into my palm.

"You will do it. Or I will put Brend through the Birthing immediately, and send him straight to Ithacus. Ashleigh appreciates the young ones. They make the strongest daemils because they are so malleable, he says." His eyes sparked, and my breath slowed.

"Think of those soft eyes opened wide to the power," he whispered. A haze crept over my own eyes as I struggled not to see Brend's pensive face twisted with pain and horrified knowing.

If I gave him up to become a Temptor, or worse, a daemil and a slave to Hreth, I would have no reason to live. That life would strip the thoughtfulness from him. The darkness would take *Brend* from Brend, and I would be left alone.

Worse than death. Finn's research claimed that Temptors could be brought back to themselves, or 'redeemed', but once a Temptor became a daemil, there was no hope. Hreth controlled them utterly and they could never escape.

"Choose," Vitrel said. "Or I will choose for you." He took a half step toward me. The smell of wet iron overwhelmed me. My throat hardened.

"You are the worst of evil," I said. "But I will do it." He held still while I turned and stumbled away.

I had three days.

Chapter Six

I struggled with the iron doors at the bottom of the marble steps until one shifted and let me slip through. Vitrel had no guards here, and no footman. His presence was enough to keep any unwanted visitor away, and to make the wanted ones tremble when they did come. The door boomed shut. I put my hand against the wall and swallowed the bile that was rising to my mouth.

Shasta's room was to my left, past the staircase. I studied the shadows beyond the lamps for a long moment before I hurried to the stairs. My foot caught on an uneven stone, but I got my other foot under me before I fell. The staircase lamp had gone out, and I traced my hands along the rough stone walls all the way to the bottom. I turned right, toward the library. Finn was supposed to meet me and Brend for supper, and I hoped he would wait for me since I had missed it. Only one classroom was in use this afternoon, the other three dark and closed.

The fire in the library hearth was lively, but the stuffed chairs were empty. Max stood in the corner, his hand rested on a bookshelf.

"Ravenna. You're still planning on tomorrow night, right?"

I cleared my throat. "I don't think the world will end before then, so I suppose tomorrow night will be there," I said. Max was one of the few Temptor students that disobeyed Vitrel's order to keep away from me.

He narrowed his eyes. "You've forgotten. You were going to help me with the diagramming."

I sighed. "Sure, Max. Right now, though, I need some help."

"Anything for you, darling," he said, slamming the book to the back of the shelf.

"Could you tell anyone who asks that you saw me go upstairs? I need to find Finn."

"Sure." He shrugged. "As long as we're still on for tomorrow. As much as I adore your company, I really do need to impress Master Scofield this time."

"Mmhm." I walked away. He followed.

"You okay?" he asked, looking down through his long eyelashes. My step hitched, but then the classroom in front of me opened and students poured out.

"Thanks, Max," I said. I surged through the crowd of faces that I recognized, but didn't know. I heard someone call my name, and I waved without looking. Aline glared at me, a new leaf

tattoo coiling over her right temple. I ran down the stairs to keep ahead of everyone else. The cooks were bustling from the kitchen to the dining hall, and I stopped at the swinging door long enough to scan for a blonde head. The rows of steel grey chairs were empty. I continued toward the front gate. I needed to know if we could leave tonight.

Darcy stood before the iron wrought double doors with his arms crossed. I stopped in front of him and took a deep breath.

"I'm in my room," I said. He shook his head as Maddox shoved through the barracks door.

"You can't go alone again, Ravenna," Maddox said.

"It's important."

"I don't care."

I glared at him, clenched my teeth to keep from cursing. "Has he sent word already?" I glanced back down the hall. If he hadn't, I had to take my chance now. Maddox's eyebrows disappeared into a furrow of his wide brow.

"You can't go alone."

"I need to talk to Finn."

"I'll take you."

"Fine," I said through my teeth. I motioned to Darcy to lift the bar and he did, slowly.

