



The Dawn Chorus

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Description: An ebook exclusive which bridges the story between the previous and forthcoming instalments of Samantha Shannon's international phenomenon series The Bone Season

Paige Mahoney and Arcturus Mesarthim have arrived in the Scion Citadel of Paris. Exhausted by her efforts against Scion, Paige has no choice but to remain in hiding, away from the revolution she started, so she can heal and come to terms with her mental and physical scars.

In the confines of a safe house, Arcturus and Paige begin to reconnect after following separate paths for weeks. As they wait for contact from the mysterious Domino Programme – an espionage network operating in Scion – they remember their complicated past, and what brought them together.

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Chapter 1

Here Lies the Heart

There is a narrow street in Paris named Rue Gît-le-Cœur. In early 2060, it was home to a tiny bookshop, a flophouse even the rats avoided, and not a great deal else. No one had much reason to linger on that street.

Except, of course, for two fugitives from Inquisitorial justice – Warden and me. It was on Rue Gît-le-Cœur that I was to fight a different sort of war to the one we had been waging against Scion: a war against my own body and mind after twenty-three days of imprisonment.

Twenty-three days. Just over three weeks. I thought that was right – that I had worked it out. There had been no tally marks on those blind walls, no grooves from desperate fingernails. Only the dates I held in my mind. The dates and the darkness between them.

I had escaped at the eleventh hour. I was getting fairly good at that. Scarlett Burnish – the most unlikely saviour in Scion – had smuggled me out of the Westminster Archon to Dover, and I had boarded a cargo ship with Warden and sailed away from England.

Now I had to prove my life had been worth the risk. I had to mend, and quickly, so I could get back to the war beyond the window. The war he and I had rekindled together.

SCION CITADEL OF PARIS

2JANUARY2060

My first thought, in the pitch-dark room, was that my execution must be close – though, to Scion, I was already a corpse. They were keeping me in cold storage, as if I would begin to rot at the merest breath of warmth.

My second thought was that I was awake, and that meant pain was coming. My muscles tightened, braced for hands to drag me to the waterboard, for boots and fists to try again to force my secrets out.

I assumed it was day when the Vigiles came, when the Rephaite guards were resting and the humans could reign as they pleased in the basement. Hard to be sure without natural light. In the black silence of my cell, there were few means of reckoning time. Still, they would come, and when they did, they would no longer pretend these private sessions were interrogations. I was their amusement in this place.

Let them go too far and kill me this time. Let me escape into the æther before the executioner got to me. Let Nashira hear that she would never dreamwalk. My escape – the spy, the tunnel, the ship – had been one more drug-induced delusion. A story I had told myself.

Except I was sure I was seeing a clock. Red digits told me it was 01:06. And I could hear something, beyond my own heartbeat – a wide and shapeless roar. The unmistakable rumble of a citadel.

It came back to me then, as I made out the snarl of a moto in the distance and felt the duvet over my body. I remembered how I had reached this bed. Speckled with goosebumps, I lay still, savouring the not-silence of freedom. I had never thought I would hear a citadel sing to me again.

It was real. I was in Paris.

I soon realised that sleep had been a mercy. Every inch of me was in distress, right down to my knuckles, my fingertips. Every breath stabbed deep into my chest. Through a dense headache, I tried to understand why it should hurt so much to breathe. My breastbone might be bruised. Cracked ribs. There had been so many beatings in those final days. Then there was the chill in my left hand, where the poltergeist had cut me, which had climbed right the way to my shoulder, leaving the whole arm stiff and numb.

My bladder was full. That was what had woken me. The pressure raised my heartbeat.

Even swine have the dignity to soil themselves outside. Wetness on my brow. If only the concubine could see you now. I doubt even his standards are this low. Suhail Chertan had said many things to me while I was lashed to the waterboard, but that remark clung to the front of my mind. I doubt even his standards are this low.

It must have been over a week before he had banished me to a cell. The only cleaning the board had received, in that time, was when he pulled the lever. They had let me wash once in the twenty-three days I had been imprisoned, just before my audience with Jaxon. No doubt he had wanted me presentable, lest he be put off his breakfast. By the time of my rescue, I had been a bloody, reeking, broken shell.

Warden knew what it was to be tortured and humiliated. He must understand that I had been in that state because I had been mistreated, not through any fault of my own.

No. He saw you for what you are, Suhail sneered. Saw the damp rot of mortality.

He might have been standing at my bedside. There he was, in the shadows, waiting to fill my stomach with foul water. I had to switch on the lamp, to exorcise him, but when I tried, my shoulder objected. My arms had been strained over my head for days.

Leave a human for too long, and you will see its true nature. The blood-sovereign taught me this. The scrape of a baton along the wall. You leak fluids like corpses even before you die. You paint and wash and scent yourselves to keep the rot at bay, yet still it stalks you.

I hated that it had been Suhail, who seemed to wield no power or respect among the Rephaim. He was a low-ranking brute. Instead of questioning me herself, affording me that thin façade of respect, Nashira had passed me off to an underling. Made me fear a nobody.

Cheeks damp, I blew out a shaking breath. I was no closer to reaching the bathroom.

In the Westminster Archon, I had divided my imprisonment into steps. Survive the torture. Resist the drugs. Withstand the beatings. Could I do the same with my healing? I wasn't sure I knew where to start. Endure the pain. Crush the fear ...

First I had to get back to sleep. I listened to the silence in the room. I controlled my breathing as best I could. I pressed my cheek into the softness of the pillow, reminding myself that I was no longer in a cell – but my throat burned with thirst and I was sore all over and the pressure wasn't going anywhere.

I would have to drag myself to the bathroom.

Sweat beaded on my brow. When I tilted my hips, pain shot up my spine. My swollen wrist refused to brace me. My back ached. Until now, I had never appreciated how many complicated little movements were involved in things I had once done without a second thought, like getting out of bed and walking. I had taken my strength for granted.

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Jaw set, I inched towards the edge of the mattress. I was Underqueen of the Scion Citadel of London. I could get across a corridor.

Before I knew it, I had slipped right off the bed. I had no time to steel myself before I hit the floor.

Every bruise and cut ignited in a single, white-hot eruption. My ribs screamed. It hurt so much that I almost deserted my body, but weakness kept me imprisoned. All I could do was lie in a heap by the bed, tangled in the duvet, and wait for the echoes to dwindle.

The door cracked open. ‘Paige?’

It was a moment before I could speak without feeling like I was going to throw up. ‘I’m fine.’

Warden came to kneel at my side. ‘I think not.’ His voice was low, as if I were still asleep. ‘Tell me what you need.’

‘Bathroom. And s-scimorphine. Hurts.’

‘What does?’

‘Everything. Everywhere. I can’t—’

He watched me try to muster enough breath to speak. At last, he reached for my arms. Against my will, I shrank from him, and he withdrew as well, as if we had stung one

another.

‘It isn’t you,’ I whispered.

His gaze flicked across my face. It was him – of course it was – but it wasn’t his fault that his nearness filled me with self-loathing.

I nodded for him to try again. He cupped my elbows to support me, letting me wobble to my feet at my own pace. I gripped his arms as hard as my brittle fingers would allow.

Ever since he had first held me in the Guildhall, his touch had been my tonic. Now I was afraid I might shrivel from the shame it raised in me. All I could think was how repugnant he must find me, tear-stained and runny-nosed, leaking fluids down my shirt.

