

Chapter Sixteen

"He feels like emptiness."

"He feels different, you know."

Manon looked up with a start at the sound of Luca's voice. She had not heard the hunter approach her place on the wall above the southern gate of Verdienne. Below, the inhabitants of the city—those who had not chosen to flee or who had no choice but to remain—filtered through the gate, giving their names to Captain Lumero and another member of the city watch as they passed through to take up what remained of their lives—whatever was not ash or black glass. They had been promised peace, the message delivered to fearful faces by Vincenzo, and the One Who Came Before had remained out of sight.

Manon had been watching since the first had arrived, straining her senses in an effort to catch a hint of Carrier blood. So far she had detected perhaps one or two among the families and individuals who had walked beneath her. Somehow she did not think the One Who Came Before would be satisfied with such poor results.

"What do you mean?" Manon's gaze dropped to Luca's chest, to the place just above his heart, as she asked the question. The mark was hidden under linen and leather, but she found it difficult not to look. Luca could hardly fail to notice.

"Our friend with the crown," Luca said. "He doesn't feel like you or other Carriers."

Manon frowned. "We all feel different? What do I feel like?"

Luca propped one foot up on the parapet. "Have you ever successfully explained to someone what it feels like to Carry?"

Manon shrugged. Luca waited. "Fine. No," she said.

"You can see the similarity, can't you?"

The frown deepened into a scowl. "Try."

Luca grinned and closed his eyes. The grin faded. His shoulders rose and fell on an inhale and exhale. "You feel like summer rain after a storm has passed." He opened his eyes and Manon was glad he chose to continue, as she had no response to that. "When I first met you, you felt like the storm—no," he hesitated, biting his

lip as he sought other words. “Not the storm, but the air when lightning is near.” He met Manon’s gaze. “Everyone is different. Sounds, smells, animals, feelings. I once met a woman who felt like soap bubbles and a man who felt like the sound of crickets.”

“And him?”

Luca was quiet for a long moment, no longer grinning. “He feels like emptiness,” he said at last. “But not as though he himself is empty.”

The difference between the two seemed negligible to Manon, but the earnest expression on Luca’s face told her not to point that out. She took a deep breath and spoke the words that had been lurking on her tongue since the moment Luca awoke.

“I heard my brother’s voice.”

She kept her gaze fixed on the people below, not willing to confront the disbelief no doubt spreading over the hunter’s face, steeling herself for hearing it in his voice.

“I don’t understand,” Luca said.

“In my head,” Manon added. Which was, she knew, a very unhelpful addition. “But it was him, speaking from somewhere inside that golden skull.” She risked a glance at Luca, expecting to look away again, but he wasn’t looking at her. Instead, he gazed out across the sand and Manon saw him nod—to himself.

“What was that?” she asked.

Luca turned to face her. She might have said he was smiling, if she could bring herself to believe it. “We should leave this place. Nothing good will come of Verdienne. I think you know that. And I wondered why we were still here. But I understand now. And I won’t ask you to leave with me.”

Manon swallowed, the thought of Luca leaving her sucking the saliva from her mouth. “What do you understand?”

Luca laughed a little. Manon could not understand his levity. “For one,” he said, “that you are very stubborn.” His face sobered. “I know you will never leave him, not while you believe your brother survives and can be saved.”

The words—the simple, unassuming articulation of something she herself had not yet known—hit Manon like a wave crashing out of the sea, and a moment passed before Manon felt fully in possession of herself once more. She watched another family pass through the gate, sensed Carrier blood—found she did not much care.

“I suppose you’ll leave today, then,” she said, striving for at least the semblance of indifference.

Luca crossed his arms and remained silent, but his face said enough.

Manon felt herself smile, but a sudden tug on her senses redirected her attention to the gate. A young woman approached, alone, her shaved head catching the sun. But it was what lay within that drew Manon’s eye—a spark and the promise of heat and roaring flames. She felt more than saw Luca shift beside her.

“You feel her, too?”

He nodded. “Unusual. Most often I have to be quite close.”