The courtyard between the Cald and Monurol Bridge was lined with sparse, grey bushes. Their shadows under the lampposts reached across the cobbled path with gnarled fingers. The Capital crowds would be thick, and for a moment I was grateful for Maddox. I knew my way, but wearing my cloak would force me to stick to the dark streets.

I don't have my cloak. I touched my face and pulled at the ends of my curls.

"They will not recognize you," Maddox said. "Not where we're going."

"I never go without it," I said.

"Would you like to go back?" he asked as we stepped off the far end of Monurol Bridge. The stench of the Shaeth was strong in the fog. I pressed the back of my hand to my nose until we were in the street. A clamor of hawking and shouted orders drifted toward us.

"No," I said. I pulled my hair around my shoulder, trying to cover my face. As I rounded the first corner, I slammed into a portly woman's basket.

“Foolish girl, watch where you’re going! Can’t ya see?” She scowled as I stared at her dumbly, pushing my hair back behind my ears.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Ya nearly spilled my basket.” I waited for her to notice Maddox, but she somehow missed the hulking black outline behind me and stomped off, her red Capital basket swaying against her hip.

“She really didn’t know me. I rather liked that.” I looked back at him. He shrugged, peered over my head and searched for the next assailant.

“You enjoy being called a fool?”

“She didn’t care who I was. I’d rather be a fool than be known by Vitrel’s name.”

He paused. “Sometimes I think I’m a fool for keeping his name,” he said.

“Why do you stay?”

“Is there anywhere else to go? A guard has never left his employ alive, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

He glanced at me. “Remember Lars?”

I tilted my head. “The quiet blonde one who quit last year?” He was silent and my heart dropped like a stone. “Lars is dead?”

Maddox’s face looked like a hammer wouldn’t break it. “He ran for it, and Temptors caught him. I know the body dropper that put him in the river.” The street narrowed and I walked behind him so I didn’t have to respond.

Finn’s hospital was on the far side of the Capital, just inside Ethen Ward. Maddox led me off the residential street and into one of the spokes that led to the Capital. I jumped after him as a window rattled and rotten fruit rained down. A man with holes in his shoes cursed and shook his fist, but the smudged window was already shut. Someone shoved me from behind and I stumbled into Maddox’s back, and then we were pressed on every side by the market crowd. He said nothing, but reached back and took my arm, forging his way through. Dirty faces, shrill voices, half naked children scabbled under the eaves of stone for crumbs.

A brawl erupted ahead of us. A woman screamed and stumbled back. A man slammed against the wall and slid down, his eyes rolled up. Maddox put both hands in front to block the

fist of a man blinded by his own blood. I jerked back, elbowing a red haired lady in the face. She shoved me hard, but someone was right beside me and I bounced back against her. She grabbed at my arm, her nails clawing me, and I tore away and shoved her into the crowd. A freckled boy wriggled through the crowd, clutching a package, his eyes lit up as if he were playing a game. He brushed against me and his dirty brown cap fell to the ground. An impulse seized me. I could hardly see the top of Maddox's head. I bent down and snatched the cap, shoved it over my hair, and followed the churning crowd into another alley.

The mob jostled me until I found an open street. My chest heaved and I ached all along my sides and back. My hair was all tucked into the cap, my pants torn and my face smudged and scratched.

I had no idea where I was. I was alone in Ethen Ward. A slight grin teased my mouth, but I kept it away. I looked for anything familiar. All I saw was a papsa roll stand, and my stomach rumbled. I bought two, surprised that I had any coins left in my pocket at all. I hardly chewed them, the cream filled up my mouth and clogged my throat.

"Hey." A voice as I passed a break between buildings. A boy with gangly legs, about as tall as me, walked toward me. "Give me that," he said. I looked at him.

"This?" I waved the last bite of my second roll.

"Yeah," he said. He reached out and grabbed it, stuffed it in his mouth.

"Here," I said, handing him my last coin. "For tomorrow." I walked away and he stared silently after me.