Stop it, I told myself. Stop.

Warden wrapped one arm around my waist and let me take the other. I was uncomfortably aware of my sweat-matted curls, the crust of blood on my bottom lip. He helped me limp across the dark corridor and sit on the edge of the bath. All the while, his gentleness confused me. My body was rigid, trapped in expectation of a blow, a shout, a needle. In the basement, all contact had brought pain.

‘I will prepare the scimorphine,’ Warden said. ‘And an antiseptic. For your arm.’

I raised a hand to cover the bandage. A shard of glass had pierced deep into the flesh.

‘Okay,’ I said.

As soon as his hands left me, I felt the cold. In the past, I would have basked in a hot

bath if I had a chill like this.

The bathroom was so dark I almost took another fall. When I was done, I crawled to the door and slumped beside it, panting.

Warden soon returned. Too exhausted for pride, or to stand alone, I let him scoop me off the floor and carry me back to bed.

My room had a parquet floor and palest green walls, capped with ornate cornices. The bed was right beside a window, but I had never looked out – we kept the curtains and shutters closed to stop anyone glimpsing us. Only hairlines of light ever came in.

Warden switched the lamp on and sat on the bed to ready the scimorphine. He inserted the needle into the vial and drew out a measure of the most effective painkiller in Scion. Seeing it reminded me of the colony, where he had tended to me himself when I was hurt. One of the clearer pieces of evidence that he was different from his fellow Rephaim.

When the syringe was loaded, he extended a hand. I could only give him a blank look.

‘Unless you would sooner inject it yourself,’ he said.

When his meaning sank in, I shook my head. I was too fatigued for that level of accuracy. He looked down at my inner arm, at the tailback of bruises in the crease of my elbow. There was a tense silence – I could see him counting – before he swabbed my wrist instead.

‘You told me you were sedated in the Archon,’ he said. ‘Do you know how often they dosed you?’

‘No. I never knew what time it was.’

He slid the needle into my vein. ‘Did you ever hear the name of the drug?’

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There was a slight throb before numbness blossomed from the needle. ‘Not the sedative,’ I said. ‘They used flux, though, I think. To make me ... amenable to interrogation.’

If I had any pride left, it was in the fact that they hadn’t wrung a single piece of information from me. In the end, none of their violence – against my body or my mind – had got them what they wanted.

‘Tell me something.’ If I kept my voice to the barest whisper, I could stand to talk. ‘You were waiting for me. When I escaped. How did you all get back from Edinburgh?’

Warden set the syringe aside.

‘When you fell,’ he said, ‘there was chaos. Your supporters in the crowd attacked the soldiers, and they retaliated with lethal force.’ He pressed a gauze to the drop of blood on my wrist. ‘You were taken to a helicopter before any of us could reach you.’

I had no memory of that. Nothing after the gunshot, not until I woke up on the waterboard.

‘Since Scion had cancelled all train departures from Edinburgh, we returned to the safe house,’ he went on. ‘At dawn, a human arrived, claiming to work for a friend of Alsafi. He drove us back to London.’

Scimorphine was a swift-acting drug. The wound at the top of my arm was already cooling down.

‘Before he got me to safety,’ I said, ‘Alsafi asked me to tell you that he hoped it ... redeemed him.’

Warden looked up at that.

‘I see,’ he said.

Silence reigned as I tried to work out what to say. Alsafi had sacrificed himself to get me away from Nashira. I had no idea how close he and Warden had been, or how Rephaim mourned.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘That he’s gone.’

A small nod was his only response.

‘We reported all that had happened to the Glym Lord,’ he continued. ‘Maria dissuaded him – dissuaded all of us, in fact – from attempting to rescue you. She guessed that you had intended to be captured, and believed we should let you complete your task.’

Glym was a good man. A good leader. If Scion had given me the noose, he would have sent people to cut my corpse down. I was glad Maria had talked him out of a rescue. None of them would have made it back.

‘Did you agree?’ I asked.

He busied himself with re-packing the scimorphine kit.

‘I have great faith in you. In your resilience, your resourcefulness,’ he said, ‘but I did not believe you would be able to damage the core of Senshield, nor even to get close to it. I knew you would be physically incapacitated, even if you did survive the

torture. So I proposed a hostage exchange. My life for yours. Terebell concurred with Maria and forbade it. I might have defied her, had an alternative not arisen.'

'You're a fool. Nashira would have just' – I paused for a shallow breath – 'killed us both.'

'Perhaps folly is catching, Paige Mahoney.'

More than anything, then, I wanted to touch him. Just to take his hand.

'For days, we waited underground,' he said. 'At last, news arrived that all Senshiel scanners had failed. And we knew that you had kept your promise to deactivate it.'

The scimorphine was pouring through me now. One by one, each flame in my skin was quenched.

'The stranger from Edinburgh then revealed his true purpose,' Warden said. 'He said that a plan was in motion to retrieve you, but your life depended on our compliance with his orders. This, I presume, was the plan for Scarlett Burnish to remove you from Inquisitorial custody.'

'He was bluffing. Burnish had already been told to save me.'

'We could not risk it.'

He said it as if it were the simplest thing in the world. They had been willing to trade their freedom and power for my life.

'Thank you,' I said. 'For not giving up on me.'

'Never.'

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I wished he would hold me. I wished I could bear it.

My blood was slowing, thickening. Having quelled the small wounds, the scimorphine was grinding the edges off the deeper ones. My body reached for nothingness again.

‘Warden,’ I whispered, ‘do you remember when I picked up that infection in the colony?’

Senseless question – he was an oneiromancer, of course he remembered – but Warden nodded.

‘I do,’ he said. ‘I feared the rebellion might lose you that night.’

‘Mm.’

My breathing softened. The knife prodding my chest was almost blunt.

‘Paige,’ Warden said, just as I began to nod off, ‘you cannot hold out much longer without water. It has already been more than a day.’

Underneath the drug, fear stirred.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Warden, I can’t—’

In a flash, I was in the basement again, shackled to the board. My hands screwed into fists. Suddenly I was shaking too hard to draw breath, let alone get a word out.

‘Paige, I am not going to force you,’ Warden said, bringing me back to the present. My hands uncurled. ‘There is apparatus in here for intravenous hydration. May I use it?’

It took me too long to grasp what he was asking. He would need to insert a cannula while I slept. I had been pierced with so many needles in the Archon, drugged against my will. He was asking for my consent. He wanted me to know I had the power to refuse.

‘Yes,’ I breathed. ‘It’s all right.’

Darkness rubbed out what scant light remained. Stone-limbed, I sank into the pillow. Into sleep.

Into memory.

PENAL COLONY OF SHEOL I

5AUGUST2059

Sunshine trickled between the bars on my window. I lay in a nest of sheets, sore and confused.

For a long while, I couldn’t think where I was. When I remembered that I was still in the Residence of Magdalen – still trapped in Sheol I – I grimaced and turned over.

My father was standing beside my bed.

The first interesting thing about this situation was that my father was somehow not in London. The second was that his eyes were gone. For a long time, he just stood there, as motionless as I was. When he did open his mouth, worms pearled from inside it.