“She’s strong.”

They watched her give her name to Lumero. She spoke so softly Manon could not make out her voice at all, and she kept her eyes downcast throughout.

“How many have you found?”

Manon shrugged as the young woman disappeared and then emerged in the plaza behind them. “Perhaps four.”

“And he did not say why he wanted them?”

Manon spread her hands before her. “I did not ask.” She could see the unease in Luca, felt the same gnawing in her own mind, but she had kept it carefully shuttered in a dark corner and was unwilling to give it air lest it swell beyond her control. She had needed the man in the crown to help Luca, and now she needed to help Perrin. She would do what was necessary.

Manon pushed off the parapet. “Wish me luck,” she said, turning to descend the stairs to the plaza below.

Manon’s first attempt to hail the young Carrier went entirely unnoticed. The woman was headed north and would soon pass behind the empty statue plinths at the far end and disappear onto a road that angled off to the northeast—whereupon

any number of side streets and alleys would be available to her. Manon picked up her pace and called out a second time just as the young woman reached the surviving statue of the woman mounted on the rearing horse, the black glass glossy in the sun. The woman slowed and shot a look over her shoulder, but then quickened her steps, neck hunched forward, arms drawn tight to her body, as though she was attempting to occupy as little space as possible. Nearly running now, she took the angled street, moving beneath the charred limbs of a line of five trees, husks, really, and then darted into an alley. Manon pursued, her longer strides eating up the ground between them—but she pulled up short when she entered the dim, narrow alley and found it empty.

Ahead of her, the alley ended at a tall brick wall that would have defied any unplanned attempt at climbing. Moving cautiously, Manon began to traverse the distance, approaching a pair of rain barrels and then a half-burned shed as though the young woman might jump out at any moment. But there was no movement, no ambush. And the damage done by the fire was less absolute in that narrow space, leaving windows unbroken and doors firmly fastened. There seemed little opportunity to slip into an empty building to hide.

A faint rattle sounded above Manon, but as she turned to search out the source, all she saw was fire streaking toward her. Manon threw herself sideways, landing heavily against the brick wall, the flames hitting the ground an arm's length from where Manon had been standing. The young woman had missed.

“I won't miss next time.”

Or perhaps not. Manon looked up and saw a figure standing on the roof, framed by the sun, the features difficult to make out. But Manon could make out the second ball of flames cupped in the woman's palm. She embraced her own spark, let its warmth fill her limbs.

“Whoever you are, whatever you want, don't try to follow me.” And then the stranger was gone.

Seething, Manon lurched to her feet, her instincts demanding retaliation, her flames but a heartbeat away—but with nothing to aim at and no where to go, the spark diminished, leaving only her anger. Manon clenched and unclenched her fists

and tried to do the same with her jaw. As she dusted ash from her sleeves, she scanned the wall leading up to the roof and noted what she had not seen earlier—iron bars forming a ladder. No doubt Luca would have a thing or two to say about her poor observation skills.

But when Manon returned to the gatehouse, Luca was no longer alone.

The One Who Came Before stood between the yawning doors of the gate, hands clasped behind his back, his golden gaze fixing on Manon the moment she stepped onto the plaza. Around her, citizens of Verdienne stared, most seeing the man in the crown for the first time, abandoning their attempts at picking through the burnt rubble or sweeping ash from streets turned to glass. Luca remained atop the wall and Manon saw him reach a hand to the mark on his chest.

Manon tried to keep her strides even as the One Who Came Before watched her approach, but by the time she reached him, her palms were damp with sweat and her mouth dry.

“My city is beautiful, is it not?”

This was hardly the line of conversation she had expected. She managed a noncommittal noise.

“Soon she will rise from the ashes.”

Ashes of his creation, but it seemed unwise to call that particular detail into question.

“Now my people must begin to know me.” He gestured across the plaza at the dozen or so men and women congregated near the remains of the statues. “How many have you found?”

The abrupt shift unsettled Manon, not least because she knew her answer to be inadequate.