I had to ask directions to the hospital three times before I found someone with an intelligible accent. I felt ignorant, unable to comprehend someone speaking in my own language. My Celidiss was stilted compared to theirs.

Finn wasn't on his floor. Most of the doctors were running between patients and would barely look at me. Finally a red haired woman paused in the hall long enough to listen.

"Dr. Chandler?" she asked. "Sorry dear, he's off shift."

"He was supposed to meet me. Did something happen?"

She sighed. "He lost a girl. That always throws him."

My stomach twisted. I nodded. "Thanks."

“Sure,” she said, hurrying toward a closed door, already scribbling on her notepad.

I picked my way down the back stairs, kept my head down while two men carrying a boy with a bleeding foot between them climbed past me. The air on the street smelled fresh compared to the blood and vomit. I found his apartment that he shared with two other doctors and knocked half-heartedly, knowing he hated to be alone when he lost a patient.

The door opened almost before I was done tapping. “Yes?” The tall blonde one whose name I could never remember looked down on me. “Miss Lastoria? What are you doing here?” he peered both ways down the street.

“I’m looking for Finn,” I said.

The blonde shook his head. “He never came back here when he got off shift. He had some trouble with a patient...” He sighed. “He’s probably at the tavern on Bark Street.”

I nodded. “I thought so, but I wanted to check here just in case.”

“Are you here alone?”

“Ummm...no. I brought a guard with me,” I waved my hand toward the street corner. “He’s running an errand.”

“Good.” He stepped outside and locked the door behind him. “You shouldn’t be in Ethen alone, and I need to start my shift.” He started off, then turned back. “I hope you find him, Miss Lastoria.”

“Thanks...what’s your name again?”

“Cedric,” he said, nodding. I nodded back, and he went on.

At the corner of Monurol and Bark, there was a loud tavern that didn’t ask questions. I took off the cap and stuffed it in my pocket on the way. A round bellied man stumbled through the swinging front door and I jumped back.

“And don’t come back!” someone roared from inside. The man walked away as if nothing had happened. I took a deep breath and opened the door quickly. Roe, the bartender, lifted his bald head, his face still angry. He relaxed as I nodded, and narrowed his eyes. *He can’t recognize me! That was years ago.* Everyone knew Roe, but he couldn’t know everyone. I had come to get Finn here once before, but the guards had been with me. A sliver of guilt went through me as I pictured Maddox searching up and down the streets for me.

Or maybe he thinks I deserve whatever I get.

Roe set down the rag in his hand and flicked his eyes to the back corner. I nodded, seeing a blonde head at the last table. The noise of the bar rose as I stepped onto the floor and squeezed between full tables.

Finn had pushed his empty mug away, and rested his head on his arms. I sat down across from him with a thud. "You have your own *mug*?" I said. I picked it up and stared at the wood. *Finn* was carved across the cup in blocky letters.

"One hundred beers. They hang it on the wall." Behind the bar, hundreds of mugs hung from pegs.

"Finn, you have a problem."

"I got the solution, honey," a curvy blonde girl said. She waved a pitcher and the brown liquid sloshed inside.

"That is the *problem*, not the solution." I took his mug and stuffed it inside the mouth of the pitcher. Finn didn't look up at the girl's indignation, only waved her away.

"You can't blame yourself for losing a patient. You didn't create the disease."

He finally looked up. His deep blue eyes were bloodshot. "I know."

I glanced at the tables nearest us. The faces were turned away, in their own conversations and drinks.

I leaned closer. "You tell me to have hope, Finn. This is not the place to find hope."

He rubbed his eyes, shook his head. "I know."

"Tell me what happened."

He took a breath. "She was only twelve. Her brother dumped the druwe on her face, and there was nothing we could do. The druwe disease takes the weakest, the ones that can't withstand the power of the druwe."

I put my hand over his, uneasy. "Can we talk somewhere else?"

He lifted his head. "Did something happen? Where did you get that cut?"