‘Níl an fhírinne ar eolas agat, a Mhathúinín,’ he croaked. His empty sockets oozed rot.

He hadn’t uttered a word in Irish for eleven years. This couldn’t be real.

‘Inis dom, a athair,’ I murmured.

‘Ní an ceathrú glas, ach an ceann deireanach.’ He reached for me with a decayed hand. ‘Tá an milleán go léir ortsa.’

His fingers gripped my throat. I felt nothing. He splintered into a swarm of flies.

I drifted in the grey unknown between sleep and strange things. Jaxon skipped in and chanted a dirge about fire and candles, leaving me in fits of laughter. Eliza screamed in another room.

Warden had warned me about the outbreak in the Rookery. A swarm of rats had got into the shantytown and brought the sickness with them. Among its possible symptoms were stomach cramps, hallucinations and severe vomiting. It could be fatal, especially in those who were already weak from malnutrition. Since my life was too important to risk, Warden had asked me to stay indoors. I had responded by wrapping up the meal he had given me, ransacking his dwindling supplies, and sneaking out while he was gone.

A cacophony of retching had filled the Rookery. More than half of the harlies were stricken. The Rephaim, naturally, had barred themselves into their residences and done a whole lot of nothing to help.

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I had thought I could avoid infection. I had been sure that if I didn't eat or drink anything, I would be fine. Clearly not. I must have touched something contaminated, or breathed the sickness in.

Warden had limited supplies, but among them were a sizeable box of anti-nausea pills and some packets of rehydration salts. After tending to as many of the harlies as I could, I had gone to see my friends. Liss was well enough. Julian, however, had been heaving over a pot when I arrived. We had helped him to drink tiny sips of skilly.

I needed them to be all right. I needed them both to make it out of here alive with me.

The bell pealed for dusk. Even though I was weak as a lamb, thirst hauled me out of bed.

A roaring fire lit the chamber below, and 'In the Chapel in the Moonlight' drifted from the gramophone. Warden was writing in a book with ruffled pages.

'Good evening, Paige,' he said.

'I'm not well.'

'I am sorry to hear it. What are your symptoms?'

'I feel sick to my stomach, my head is about to explode, and I'm having visions,' I said, 'so unless I've turned into an oracle, I'm either ill or mad. Madness is a possibility, of course, since I've now been a prisoner for ... what, five months?'

‘I think it more likely that you paid a visit to the Rookery.’ When I said nothing, he set down his pen. ‘Do you take pleasure in opposing me, even when what I ask is for your benefit?’

‘I do take a little pleasure in it,’ I confessed, ‘but on this occasion, I wasn’t thinking about you at all. I’m just not willing to skulk up here while my friends are in danger.’

‘So you chose to put yourself in danger, despite the fact that our plan hinges on your survival.’

‘And you’ve never put yourself at risk to help somebody else?’

It was his turn not to reply.

Of course he had. He had done all this before. Staked everything on a rebellion that had ultimately failed.

‘I would offer you some remedy,’ Warden said, ‘but my stores appear to have been emptied.’ He looked hard at me. ‘I know our understanding is by no means equal to a friendship, but I do not appreciate being stolen from. Not now we have a common purpose.’

‘Shouldn’t have brought a thief into your tower, then, should you?’ I steadied myself on the wing chair. ‘If I’d asked, you might have refused. Like you refused to bring Liss and Julian in here.’

‘A decision I have already explained.’

‘An explanation I’ve already decided is bullshit.’

‘You are entitled to your opinion.’

‘Well, thank you. I really needed you to remind me that I’m permitted an opinion.’

Warden held my gaze for a moment, then returned his attention to whatever he was writing.

He was trying. I knew what a risk he had already taken for Liss, and it was hard enough for him to keep me and Michael safe without arousing suspicion. Still, sometimes my bitterness about being here boiled over, and he was the one it tended to scald.

I was bitter. Yet part of me was relieved that he had brought me back – because even if escape had been at my fingertips in London, I saw now that seizing it would have been the wrong choice. It would have meant abandoning Liss and Julian. Abandoning them all. This place would have haunted me, and I might never have been able to get back to it.

No. I needed to finish this first, to destroy this horrific place from within. Then I would leave, and I would take everyone with me. All of us would escape to London.

‘I was trying to protect you,’ I told Warden. He stopped. ‘The harlies saw you heal Liss. That might have put you in good standing, but you need to secure their loyalty, Warden.’

‘I offer them freedom. Surely that outplays whatever Nashira can use to tempt them.’

‘Right. As if the harlies would refuse food if she offered it. Or blankets. Or a cup of clean water.’ When he just looked at me, I shook my head. ‘You know, for this ... ancient being of the eternal twilight, or whatever, you’re naïve to the point of being absurd.’

‘Educate me, then.’

‘Fine. You’re asking the harlies to choose life-threatening change over the status quo. The status quo – while terrible – is slightly easier to bear than death and torture.’

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‘Arguably.’

‘If you want them to choose the hard option, and if you want them to resist the temptation to sell you out, then they need immediate, tangible incentives, not some vague hope of freedom. The medicine I distributed will help keep the harlies on side. I’m going to assume that last time you rebelled against your fiancée, you tried to pay your army with promises. I’ve spent long enough in the syndicate to know that never works.’

‘Bribery insinuates vulnerability,’ he stated. ‘Will this not leave you open to blackmail?’

‘I didn’t tell them why I gave them the medicine. They don’t know for sure that I’m bribing them, even if they suspect. What they know is that I’m helping them. Now.’

Only the gramophone broke the silence for a while. Eventually, Warden said, ‘I trusted that you would apply your lessons from the syndicate. Do as you must.’

Even as I nodded, a high-pitched whistle filled my ears. The wooden floor roiled under my feet.

‘How long do we have left?’ I asked him, even as darkness blotched my vision. ‘Before I face her.’

‘A month.’

My skin tingled. In one sense, it would be the longest month of my life – the final

stretch of my captivity – but it wasn't enough time to turn a troupe of starving prisoners into rebels. And now, when I should be out there helping them remember their worth, I had no strength of my own.

A jug stood at the end of the desk. As I made for it, my legs wobbled and my head doubled in weight. I glimpsed a forked rash across my neckline – like a bolt of lightning – before the rug came rushing towards me.

When I woke, I was on the daybed, covered to the waist by a heavy mantle, and Warden was in a chair beside me. The muscles of my neck were firm as bone, my stomach tight.

‘Mm.’ I touched my throbbing head. ‘Did I pass out?’

‘Not for long.’ Warden dimmed the oil lamp. ‘No need to thank me for catching you.’

‘You don't get a medal for being decent.’

‘I should think not.’

I turned into a blade around him, always quick to cut. After months of mutual dislike, it was hard to shake that instinct.

Warden had banked the fire, leaving us in near-darkness. Seeing me shiver, he tucked the mantle around my shoulders. He did it in a detached manner – I was cold, he was solving the problem – but he was gentle. Since healing Liss, he had never removed his gloves again.

‘I presume you can't catch this,’ I said.

‘Correct.’

‘Still afraid to touch me, though.’

I expected him to ignore the taunt. Instead, he looked me straight in the eye.

‘Do you desire for me to touch you, Paige?’

An admission would sound like something it really wasn’t. It would just gratify me to know that he had the mettle to defy that Rephaite law. That he could stand the touch of a mortal. It would prove to me, once and for all, that he was prepared to fight for us.