“Four,” she said. If the man in front of her was not wearing a golden skull and was not capable of tuning brick and stone and wood to glass, she might have felt rather like a child under scrutiny for a particularly poor showing on a mathematics equation. As it was, the golden skull was grinning at her and the glass under her feet flashed in the sun, which meant Manon felt only that she might be next.

If her answer displeased him, she could see no sign of it, only a slight shift in his shoulders, a subtle tilt to the head. It was easy enough, however, to imagine the face beneath darkening with disappointment.

“What will you do with them?” She asked the question for Luca, rather than for herself.

Now the skull did move, coming around to face Manon full on, the dark eyes bringing their full weight to rest on her.

“It’s a little late for that question, don’t you think?” The rumbling voice seemed to vibrate through Manon’s bones, but no fire or fury followed. Instead, he returned his attention to the plaza. “But if you’re in the mood for questions, you may ask one for every Carrier you bring me.”

“And you’ll answer?” Manon asked.

Another heavy glance, this one longer than the first, so long Manon wondered what he saw that gave him such pause. She fought to keep all thought of the bronze disc in her pocket from her mind, which of course meant that was all she could think of. Once she would have thought it irrational to fear another might be capable of perceiving her thoughts—but once she would have thought it impossible influence the flight of birds or to burn stone black glass. The parameters of what was possible were no longer what the world knew to be true. At last he said, “I suppose we’ll find out.”

In other circumstances, this answer might have been given in tandem with a laugh or a wink or any number of playful additions. There was none of this. Only the grim certainty that Manon would, indeed, find out.

“Where do I bring them?” Manon asked. She had two days to—to what? Convince the Carriers to follow her when she could not tell them why? And if they did not cooperate? Was she to use force? At least one, Manon knew, would not come willingly.

The man in the mask hesitated—well, she supposed he did, somewhere beneath the smooth gold—then looked around, as though this was not a detail that had occurred to him, indeed, as if the very thought was beneath him.

“Here,” he said. As simple as that. Manon got the sense that he would have answered the same if they had been standing on the beach or atop the city wall or in the burned out remains of a home.

She nodded to show her understanding, but the man in the crown was already moving away, his attention suddenly fixed elsewhere, his long strides carrying him across the plaza. Men and women scattered before him, avoiding that dark gaze, scurrying like small animals with no where to hide—all except one man. Manon had seen him earlier, taken note of his bulky figure and the scar on his cheek as he returned to Verdienne. Now he watched the One Who Came Before—from the comfort of a good deal of distance, it had to be said. His expression was not one of calculation, Manon saw. No, it was admiration that arranged his features into a cruel smile.

The man who was not her brother had reached the far end of the plaza. He stared up at the glass face of the remaining statue, the only movement about him the gentle ripple of the hem of his cloak in the breeze, a ripple that surged into a wave as Manon watched, the black fabric snapping away from his body at an angle in the sudden stiff wind. A wind only he felt, Manon realized. Cold fear curled in her stomach as she glanced around the plaza. Nothing else moved. No ash drifted through the air. A ruined canvas awning just beyond the statues hung at a crooked angle, undisturbed. Manon glanced over her shoulder. The banner above the gatehouse remained listless. The wind belonged to him and him alone.

The One Who Came Before held that position for longer than Manon would have considered natural—but then, there was nothing natural about him. When he did move, the air around him died and a moment later he vanished from sight, disappearing into the depths of the city he had claimed as his own.

Only later, when Manon stood at the base of the statue of the woman on horseback did she realize what he had done.

The glass woman was changed. Small changes, only, the shape of the nose, the sharpness of the cheekbones, the height of the forehead, but together they made the woman’s face more severe and less joyous—and the face of someone else

entirely. Whoever this hero of Verdienne had been, whatever she had done to be immortalized in stone, she was gone.

The first was easy.

Manon found him in the charred husk of what had been his butcher shop, directed there by Captain Lumero and her list of citizens who had returned to the city—after a brief disagreement about the color of his beard. Manon had not realized such vehement opinions might be held as what, exactly, qualified as the color auburn.