"It's just a scratch." I touched the tender skin of my jaw. It felt like a war wound. "Let's go." Finn used the table to rise, but after that, he could walk straight. A man with a hood stepped out of our way and nodded. Every sound seemed directed at us now, the clunk of a mug against

the table, a bellowed curse, even a few whispers. When the door swung shut behind us, I let out a sigh.

“I hate going in there.”

“You didn’t have to,” he said.

“I had to talk to you.”

“What happened? Was it Shasta?”

I gave him a sharp look and didn’t answer. We walked silently across the street and skirted a man sleeping on a doorstep, his legs sprawled into the gutter. I stared down at him carefully, relieved to see his chest moving. Pebbles pattered on the street behind Finn and he gripped my arm and turned. Another shower landed closer, one stung the top of my head.

“Finn, look.” I pointed at the Ambitus across the street. Even through the mist, a jagged black crack seemed to reach down like the mouth of a monster. I cringed back, pulled Finn with me. The stone groaned, firm sections straining to hold the weak. A chunk the size of a roof leaned down, pebbles and boulders crumbled onto the apartment building and street beneath. The huge piece groaned, and screams filled the silence as it broke free and fell. The impact crushed the top floor and shook the ground. The bar door opened, and Roe stumbled out.

“The Ambitus!” he screamed. Men and women poured from every door along the street, some holding hammers and knives. The screams never stopped as people crushed through the doors and flooded the streets. The entire row of buildings emptied. We pressed back against the barred door behind us.

The huge piece had settled onto the roof of the building, but now its weight was beginning to slip toward the corner. Bodies pushed tight around us, people desperate to get out of the way. A figure dropped from the gaping hole above and landed on top of the crushed roof. My mouth dropped open as he ran across the piece and jumped to the next roof without hesitating. Someone had been above the Ambitus, and broken through. I stared up into the black, searching for the forest that the Ambitus protected us from, but there was only darkness.

A tiny girl with a white face was screaming in the first window of the building next to the crushed one. She could see the roof was leaning above her, ready to smash that room, but she only stood and shrieked.

“Someone help her!”

The bartender pushed through the crowd, and I started after him, but Finn pulled me back.

“He’s here, Venna,” he said. The figure was sailing between roofs, just across the street from us. Shasta followed close behind, his hair wild and his red cloak flapping around him. Five Temptors in uniform black swarmed the roofs of the buildings behind them.

Roe convinced the girl to jump, and she did, wailing, as the roof collapsed behind her. One of the Temptors was running along the roof as it collapsed and he missed his footing and fell to the street, landing in a low crouch. The fugitive turned sharply toward us and leaped over our street. A woman beside me shrieked and I gasped, watching him sail through the air and disappear onto the roof above and behind us.

It was Jasper. He was supposed to be lying in wait for Shasta but instead he was running away, outnumbered.

“You need to get inside,” Finn was saying, pulling me away from the crowd. “He’ll be looking for you. And it’s only a matter of time before the Vithren come through that hole.”

“He’s why I’m here, Finn,” I said, jogging beside him. People hesitated on the road, not knowing whether it was safer outside or inside. Their safety wouldn’t matter anymore when curfew began.

“I could have guessed,” he said. The crowd was quiet and pale, and it thinned near the river. We crossed the bridge and wound around the timetower to the old crumbling steps in the back.

“We have three days to get out.” I sat on a sturdy stone. “You were right. Vitrel believes the Prophecies.”

“Three days? Until you have to marry Shasta?” he asked.

I nodded. “What can I do?”

He rubbed his hands along his knees. “Well, I’ve made progress with our contact in Solaris Ward. There’s a caravan leaving tomorrow night. I didn’t think we were ready, but we’ll have to be. Why is Vitrel doing this now?”

“He’s scared with Jasper loose,” I said. I waved my hand in the direction we’d come. “Though I don’t know how long he will be. What was he thinking, running on top of the Ambitus,

especially above Ethen?" I asked, shaking my head. "We're going to have bats and Vithren everywhere now."