Before I could explain, Warden slid a cushion under my head, and the moment to retort had passed.

‘Have you experienced any more hallucinations?’ he asked. ‘Any headaches?’

‘Both. I’m fine.’

‘Those statements are contradictory.’

‘Everything about you is contradictory.’ I shifted on to my side. ‘Where were you while I was in the Rookery?’

His firefly eyes caught mine again. I wished I knew how to read his expressions.

‘I was arranging another infiltration into the House,’ he said. I must have looked worried, because he added, ‘Fear not. Nashira and Gomeisa do not suspect you of destroying their blood-heir.’

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I tried not to remember the way Kraz Sargas had looked once I was finished with him. A fistful of poppy anemone and a bullet to the face had not exactly left him at his best.

‘Who’s going to replace him?’ I asked.

‘There is another blood-heir, but she is abroad. A new male will be elected in due course. There must be a male and a female, just as there must be a male and a female blood-sovereign.’

‘Right.’ I paused. ‘If not me, who are you sending to the House?’

‘Michael.’

My chest tightened. ‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ I said. ‘Michael is worthless, in their view.’

‘Aside from you, Michael is the only human I trust. He has undertaken dangerous tasks for me before. This one,’ he said, ‘is to collect the cure for the performers.’

He had been working behind the scenes. I was too quick to assume the worst of him.

‘There is a cure, then,’ I said.

‘Yes. There was an outbreak of the same infection once before.’

‘Surely Nashira will distribute it at some point. She won’t want all her voyants dead.’

‘The performers are sustenance to her. She will not care if some of them die. Death in the Rookery will sow fear, and it is fear that upholds her rule. She will then have the opportunity to appear benevolent by distributing medicine at a time she deems suitable.’

‘So we have to get there first. Before we lose half our soldiers.’

‘Indeed.’ He rose. ‘Fear not, Paige. You and your friends will soon be well.’

As he turned away, I caught his sleeve.

‘We can’t stop training,’ I said. ‘I’m nowhere close to being able to win against her.’

‘We will continue to train. Tomorrow.’

He poured a cup of water and placed it beside me. With nothing to distract me from the wildfire in my blood, I rested my head on a folded arm and watched him walk back to his desk.

Something had changed since he had healed Liss. The same night Nashira had come to the tower and struck him, and I had followed him to the chapel to find him playing the organ. That night had rewritten my understanding of this place. When I looked at him now, curiosity outweighed mistrust.

He was not what I had once thought him to be. Not my friend, but no longer a foe. All I knew was that he loathed Nashira as much as I did, which meant that, for now, we were on the same side.

And he had said he trusted me.

‘I have to ask what you’re doing,’ I said. ‘Writing your last will in case this all goes

wrong?’

‘Sagacious as that would be, I have nothing to bequeath to anyone. This tower – and everything in it – belongs to the blood-sovereign.’ He kept writing. ‘Just as I do.’

Because he was her betrothed only in name. Because he was nothing but her war trophy.

‘Well,’ I said, softer, ‘what is it, then?’

‘A journal. A chronicle, more precisely. I record the daily events of the colony.’

‘That sounds like a laugh a minute.’ I managed a sip of water. ‘Do all Rephaim keep journals?’

‘We are not a monolith. I could not remark on what other Rephaim do to pass the time.’

‘Can I read it?’

He dipped his pen in ink. ‘Is it not ill-mannered to ask to read a private journal, Paige?’

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‘As we’ve long established, I don’t like you. I don’t care if you think I’m ill-mannered.’

‘Hm. Now I think I will keep my journal to myself.’

‘Like you would have shown me either way.’

‘You will have to live with the uncertainty.’

I tutted. When he had finished whatever he was writing – I imagined a treatise on human ingratitude – he made a point of locking the leather-bound book and tucking the key into his doublet.

‘Remember I’m a thief.’ I dropped my head on to the cushion. ‘I’ll pickpocket that key.’

‘By all means, try.’ Warden glanced at the mantel clock. ‘Michael will have returned by midnight. You should rest until then. If our luck holds, he will have what you need.’

‘And if he can’t find the medicine?’

‘Then I bid you farewell, Paige, and thank you for our agreeable acquaintance.’

‘Oh, hilarious. You could get your own show at the penny gaff with red-hot quips like that.’

I could have sworn the corner of his mouth lifted.

Staying lucid was like treading water. Eventually, I slid back into a doze.

A faceless woman opened a jar, and out poured seven golden streams. The floor rotted beneath her feet before the woman disappeared. A disembodied mask drifted up to me and told me it looked forward to our meeting. A shadow-bear lumbered over the threshold – its claws were like ten swords, each tipped with blood – and ruffled my hair with its breath. When it roared, black moths and honeybees erupted from its mouth.

All the while, Warden wrote. At some point, he switched off the gramophone.

Beware, the mask said. The lord of hindsight is purblind. Look to the all-gifted for the key. Knowledge has a terrible price. Come and see, pale rider, come and see.

‘Shh.’ I turned on to my back. ‘No more riddles, now. I’m busy.’

Busy doing what, pray tell?

‘Dying.’

Warden glanced towards me. The mask dissolved into thin air, leaving only him.

I wanted to hear his music again. In all my life, I had never heard such wrath and sorrow from an instrument as I had on that evening. Just the memory of it was chilling.

It seemed like an eternity before I got free of my drowse. My insides felt twisted, my stomach tight. Warden stood by the bay window.

‘Warden.’ My skin was clammy. ‘Michael isn’t back, is he?’

‘No.’

I tried to look for him in the æther. Too weak. ‘Someone has to go after him.’ With some effort, I managed to sit up. ‘He might be holed up with the harlies. I’ll find him.’

‘The fact that you think you are in any fit state to go anywhere is a testament to the fact that you should not.’

‘Well, you don’t exactly have humans lining up to be your allies, so I’m your only choice.’

‘If he is not back by one of the clock, I will go myself.’

‘It could be a trap,’ I said. ‘The Sargas might expect you to come looking for him.’

‘Perhaps.’ He glanced at me. ‘How do you feel?’

‘Awful.’

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At this, Warden returned to sit beside me on the daybed. He eased the mantle back over me.

And there it was, so fleeting I almost missed it. The thrum of the golden cord.

The bone-deep sensation caught me unawares from time to time. It was the quick, smooth pull of a bow across a heartstring, a note that never made a sound. A seventh sense. I hated that I could bear it.

At quarter to one, the vomiting started. Warden wordlessly handed me a vase – a priceless antique, by the look of it – and I coughed bile into it. I was going to die of this before I ever started a revolt. The secret behind Scion would never be revealed.

Warden stayed with me. To my surprise, he held my hair away from my face while I heaved and shuddered. When the wrenching finally stopped, I wiped my mouth, exhausted.

‘Thank you,’ I rasped. ‘Sorry. About the vase.’

‘It was serving no other purpose.’

He released my hair, letting it fall back around my shoulders. It had grown too long for my liking.

‘Warden,’ I said as he rose.

‘Yes?’

‘If I die of this, p-plant wild oat on my grave. The flowers are my favourite.’

‘You are not going to die, Paige Mahoney.’

‘You said this could be fatal.’