All in all, Captain Lumero and Vincenzo had calculated, based on death estimates and the relatively small number that had chosen to leave Verdienne with nothing but the clothes on their backs, that roughly half of the citizens of the small city remained, and once Manon had remembered to add that the man with the auburn beard—or what Manon considered auburn—had carried a large knife in his belt, Lumero had felt certain she was speaking of a man known as Romano the butcher.

Romano's Carrier gift was small in the grand scheme of things, so small she was not certain she had felt it at all until she stepped across the threshold of the burned out shop. The butcher sat on the floor, head in his hands, elbows propped on his knees, the very picture of a man who has lost everything. The fire had raged here, and half the floorboards had turned to glass. Ash still choked the air. But despite the butcher's grief, or perhaps because of it, Manon felt the glimmer of Carrier blood once more.

He looked up at the sound of Manon's footsteps, seeing her through eyes glassy with tears. Manon told herself not to look away.

"Romano. That is your name, yes?"

He gave a slow nod.

“Do not waste time grieving over this,” Manon said. The words were callous, she knew, but hers was not a tongue accustomed to giving comfort. “It is gone, and you must accept that.”

Fresh tears spilled down his cheeks and his head sank to his chest.

“There is a way forward, a future, if you will but seize it.”

A few snuffles later and Romano had wiped some of the salty tracks from his cheeks. “What are you saying?”

Manon had puzzled over this particular question herself. But with Romano the answer was simple. The man’s Carrier gift was so small, so deeply buried, any clear reference to it was likely to draw suspicion, or, at the least, more questions. Better to be opaque. “There is someone who would like to meet you.”

The butcher’s face creased with a slight frown. “To offer work?”

Manon nodded, rather than speak words she doubted held any veracity.

Romano pushed himself up off the floor and dusted his palms together. He looked around his shop, his gaze lingering on memories Manon could not see. At last his dark eyes fell on her once more.

“I will follow where you lead.” He kept his chin up as he spoke, finding comfort, Manon supposed, in what dignity he could muster, even if it was only an illusion.

Manon nodded. “Tomorrow. The south plaza. Mid-day.”

The second was much the same as Romano the butcher. A dressmaker, her shop turned to glass, a casualty of a fire so hot that rather than reduce the mannequins and their frocks to ash, the smooth faces in the storefront that had once been porcelain stared back at Manon with glassy eyes. The satin and brocades, the buttons and ribbons—all were black and solid and swirling with unnatural light.

Manon had found her by the western gate, where a few enterprising citizens of the city had established a makeshift market, albeit one that traded in donations and fair exchanges of household goods and food. Manon saw a young man offering carpentry services in return for sustenance and a girl of no more than perhaps ten years with a net full of crabs.

The dressmaker had escaped the small apartment above her shop with her life savings, only to find her coin to be less valuable than the sacks of grain and live

chickens being bartered over, and Manon had spotted her at the fringe of the crowd, her purse clutched tight in her hands, strands of black-grey hair slipping free from what had once been a tight bun. The offer of fish—fresh-caught by Luca that afternoon—had been enough to draw her away from the market and back to her shop.

“I should be dead,” she told Manon as they both surveyed the shimmering glass.

“But you are not,” Manon replied. “Surely there is hope to be found in that.” The meaningless platitude slipped off Manon’s tongue with ease.

By the time Manon introduced the dressmaker to Luca—as the heat of the day dissipated and the sand began to grow cool to the touch—she had agreed to be in the southern plaza at mid-day. If Luca was quiet as they shared the fish and a handful of wild mushrooms while seated around a small fire on the beach, Manon was determined not to think of it. If Luca was quick to escort the woman back into the walls and help her find shelter among the families offering it—and slow to return—Manon was resolved not to care.

The third...the third was a different matter entirely.

The third Carrier was a child. A boy of few enough years that Manon doubted he understood what had happened to his city—or his home, which the glass had left untouched but the fire had not.