"Perhaps he'll give you more time if they catch him," Finn said.

"I doubt it," I said. "Ashleigh is coming up for the Purity this year. He wants us bonded then. That's the day after tomorrow." I paused. "He threatened to send Brend to Ithacus." I spoke very quietly to keep my voice even.

He groaned. "We have to go, then."

"I wonder if I could get to Jasper. He offered to help me escape once."

"Jasper Solivar? When did he offer his assistance?" he asked, rubbing his temples.

"I didn't want to worry you. He came to the Birthing celebration." *I mean, I didn't want to talk about it at all.*

"If Jasper offered help, why didn't you take it?"

"He offered to get me out. Only me. Not you or Brend. I'm not leaving without him."

He was silent.

"You know, if I give him what he wants, Shasta might mellow after a few years—"

"Stop it." He turned me to face him. "Shasta will not mellow." A handcart rattled by on the road, and we paused, waiting until it was gone.

"So we need the disguises by tonight," I said when I was sure it wasn't a body dropper.

"If we can't take the caravan, we'll hide in Solaris Ward. Maybe the guards will let us past."

"They'd sell us back for the bounty."

"Not if we convince them we're on their side. They might help us past the Ambitus. You're not an ordinary runaway."

"I don't know."

"There's no other way, Venna. I'm not letting you and Brend stay here."

"What about..." I paused.

"My mother?" he asked. "I don't know what I can do for her. She doesn't know me. They keep her tied down most of the time. The last time I went to see her—" He shook his head.

"She tried to grab my throat."

"Oh Finn. I am so sorry." I patted his hand.

“I really think she’d be better off dead like your mother.”

I nodded, staring down the river, following its course until it was out of sight. Vitrel told me my parents died in an Enyan attack at the north gate. He took me and Brend in because he felt responsible for not saving them. I didn’t believe him, but no one knew what really happened.

“Vitrel saved me and Brend because of my Mark.” It felt good to admit it was true.

“I know. I think Eloi used him to save you for something more. I’m sure he did.”

I shook my head. “Eloi, the God of light, saved me? That’s hard to believe in this place.”

“It’ll be easier once we’re away from here.”

“Do you really think we can do it?”

“Doing nothing is the same as failing,” he said. “Vitrel will bring the dark Prophecy to reality if you stay. We have to try.”

“Why does it have to be this way?” I asked. “I never asked to have this Mark. Why can’t I be an ordinary girl, with an ordinary family?” I kicked a loose stone over the edge and it skittered down toward the river bank. “Why am I even alive?”

“You’re not thinking. The evidence is all around you. Do you think the Tygers visit you for no reason? There has to be more to the Prophecy. Why else would Vitrel destroy the Burning Books and forbid anyone to talk about them?”

“It just doesn’t seem possible,” I said.

“If there wasn’t another God out there, none of us would be here,” he said. “Everything good comes from somewhere good. Do you really want to believe Hreth created everything? He only knows how to destroy.”

I was silent for a while. “I don’t know. I hate being forced into this.”

“We still need to get out.”

I nodded. Eight beacons shone out on the timetower across the bridge. Almost curfew. I stood up. “I should go. I left Maddox behind out there and he’s probably mad about that.”

“I’ll check with my contact and get those disguises tonight.”

I grinned. “What if we actually do it? Can you imagine leaving this all behind, Finn? Seeing the stars?”

“I dream of it every night,” he said. “Vitreol has kept us locked inside this stone cage, but he can’t do it forever. People have gotten out before. It’s not impossible.”

“It feels like it,” I said. “If Shannon...” I swallowed. “If he’s out there, alive, he could have come back by now.”

“We don’t know how long it would take him.”

“I know,” I sighed. We walked to the edge of the bridge and paused. “I’m sorry about your patient.”

“If we find the Solari, they might have a cure for the druwe disease. I’ve heard stories that Eloi heals them.”