‘I did not think it would depress you this deeply, since mortals are familiar with the concept of impending death.’

‘I can’t even tell if you’re joking.’

‘I will leave you to wonder.’ He looked towards the window. ‘If I do not return, seek Terebell. She will guide you in the days ahead.’

He took his cloak from the back of the armchair. At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

I tensed. It might be one of the Rephaim, come to tell Warden that his courier had been caught. As soon as the door opened, however, Michael stumbled in, out of breath.

‘Michael.’ Warden shut the door. ‘Are you all right?’

Michael nodded. His cheeks were even pinker than usual. Seeing me on the daybed, he came straight to my side, his brow furrowed.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Slowly dying.’

Michael immediately slid his satchel from his shoulder and handed it to Warden, who emptied it on to the bed. Several boxes of medicine fell out.

‘Scared the hell out of us, Mike,’ I said. Michael pulled a face. ‘You’re not a fan of nicknames. Noted.’

‘Well done, Michael. This is enough to cure most of those who have been stricken.’ Warden placed the boxes in his cabinet. ‘You have returned later than we agreed. Were you seen?’

Still breathless, Michael shed his black coat and signed an answer. Warden watched.

‘There was a meeting in the House,’ he related to me. ‘When Michael attempted to eavesdrop, a red-jacket almost found him. He hid until there was an opportunity to escape.’

‘Did you hear anything at all?’ I asked Michael hoarsely. ‘Anything about us, about a rebellion?’

Michael shook his head and signed again, faster.

‘It seems that Benoît Ménard, the Grand Inquisitor of France, will not be attending the Bicentenary, apparently due to a long-term illness.’ Warden paused. ‘His physician has advised him against all travel until his symptoms subside.’

‘That seems ... odd. I’d have thought only death would keep him from answering a summons from Nashira.’

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‘Yes. His absence will rattle her. This was to be the first time they met. The Great Territorial Act, which is to be ratified on that night, promises a new colony in France.’

‘Sheol II.’

‘Yes.’

David, the mysterious oracle, had told me as much. That Nashira planned to open another prison city. To take more voyants from their homes and force them into a nightmare.

‘You never mentioned this,’ I said to Warden.

‘Consider it mentioned now. It is another reason why we must disrupt the Bicentenary,’ Warden said. ‘If we can demonstrate that there is rebellion against the Rephaim, and if all of you can escape from the colony that night, Ménard will have grounds to delay signing the Great Territorial Act. For fear that the Bone Seasons will be exposed.’ He topped up my goblet of water. ‘His representatives must see you at your strongest.’

‘They must.’ I propped myself up on one elbow. ‘Back to three pills a day, then.’

No reply. I was taking the iron and the contraceptive out of choice – the last thing I needed right now was a period – but he had never presented me with a green pill again.

‘There should be no more excursions to the House,’ he said. ‘Paige, I ask that you tell your allies not to enter it. Clearly security has been tightened.’

‘The House is chock-full of provisions,’ I said. ‘Julian knows a pair of white-jackets, both decent climbers. They could try.’

‘If they fail, I would not send anyone else.’

After a moment, I nodded.

‘You said those would cure most of the harlies,’ I said. ‘Was there not enough for everyone, Michael?’ Michael looked away, downcast. ‘It’s all right. You’ve saved a lot of lives.’

Warden brought me the goblet of water and a pill. I sluiced the medicine down.

‘It should be you who chooses, Paige,’ he said in an undertone. ‘You know the Rookery.’

When I realised what he meant, my fingertips blanched on the goblet.

‘You want me to decide which of them to cure,’ I said. ‘And ... which of them to leave.’

‘They may not all die. Some of them may weather the sickness,’ Warden said, ‘but others will need the medicine. And I suspect you would sooner the choice fell to a human than a Rephaite.’

Michael glanced at me, looking worried. I set the goblet aside.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I would.’

For a time, there was stillness between the three of us – a dreamwalker, an unreadable, and a Rephaite. We ought to have been bitter enemies, yet the rebellion now turned on our alliance. Michael rubbed his pink-knuckled hands together while I tried not to think about the responsibility he had passed me with those boxes.

There would be no easy choices on this road.

‘Thank you.’ Warden looked at us. ‘Both of you. For all you are risking. I hope the sacrifice is not in vain.’

‘It won’t be,’ I said. ‘Not this time.’

Chapter 2

The Hunger

SCION CITADEL OF PARIS

4JANUARY2060

Sweat plastered my nightshirt to my skin. I lay on my bed in the safe house, in too much pain to move. Not just from my wounds. This was withdrawal. They had injected me with more than one drug in the Archon.

A dry cough shook my frame. The clock now read 15:28. It might have been a day or a week since I had last woken like this, feverish and clattering.

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Agony filled my skull. It clanged in my jaw and my eye sockets and the hollows of my cheeks. An iron band was locked around my brow and, with every breath, it constricted. I wept into the pillow, trying not to make a sound. Warden had already seen too much.

A memory. The wallpaper in my childhood bedroom. Mamó spoon-feeding me medicine while I burned and itched with chickenpox.

Something was tightening my insides. Not just the wounds, not just grief. Deeper than the hunger in my stomach, it whispered in my blood and sinews. It wrung my muscles and scraped my bones. My skeleton was ravenous, every joint a panting mouth. I was starving. For the drug. For the oblivion promised by a needle. In oblivion, I was not an orphan. I was not hunted or trapped or broken from torture. I was fog, impossible to chain.

Grey light sifted through the cracks between the shutters, enough for me to glimpse the pouch of saline above my head. A tube snaked down to meet the cannula in my hand.

In the Archon, I had been sedated to keep me from using my gift. Now my body craved the stupor that had kept me weak and powerless for weeks. I was a razor blade, all edge and gleam, and I needed to be dulled. I needed to fade. Not to die, not to disappear altogether – just to soften, so the world stopped catching on my sharp corners. So I didn't feel it when it scraped me. I ached for the comfort of absence. I longed to exist less severely.

My eyes closed. I didn't want him to see me in this state again.

I had no one else.

‘Warden.’

Only a breath came out. My eyelashes were sticky, my hair dishevelled from being crushed into a pillow for days. I kicked with boneless legs at the duvet. The chains. The duvet.

‘Warden,’ I slurred again, but I had no more strength to speak, or to tug the golden cord.

For a while, I drifted between the room and my dreamscape, where a spectre had appeared. A smoking, Rephaite-shaped reminder of my ordeal, staring out from the darkest circle of my mind.

I must have fallen back to sleep. Next I woke, I was desperate for breath and soaked to the skin, and it was dark. Dread viced my limbs. Was I on the board again? No. I wasthe board.

Water. My skin wascreatingit, pints of it. It prickled on my scalp and nape. Even the backs of my knees were slippery. Whimpering, I rolled on to my side and scrubbed at my arms, desperate to dry off. Liquid trickled down my back and dripped from the ends of my hair. I was slimy with it. Each movement stretched the skin of my hand.

Perhaps the Underqueen would care for a drink...

The tube.

Water was shooting into my bloodstream. Flowing out of the bag, into my arm. I was so full of it that it burst out from my eyes, my pores, my nose. I was drowning from within. Wet sponge. Soaked cloth. Like the rag that had masked my face in that

basement, congealed the air before it reached me, kept me blind and screaming. I was blind now, too, with terror. Desperate, I groped for the tube and ripped it out.