He was sitting on the stoop of that home when she found him in the morning—the morning the price was due. Chin in one hand, head down, one finger tracing shapes in the coating of ash that covered the stone steps. From behind him emerged voices, older ones, frightened, angry voices. Manon heard something about a sister in Toridium, heard the other say they did not have the coin to make the journey, much less start a new life somewhere else. The boy kept his attention on his drawings, scuffing them over with a shoe when he was unsatisfied, or perhaps satisfied, Manon supposed she didn’t know.

She had hoped, when she first felt the Carrier skill emanating from the three figures—the boy clutching his father’s hand as the mother bought a jug of milk for three times its worth—it wouldn’t be the child. Further observation made this an impossibility, as she saw the boy, his father distracted, wave his fingers at the

surface of a barrel of water he could barely see over. The subsequent ripples could not be attributed to wind, and the giggle that erupted from the child's lips was proof enough. She wondered if the parents had even noticed their child's talent.

A child. She had not prepared for this. Still, she had her directive. And if Manon's life did not depend on delivering, the chance to ask questions of the One Who Came Before—questions that might help her free Perrin from his unnatural prison—certainly did.

She could remember Perrin at that age. More solemn than this child. Quiet. Observant. The mischief and laughter had come later, born from Victor's example and encouragement. But where Victor's mischief had turned dark, Perrin's was a purer heart—bright and unblemished until the day their father was dragged from their summer home on Isle de Gaustin and imprisoned. The brightness had begun to fade then, and over time her brother had learned to wear a mask, a façade built on indifference, and Manon had come to see this as the greatest casualty of Julian Barca's crimes.

Four was better than three.

But perhaps three was enough.

Manon turned away.

That left only the fourth. Manon had not seen the young woman again since their encounter in the alley, which in itself was not surprising. Verdienne was no market town. But her inquiries as to the identity and whereabouts of a young woman with a shaved head and a nervous disposition were met with shrugs, apologetic shakes of the head, and not a single piece of useful information.

She tried to consult Captain Lumero and the roster of names the city watch had collected, but the captain was engaged in coordinating cleaning efforts and was not interested in giving Manon's trivial needs any of her time, a fact that she communicated with curt disdain that set Manon's teeth on edge.

At a loss, Manon even made mention of the young woman's Carrier skills, but this, too, seemed to be a dead end. It was as though she did not exist. And Manon was running out of time.

Two was enough. Surely. Two questions were better than none.

The sun was at its peak when Manon made her way to the plaza. Romano was there ahead of her, milling about aimlessly, and the dressmaker arrived shortly after Manon. The butcher's pacing became intolerable to Manon almost instantly as they waited at the ruined fountain, and by the time the One Who Came Before arrived—striding with purpose through the gate—she was ready to be gone.

The man who called himself king had other ideas.

Manon had taken only two steps when his voice called after her.

“You will stay.”

And so she did. Because though every fiber of her being screamed at her to be away from that place, there was something new in his voice, something cold and fierce and implacable, and Manon did not have the will to defy it.

The man in the crown looked at the dressmaker and the butcher. They stared down at the ground, their fear palpable.

“Two,” he said, his displeasure shaping his voice into something sharp.

It was in that moment Manon saw her.

There, at the edge of the crowd that was forming across the plaza.

Unremarkable and plain, but for her shaved head.

“Three,” Manon said, with eyes only for the other Carrier. “This one fought and fled.”

The One Who Came Before followed her gaze. “You said four.”

“I was wrong.” Manon didn't move, didn't blink, but she knew if he could hear her heartbeat he would know her words to be a lie. But the golden gaze remained fixed on the young woman. Manon was not the quarry in his sights.

For a moment, Manon thought he would order her to bring the woman to him, which Manon could not imagine doing without the use of her Carrier abilities—which she was desperate to keep concealed. But it seemed he was willing to do his own work. Manon once more experienced the decidedly uncomfortable sensation that the skull's grin had grown wider—and then she heard the dressmaker cry out.

Manon spun, saw the two Carriers struggle where they stood, saw fear contort their faces, saw ashes rise from the drifts around the fountain and form dark clouds around their legs. Romano strained, his arms reaching for Manon, and she

understood they were immobilized, leashed to the stones at their feet. And from across the plaza, another cry rang in the air.