Something clanked behind me and I whirled. Shasta stood staring at me with red veined eyes.

Chapter Six

“What are you doing out so late, Ravenna?” Five Temptors stood behind him, their hands on hips, close to their knife sheaths. I recognized two students, Kahtarine and Julian, but the rest were Ithacan.

“It’s only eighth beacon.” Finn said.

Shasta jerked a finger at him. “You! Shut up.” He looked him up and down, stretching the tendons of his neck tight when he lifted his head. “I don’t want to see you with her again.”

“*What?*” I said.

“Of course, Second Temptor.” Finn ducked his head and elbowed me.

Shasta tilted his head back and stared down at both of us. “She is mine now.”

My teeth clacked together. “I am *not* yours. I’ll see whoever I want until Lord Vitrel decides otherwise, not you.” I clenched my hands so I wouldn’t scratch his face until it bled. The corners of Kahtarine’s mouth lifted, but the rest of the Temptors remained as blank as before. Shasta took a long step forward with his right hand raised, and I planted my feet, wondering why he was using his weaker hand to hit me.

“I must say, cousin, you’re disappointing me with your ability to capture the heart of a woman,” someone said behind him. My heart leaped as I recognized the voice. “If I recall from my own experiences...charming comes first. Then the beating.”

Shasta straightened his back and jerked away. He stepped aside and waved a hand for me to look. “I’ve made a conquest tonight. My uncle’s bastard will no longer be a threat to the peace of Celidom.”

I stepped around Shasta’s rangy form, peering. “Jasper?” He was in the middle of the Temptors, massive chains glinting on his arms and legs.

“Not so impressive now, is he,” Shasta said. I blinked up at him, Jasper’s promise sounding in my head. *You will be out of Celidom before the Purity Celebration.*

“I’m surprised that you were captured so easily. They’ve only been chasing you for a few days.”

“He went down quickly enough,” Shasta snarled. His hands were balled up, but his left was wrapped in something bulky. *Jasper broke his wrist.* A small smile fought with my lips.

“You surprised me in the middle of a nap,” Jasper said. A laugh slipped out of me before I could smother it. Shasta turned on me, but Jasper’s shadow flashed some teeth in a mockery of a smile. “Charm, Shasta, charm.”

Julian shifted and winked at Kaht. The gate to the Cald cracked, and a stream of light spilled across the stairs. Darcy or Maddox, waiting for me.

“I should go,” I said, edging sideways. Shasta was watching me so intently that I was afraid to speak to Finn. Trying not to meet his eyes, I happened into Jasper’s, and wished I hadn’t. A second went by before I turned and walked away. It had been a long time since someone had made me forget about Shasta, but it had just happened, and I didn’t like it at all. There was too much confidence in Jasper’s cool grey eyes. I shivered and hurried across the hedged path and up the stairs. Darcy pulled open the door, looked out over my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Maddox wants to talk to you.”

“Could you tell him I’m sorry, and I’ll come—” I said.

“Oh no,” Darcy said. He stepped out and blocked my way through the hall. “This moment. Every second that passes is only making his face more...” he gestured at his face. “Stony? Frightening? Maddox-like? You know what I mean.”

I sighed. “Yes, I know exactly what you mean. All right.” I took a deep breath and walked into the barracks. I heard the entry to the floor below the stairs thud. Jasper would soon be in a cell, chained to a wall, perhaps. *Double chained, I hope.* Maddox was standing in the front room.

“In here, Ravenna,” he said, turning away into the kitchen before I responded. Lex, the smallest of all the guards, sat at the table, drawing carefully in a notebook.

“Hello,” he said softly.

“We need the table,” Maddox said. Lex stood and disappeared into one of the bunk rooms. I sat down in a wooden chair across from Mad and waited. He said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I said, staring at my hands.

“You have no idea what’s happening, do you?” he asked.

I looked up. “Look, I’m trying to—”

“Jasper Solivar is here. He is prepared to set this in motion.”