Heat knifed through my hand and drew a sharp cry from me. Blood dribbled from my vein, saline from the tube. I sat there, staring at the break in my skin, too shocked to do anything but stare.

That was how Warden found me, bloody and petrified, hair wild around my face.

‘Paige.’

Dizzy, I looked up at him.

‘I had to get it out.’ Tears seeped to my neck. ‘I was drowning.’

Warden seemed to assess the situation. He looked at the wormlike tube on the bed, and at my hand, gloved in blood.

When he left, I watched the door, shivering. Moments later, he was back with a gauze and a roll of bandages.

‘Don’t touch me.’ I cringed against the headboard. ‘Please d-don’t try to touch me.’

This time, I saw a flicker in his expression. Disquiet, perhaps. He must be wondering what he had done to unnerve me to this extreme. I wished I could explain that if he touched me, he would know what a filthy, broken creature I was. He would slice himself on my razor edges.

I doubt even his standards are this low.

‘I will not touch you,’ Warden said quietly. ‘You have my word.’

I swallowed. Making no sudden movements, he placed the supplies within my reach.

‘You must staunch the bleeding yourself,’ he told me. All I could do was shake.
‘Paige—’

‘I can’t do this yet, Warden. I n-need the drug.’ Blood laced my arm. ‘Please just find it for me. They must sell it somewhere, the sedative. I’ll just have a little bit.’

‘That is not a sound idea.’

‘It is. I’ll be stronger in a few days.’ I blotted my face on my sleeve. ‘Warden, humans aren’t supposed to just come off drugs. You’re meant to take a s-substitute. Or something.’

‘All I can offer is scimorphine.’

‘Scimorphine isn’t strong enough. Look again. Please.’ When he did nothing, anger nearly throttled me. ‘Why are you just standing there? Do you think I’d bepleadingwith you if I didn’t really fucking need this?’

‘Even if I wanted to do as you ask, I could not. I can guess which sedative they used, and it will not be available from a pharmacy. Only from SciSORS.’ He was perfectly still. ‘This will end soon. You were sedated for less than a month, and the drug is not known to cause long-term withdrawal.’

‘Less than a month?’ I said thickly. ‘What – what are you saying, Warden? That I’m weak to be this desperate after such ashortimprisonment?’

‘That is not what I meant.’

‘Why are you doing this to me?’ I barked, loathing him to his core, half as intensely as I loathed myself. ‘Do you really hate me that much, Warden? Because I gave myself up to Scion, to Nashira? Is this your sick way of telling me that I made my own bed? Do youenjoyhearing me beg?’

‘I will not dignify those questions with an answer.’

A rusty laugh escaped me. ‘No.’ My ribs fought to contain the beast that writhed behind them. ‘I imagine you think this is all very undignified behaviour on my part.’

‘You imagine wrong.’

‘Oh, go back to hell. After everything I’ve done for you—’

It occurred to me that someone in the nearest buildings might hear me shouting myself hoarse at him. I needed to stop. If he would just get me the drug, if he would just for once relent, I could get better. I could heal. He could see me whole and strong, not broken.

‘Paige,’ was all Warden said, ‘you must see to your wound. You are losing blood.’

Enraged, I made a clumsy grab for a pillow – my fingers throbbed with the strain of lifting it, my sprained wrist seared like hellfire – and, with every bit of strength I had left, I tried to throw it at him. He watched it thump into the foot of the bed as I folded at the waist. That pitiful swing of my arm felt as if it had peeled the bones of my spine apart.

I had been so strong before.

‘Fuck the blood,’ I hissed. ‘You didn’t mind when I used it to heal you in Magdalen. Or spilled it in the scrimmage so I could be Underqueen.’ All the anger that had simmered in me came boiling to the surface. I spoke between my teeth: ‘Get me that sedative, Warden, you miserable fucking ingrate, and I might consider those debts paid.’

His chin lifted a little, his eyes dark.

‘No,’ he said.

My face crumpled. Even in this state, I knew when he had dug his heels in. Arms trembling, hair limp with sweat, I collapsed back on the bed and curled myself around a pillow.

‘None of you came for me,’ I said weakly. ‘Why did none of you come?’

‘Paige—’

‘I would have done anything to get you back. Why didn’t any of you try to get me?’

‘Paige,’ Warden cut in, ‘I know you are distressed, but please, little dreamer, bind your wound.’

Please. That word reached between the gnashing jaws of the withdrawal and gripped what little of my sanity remained. He had said it right before I surrendered to Scion. Paige. Please.

The realisation cooled the burning corridors of my mind. Suddenly I understood why he had sounded afraid that night, and how he must feel to see me in this state. He had tried to stop me because he had known exactly what awaited me if I gave myself to the enemy.

He had once been at her mercy, too.

She will chain you in the darkness, and she will drain the life and hope from you. Your screams will be her music.

It could have been worse. Nashira could have had my bones shattered, my tongue ripped out – anything she liked. She could have mutilated me until I was

unrecognisable. I had been spared only so that the torture didn't kill me before she could. Warden must have imagined me chained somewhere, in agony.

Silence leaked like crude oil between us. Under his gaze, I pressed the gauze over the wound and tried to strap it in place. My fingers were stiff, ill-suited to such delicate work. The bandages spilled between them.

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‘I can’t,’ I said.

My eyes overflowed again. Scion had even taken my ability to tend to my own wounds.

Warden sat down beside me. He was slow, and kept his distance.

‘May I?’

I looked at his proffered hand as if it were a red-hot iron. Straight after my rescue, I had realised how much I craved his touch. Now, like water, it was something to fear.

‘Paige,’ Warden said, ‘will you let me bind the wound if I wear gloves?’

The question cut right to my core.

I saw now what Suhail had done. Nashira must have ordered him to keep invoking Warden, to chisel away my ability to take solace in him – so that even if I did escape her, it would always hurt to be in his presence.

I could see the trap. Still I couldn’t bear for him to touch me now. Not like this. Not with gloves, either.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Warden, you know I’d never want that.’

‘Then will you trust that I am not going to touch you?’

His words sank in slowly. At last, I yielded the bandages. My heart drummed as he unravelled them.

‘Spread the fingers of your injured hand.’

I did. Blood drooled from my open vein. Warden set the gauze on top of it, then hooked one end of the bandage between my middle and forefingers.

‘Hold that in place.’

It took concentration to press my fingers together – enough to distract me from the pain. I could do this one small thing. I could hold the bandage. Warden began to wrap the rest of it around my hand, as he had once in the colony.

‘Are you in pain?’ he asked.

Even my jaw was trembling. ‘My head.’

‘Do you wish for scimorphine?’

After a moment, I gave as much of a nod as my headache allowed. Warden gently looped the bandage under my thumb. All the while, he somehow kept his word. At no point did he touch my bare skin.

I’m sorry. The words had almost reached my lips. I’m so sorry.

I almost got it out. Almost found the courage to clasp my fingers around his, the way I might have done in the past. Before I could try, he guided my neatly dressed hand to the covers.

‘You should eat something, Paige,’ he said. ‘You might feel stronger.’

‘Tomorrow.’ My eyes drifted shut. ‘I just want to not ... hurt. Just for a little while.’