More ashes forming, reaching out to snare the young woman with black tendrils. Manon saw her turn and try to run, saw the crowd begin to scatter, saw the man in the golden skull extend one hand.

She did not get far.

The ash cloud surged upward, enveloping the Carrier, and for a moment there was silence. Then a scream and a burst of fire from within the swirling ashes, but it was not enough. The One Who Came Before snapped his fingers into a steel fist and the ashes collapsed to reveal the young woman on the ground, obscured within thick ropes of ash that bound her tight—and with a slight twist of his wrist, the cloud of ash retreated, dragging her across the plaza with the speed of an arrow shot from a bow.

The ash deposited the young woman in a heap at the crowned man's feet, facedown, what skin could be seen through the unnatural bindings smudged and scraped raw. Manon jerked back, recoiling from the sudden violence, aware in a way she had not been that this would be her fate if she made a single mistake.

With the three Carriers rendered helpless, the One Who Came Before flexed his gauntlet and rolled his shoulders, a motion exaggerated by the black steel he wore, and then he reached up to the bronze disc hanging from his neck and lifted it free, up over the golden skull, up over the sharp shards of his silver crown.

“What are you going to do to them?” Manon heard herself whisper. The golden skull looked up, that resonant stillness emanating from somewhere deep within, and for a moment Manon was certain he had forgotten she was there. She didn't expect an answer. Wasn't sure she wanted one.

“What I have always done.”

And with that he stepped close to the butcher, one hand on the back of his neck, pulling him close in a strange sort of embrace, the other hand darting toward the man's abdomen—like an assassin with a blade. Only he wielded the bronze disc instead of a knife.

Romano screamed, his face contorting into a hideous maw, his burly form sagging against cold steel armor, eyes rolling back into his head. The One Who Came Before held him upright, steel-clad fingers entwined in the butcher's hair, and waited while the scream faded into mewling gasps. Then, with tenderness that frightened Manon more than the butcher's pain, he lowered Romano to the ground.

Manon saw the butcher's eyelids flutter, saw the black circle burned into his flesh, saw his fingers curl against the ground—and then lived it all over again as the One Who Came Before turned to the dressmaker. When she, too, lay on the ground, her chest rising and falling in the shallowest of breaths, at last he approached the young woman.

He took his time with her. Went to one knee beside her. Watched her twist and squirm in the grasp of the ash ropes that still held her tight. Stroked a gauntleted finger along her scalp. Gently, he slid one hand under her back and lifted her torso from the ground—as easily as a child lifts a straw doll—and when he brought the disc to her stomach, he leaned close, his golden face nearly touching hers.

When the young woman screamed, Manon was ready for it. But she was not prepared for the second voice she heard.

“Manon.” Perrin's voice. Just as before. Nothing but her name, a soft whisper that caressed her mind. Manon sucked in a breath, felt eyes on her, lifted her gaze just enough to see Luca at the western edge of the plaza. Even at that distance, Manon felt the weight of his sorrow. The screams went silent.

The man with the golden skull set the young woman's shivering body alongside the other two. All three clung to life. He stood, unfurling his full height, the disc in his hand radiating light as he hung it around his neck once more. Slowly, as though the air offered resistance, he spread his arms wide, his steel fingers stretching toward the ground.

Manon held her breath. Nothing happened—nothing, that is, until the disc flashed with blinding white light. Manon dropped to a crouch, one arm shielding her eyes. But this was no attack. As she blinked away the white spots in her vision, she saw something form in each of his hands, growing, extending—a thing Manon's

mind could not comprehend even as her eyes witnessed it—until he held a sword in each hand. Long and sharp, with wicked notches in the steel near the hilts.

He looked down at his work, admiring them, judging them, Manon supposed, twisting his wrists right and left, the dark steel swallowing the light. He turned his attention to the Carriers at his feet. And then the One Who Came Before cut their throats with three furious, savage strokes.