“He’s in the *dungeon*.” I planted my palm on the table. “He’ll be there for a while.”

Maddox laughed. “A matter of hours. I know him. He is here for a reason.”

“He disobeyed Ashleigh’s orders and he’s been caught.” I snapped. “It’s as simple as that.”

He shook his head. “Jasper could have evaded them forever, could have fled across the Mons, now that—” He stopped. “He came for *you*, Ravenna. He knows about your Mark.”

I froze. “How do you know about that?” I hissed, glancing over his shoulder at Darcy. He wasn’t looking.

“I know what I need to know,” Maddox said. “The point is, Vitrel is going to use you to fulfill the dark Prophecy, with Shasta. Jasper will not let that happen, no matter what you say.”

“So I’ve been told,” I said. “But no one seems to care what *I* think about all of it. I’d follow anyone if they got me and Brend out of here. What is so difficult about that?” I slapped my hand on the table again.

“You’re more than just a girl who has sworn to protect her family,” Maddox said. “What you do affects everyone, the cities, the whole world. You have to do what’s best for *them*, not just yourself.”

“I know that. But why does it have to be me?” I glanced at the bunk rooms, but every door was shut.

“They’re all with us,” Maddox said softly.

“Vitrel will send Brend to Ithacus as soon as I’m missing,” I said. “He’ll probably send Finn, too. How can I leave if I know that will happen?” I put my hands over my face.

“I will watch him for you. I can get down there if need be.”

“No! He’s not going near that lake. I will die first.” I stood again, and he put his hand on my arm.

“Think it through, Ravenna.”

“I’ve been thinking for years, Mad.” My voice sounded dry and weak, like the hedges that lined the courtyard. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Wait for him. I know he has a plan. Who knows? Maybe someday you’ll see the outside.”

I smiled. “Someday, you will too.” He let me go.

“Good night, my lady,” Darcy said as I walked past.

“Stop calling me that.”

He had a girlfriend, a jealous spitfire who worked the floor in the tavern on Kent Street, but he insisted on flirting with every woman he could find. He deserved the bruises he had sometimes.

Maddox’s words swirled in my brain, and I walked the entire length of the cold, empty hallway with my eyes on the stone floor. I took the stairs as fast as I could in the low light, hoping Finn was in bed, sleeping off the alcohol. I had a firm grip on my panic now. I would sleep in Brend’s room tonight. I tripped on the last flight, scraped my hands as I caught myself. The empty stairs still haunted me, though I knew Shasta was downstairs in the basement, gloating over his prize. The door slammed into something as I shoved it, stumbling through. A dark arm reached around me, and my vision blanked for an instant, an overdose of dread.

“Careful,” a boy said softly. I couldn’t see the face because it was hooded in shadow, but I knew that voice.

“Brend! What are you doing out here?”

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m confused about why you aren’t in bed.” His eyes were hidden, and I reached up and jerked back his hood. His dark hair stood up in shocks. He rubbed it down, his wide grey eyes luminous. His raised arm exposed a small, intricate badge on the right breast pocket of his jacket. It was a tree, a replica of those that twisted above the Ambitus. The red thread reflected the light.

“Brend.” My tongue wouldn’t shape the words in my head. “Are you going on patrol?”

He shoved his hands in to his pockets and looked between his feet. “Yes,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell me he assigned you?” My voice was rising.

“I didn’t want you to worry.” He raised his chin “I don’t want to be like them. I just want to learn how to fight and stay alive. So we can escape.” I put my hand on his shoulder, wanting to squeeze hard, but knowing he would only pull away.

“Hreth lives in them, Brend,” I whispered. “What can you learn from them?”

“How to make the nightmares go away,” he whispered back. “I would rather walk the streets than see the darkness in my dreams.”

“Oh, Brend.” I swallowed hard. “They’ll make your dreams darker.”

He looked down again and slipped his hands in his pockets. “I know. I want to find Jasper.”