Even though the hunger was still in me, its bite was softer now. I hadn’t exerted myself as much in days as I just had trying to throw that pillow. I wanted to say more, to explain, but the bed was beginning to swallow me.

The small weight of his hand left mine. And even though I feared his touch, I wanted it back now.

‘Warden,’ I started, but sleep chose that moment to snatch me away.

PENAL COLONY OF SHEOL I

8AUGUST2059

Light leaked into the Rookery where time had strained its walls apart. Liss kept her shack draped with swathes of cloth she had bargained for and scavenged, but sometimes she would uncover the hole in the roof to let the sun inside. It was snug enough that you could almost forget it sat at the heart of a prison.

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I stirred from a drowse, rosy sunlight glowing in my hair. Dust twinkled above me, and I let myself believe, for a heartbeat, that I was waking up in my own room, in London.

A gentle snore broke the illusion. Julian was asleep beside me, head on a limp cushion. The vomiting and hallucinations had worn him out.

I rubbed the grain from my eyes. My hair was in desperate need of a wash. So was my tunic. In Magdalen, there was a bath with stove-heated water, which I used as often as I dared – if I looked too clean, the other Rephaim would suspect Warden of lenience and detain him. All the harlies had was rain, or murky water from a stream near the House. That was all they had to drink, to clean their clothes and skin and homes. Liss kept a barrel outside her shack and boiled every cup she used. Perhaps that was how she had avoided getting ill.

The rats, at least, had taken their leave. Or the harlies had snapped and killed them all. I had elected not to ask.

Liss sat barefoot by the stove, studying a few of her cards. Shadows feathered over her face. One of the other harlies had filched her curling irons, so her black hair fell straight to the small of her back. Since her strength had returned, she had been practising night and day on the silks.

A blanket was draped over me. I wrapped myself in it as I sat up, covering the yellow tunic that marked me as a coward. Nashira had decreed that I should wear it after my escape attempt.

‘Hey,’ I said.

Liss stiffened and hid the cards. Seeing me, she relaxed again and offered a weary smile.

‘Evening, sleepyhead.’

‘Sorry.’ My broken wrist throbbed. ‘Must have been more exhausted than I thought.’

‘Not to worry. It’s only sunset,’ she said. ‘The night-bell won’t ring for a while yet.’

She returned the cards to the box and drew her shawl a little closer. I joined her by the stove, and we warmed our hands for a while. Her feet and ankles were mottled with bruises.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked her. ‘You’re training harder than usual.’

‘Beltrame expects my best performance for the emissaries.’ Liss kept her gaze on the stove. ‘Have you heard if Gomeisa will be at the Bicentenary?’

‘I’ve no idea. Why?’

‘Just wondering.’ She slung an arm around her knees. ‘Watch out for him, Paige. We could have an ugly fight on our hands if he gets involved.’

‘We’re not sticking around to fight anyone.’ My wrist gave another twinge. ‘I may not be sticking around at all.’

Her dark gaze snapped to mine. ‘Don’t think that way.’

‘My chances of hurting Nashira are abysmal. Warden won’t turn me into the perfect

dreamwalker by September. I only found out I had this ability a few months ago.'

'You're not trying to kill her. Remember that,' Liss said. 'You're trying to show her up. Don't get arrogant. Just do something to show them she's not all-powerful.'

I nodded, absently curling my fingers in and out of a fist.

'The courtiers are dead. Tilda was the last,' Liss said. 'Cyril told me she went around midnight.'

I closed my eyes.

Liss had helped me choose who would receive the pills. Most of them had gone to those who had seen Warden heal her. Those who had the power to betray his treason to Nashira.

In the end, it was the harlies who were hooked on purple aster that had paid for the shortfall. The fever had made them too weak to run the usual errands for Duckett, who had refused to deal the intoxicating flowers to them. The withdrawal and the fever together had already weakened them beyond saving by the time we had the medicine.

'We'll bury them after Nashira has seen the bodies,' Liss said softly. 'She needs to know that a few of us died, or she'll suspect that we had a cure. And that it was stolen.'

'Duckett never even contracted it.' I gazed into the flames. 'He knew Tilda and the others would be too weak to fight the fever without regal.'

'He maintains his power by sticking to his rules.'

‘Most of the errands he makes up are pointless.’

‘In a place without coin, the canny make their own currency.’ She gave me a sidelong glance. ‘I hate his guts as much as you, but stay your hand, Paige. Lay a finger on him and he’ll squeal to Nashira, and you don’t want to draw her eye.’

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She spoke in the clipped tone she used whenever we discussed the imminent rebellion. It was hard for her to fight the instinct to keep her head down.

‘Liss,’ I said, ‘does Duckett sell you the fuel for your stove?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘On the night of the Bicentenary, we need to burn down the Residence of Balliol. It’s where they stay in touch with the Archon. If we don’t cut that line of communication, Scion will be waiting for us on the other side.’

Liss looked back at the hand-carved box.

‘The other side,’ she echoed. ‘Yes.’ She cleared her throat. ‘We’ll need a lot of fuel.’

‘Any idea where Duckett gets it?’

‘While he was alone here, he stripped the colony of everything valuable and hid it all before the next lot of prisoners – my lot – arrived. We think his stores are buried in the woods somewhere.’

‘Maybe I should have a word with him.’

‘Paige, you mustn’t.’ Liss grasped my arm, eyes hard. ‘If you start asking for a lot of fuel, he’ll suspect.’

‘It’s not just fuel I want from him. He could have things we need to keep the red-

jackets from interfering,' I said quietly. 'As for squealing to Nashira – does he have white aster?'

Understanding sharpened her gaze. 'Maybe.' She let go. 'I'll find out. Until then, promise you'll not say a word to him.'

'I promise.' I squeezed her shoulder. 'How are you getting on with the new cards?'

At this, Liss softened. 'They work.' She sat back and laid a hand on the box. 'I never asked you, Paige. What did you have to do to get the Warden to take that sort of risk for a harlie?'

'I said I'd stay. To start a war.'

Her lips twitched. 'You agreed to start a war ... to get me a new set of cards.'

'Well, to keep you alive. Why, do you never start wars for your friends?'

Liss smiled enough for the skin around her eyes to pucker. When she smiled, I remembered how much longer she had been in this place. How much time had been stolen from her.

'You really are nothing like the other syndies,' she said. 'I have to wonder how you fell in with them.'

'Long story. I'll tell it to you someday.'

That strange, closed look returned to her face. She plastered it over with another smile.

'Let's have a cup of tea before you go.' She reached for her cast-iron kettle. 'Is the

Warden still kind to you?’

‘He’s not unkind. He’s just ... Warden.’ I tightened the blanket around my shoulders when a cold draught penetrated the shack. ‘He organised the theft of the medicine.’

‘I guessed.’ Liss went straight for the source of the draught – a small crack – and wadded a rag into it. ‘Does he still expect you to talk to him for an hour every night?’

‘No.’

Because we talked as a matter of course now. During training, before I left, and the moment I returned.

‘I want to understand him. Why he wants to help us. If he gets caught this time, Nashira will do worse than scar him.’ As I spoke, I turned to her collection of herbs, unhooked the bag of silverweed, and passed it to her. ‘He likes music. Our music. He has a gramophone up there that plays blacklisted songs. Plays the organ in Magdalen, too.’