My eyes widened at the thought of Brend meeting Jasper on one of the dark, muddy streets of Celidom. “Shasta caught him tonight.”

His face came up again, fear in his eyes. “Jasper’s caught?”

I nodded. “Maddox thinks he’ll get out, though. Why do you want to find him?”

“Because he ran away from Ashleigh. Maybe he could help us.”

“I don’t think so, Brend. He doesn’t care about us.”

He started to speak and stopped. “I have to go or they’ll leave without me.”

I curled my fingers around his wrist. “You don’t have to go,” I said. His skin was colder than mine.

“I don’t want to stay inside.”

I sighed and kissed the cheek that he presented me.

“Be careful.”

He edged around me. “You don’t have to tell me.”

I watched until his shadow melted into the dark stairwell. He was so quiet. I suddenly wanted to be safe in my room. I hurried to the end of the hall, stepped inside, and locked and bolted the heavy plank door. I took the lamp off the wall post and fished around in the top drawer of my dresser for matches. Something looked different from the corner of my eye.

My window was open, one shutter still set ajar. The lamp crashed onto the floor as I stumbled back to the door, watching the dark corners on the other side of my bed and the doorway to my bathroom. I pinned my hands against my sides and forced myself to breathe slowly. If someone had come in my window, it was a Temptor. Three stories of stone had been enough to deter even Shannon, and he was the most stubborn person I knew.

“Who is there?” I asked. A thought struck me. *What if it’s Jasper? What if he escaped already?* Cold fear and excitement made my insides writhe. The room felt chilly. I lowered my knees slowly and picked up the lamp without taking my eyes from the darkness on the other

side of the room. I found the matches on my first grasp and lit the lamp without dropping anything. The sputtering of the oil filled the room with sound. I heard nothing from the corners. Finally, my fingers white around the lamp handle, I strode around the bed, holding the light in front of me like a weapon.

Nothing. The floor was bare as always. My little table was still covered in stacks of books. Nothing in the bathroom either. I crept to the window and peered at the ground. The thin grass of the yard was grey in the dim light from the Cald doors. The double doors that led past the barracks were the only entrance into the castle from aboveground. I had searched for other doors as a child and never found any. The only other way out was through the passage to Ithacus, in the dungeon beneath the Cald.

The garden was a sea of dark shapes. I waited for a while, but saw no movement. I scanned my room one more time and latched the shutters behind me. The lamp was burning low since I'd spilled most of the oil when I dropped it. I found the extra oil in the bathroom cabinet and refilled it. I checked the door bolt and the shutter latch one more time, then shut the curtain to the bathroom and ran water for a bath. I held my fingers under the stream and waited for it to get hot. It barely rose above skin temperature, and I groaned.

During warm season, the warmer air took the chill off the water supply, but now fires had to be kept up beneath the tank. My pants were torn and dirty, and my favorite green shirt bore more than the grease stain now.

Somehow Vitrel knew what my mother had hidden even from Nicola, my own father. I wanted to forget the words of the Prophecy, forget my responsibility to keep them from coming true, forget that Maddox was right. I owed the people of Celidom a chance to be free of the dark.

When I was twelve, Shasta stole my doll, smashed it on the library windowsill, and dropped it outside. I went to retrieve its pieces from the bushes and a Tyger was waiting for me. It didn't speak that time, but the way it looked at me made me believe I was a real person, for a moment. I'd seen three more since then, and that feeling returned each time.

I began shivering and realized the water was cold. I put on my pajamas and cracked one of the shutters. Eleven beacons were lit on the timetower by the bridge, their light faintly gleaming on the river.

I hurried to across the hall to Brend's room and shut the door. I locked his shutters and made myself a nest on the foot of the bed. Often, on restless nights when I couldn't bear to be alone, I slipped into Brend's room and watched him sleep until I drifted off myself, even though he was usually annoyed when he woke up to find me there. I hardly expected to sleep now with him out on the streets, but my heart was beating slowly and I drifted away, the end of my braid curling over my hands.