‘I’ve never heard of a Reph doing such a thing,’ Liss said, wary. Flames licked at the base of the kettle. ‘Did it seem ... real, the music?’

‘Yes. It was beautiful.’

Liss seemed to contemplate this for a while. The kettle began to steam, then to whistle.

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‘I suppose humans can never fully understand each other, either.’ She poured. ‘He healed me. He protected you. He must care. But is he an outlier, or proof of what they could be?’

The question hung between us. Liss handed me a cup.

‘Something to ponder,’ she said.

‘Yes.’ I wet my lips. ‘I wish I could—’

‘Good evening.’

We turned. Julian had propped himself up on both elbows.

‘Jules,’ I said, relieved. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘All right,’ he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. ‘All rightin comparison to what I last felt like, anyway.’ His dark brown skin was glazed with sweat. ‘What about you two?’

‘Paige fell asleep, too,’ Liss said. ‘You’d think the pair of you had contracted a life-threatening infection.’

‘Yeah, you’d think.’

Julian shifted across the floor to sit between us. We both leaned in to him. For a while, the three of us sat quiet in the light of the stove, keeping warm.

Soon enough, there would be no more nights like this. We would be dead or far away. I hoped we could stay together in London. Jaxon would never let two soothsayers into the gang ('And just what am I supposed to do with these, Paige?'), but he could find them somewhere to live.

'We have a month left,' Julian said. 'The harlies are with us now. I'll start talking to more of the white-jackets.'

'Liss thinks Duckett has enough fuel for the fires,' I said. 'If we can wipe his memory, he might be useful.'

I told him about the part I thought Duckett should play. He listened with a sober expression.

'Good,' he said. 'While Liss looks into it, you could ask the Warden about food. People need to be strong enough to run to the train.'

'I will ask. Food is hard to come by, though, even for him.'

'They'll have to give at least some of us more.' Liss huddled deeper into her shawl. Her jaw flexed before she said, 'Me, especially. I'll be sure to share my portion.'

'No, Liss, don't. You need it, or you'll fall.'

'I never fall.'

That was true.

'Let's see what the Warden can do, if anything,' Julian said. 'Then we can decide how to ration food.' A grin lifted his cheeks. 'Speaking of food – what's the first thing you're going to eat when we get back to the citadel?'

‘Roasted chestnuts, hot off the pan,’ I said wistfully. He nodded his approval. ‘And I’ll take you both for a slice of honey pound cake at the best cookshop in London. My treat.’

‘Perfect.’ Julian wrapped an arm around me. ‘Liss?’

It took her a while to reply. ‘I used to like clove rock,’ she said. ‘Ma gave it to me for a toothache once, and I loved it so much that I kept asking for it. She thought it was the funniest thing.’ She looked up at him, a smile on her chapped lips. ‘What about you?’

‘Ice cream.’

‘What flavour?’ I asked.

‘Cucumber.’

‘Och, no.’ Liss wrinkled her nose. ‘I remember that. It’s like eating ... toilet water.’

‘I have to agree,’ I said. ‘Half-frozen toilet water.’

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‘It has delicate flavour.’ Julian clicked his tongue. ‘Neither of you has taste.’

‘Neither does your wretched ice cream,’ Liss muttered.

I snorted. Julian pulled a face. ‘Well, we’re eating it,’ he said, drawing her to his other side. ‘We’ll savour the culinary delights of London, and then we’ll save it from the Rephaim.’

As I rested my head on his shoulder, I thought of the syndicate, large enough to become a formidable army. I thought of Haymarket Hector, who would never believe my story, who had rotted the underworld with his cruelty and sloth. I thought of my own mime-lord, who had irrevocably divided voyants with nothing but his pen and his ambition.

‘We can try,’ I said.

Liss looked at me with a slight frown, her smile fading as quickly as it had come.

‘I’d better get back to Magdalen.’ Feeling tired again, I stood. ‘Stay out of the way of the Rephs, and keep looking for anything that might be useful. I’ll come back in a few days.’

‘Be careful, Paige,’ Julian said.

‘Always.’

I did up my gilet and brushed through the curtain, leaving them curled up by the fire

like two birds in a nest.

Whispers and glances chased me as I made my way out of the Rookery. Most of the harlies now knew I was the Pale Dreamer. Since the Rephaim knew the truth, I had allowed Liss to let it slip to her friends. She had thought it would reassure them to know that a high-ranking syndicate member was leading the rebellion.

A few people had dealt me resentful looks. Still, most showed a respect that bordered on fear. Some of them tapped three fingers to their foreheads as I passed. Even those who had been captured a decade ago remembered the White Binder. And knew of his mollisher.

In London, my alias was a vital weapon, my reputation a shield and a bludgeon against rival gangs. Here, it felt like a cheap grab for power – but if my presence encouraged even one person to place their trust in the rebellion, and to imagine that they might have some protection from the syndicate if it succeeded, it was worth a few weeks of disquiet.

Dusk was just about to fall. As soon as I was out of the Rookery, the cold rushed into me. It was hitting me harder every day. So was my fatigue, as evidenced by the unexpected nap. The hunger, too, was unrelenting. Warden tried his best to get me at least one meal a day, but supplies across the colony were low.

Just a few more weeks, and I could leave. I could fill my aching stomach every day. Warmed by the thought, I lifted my hood and cut through the cobbled square by the Old Library, past the ever-locked Room. There was no movement in there today. All was quiet.

Well, not all.

‘Hello.’

I turned at the sound of an unwelcome voice. David, the oracle, was slouching against the wrought-iron gates of the church, a cigarette in one hand, dark crescents bitten under his eyes. Unlike me – conspicuously shivering – he looked just toasty in his coat.

Last I had seen him, it was when I had possessed him in London. To stop him killing Nadine.

‘What are you doing here?’ I said, curt.

‘Smoking.’

He held up his cigarette, which gave off the scent of mint. ‘How the hell do you even get those?’ I asked.

‘Benefits of being a red-jacket. Shame you lost yours.’ He took a drag. ‘Yellow doesn’t suit you.’

‘Blame whoever designed the wardrobe here.’ I pushed my hands into my pockets. ‘You know there are rats all over the Rookery. Shouldn’t you be holed up in a residence, feasting with the other bone-grubbers?’

‘Needed some fresh air. Not that it’s ever very fresh around here.’ He blew smoke. ‘So, tell me. How long have you been able to possess people?’

‘Why do you care?’

‘Just wondering. It was ... something, 40. Not being able to control my own arms. I had a headache for days.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it. Will you be asking forpaymentin exchange for your

forgiveness?’

The corners of his mouth pinched. ‘You’re still angry about that.’ When I said nothing, he sighed. ‘Paige, if I could just—’

‘I’m not angry with you, David. I can honestly say that I never think about you.’

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‘Very good.’

I raised my eyebrows and walked on.

‘I meant to say,’ he called after me, ‘that I saw your friend. In the House. What was he trying to steal?’

Any warmth left in my body flickered out. I cleared my expression before I faced him again.

‘Friend,’ I repeated, trying to sound impatient. ‘Who?’

‘The rottie who dusts for the Warden. Michael, isn’t it?’ David let a creamy plume of smoke decant from between his lips. ‘I can only assume he was after provisions. But for what?’

‘He was probably after food. There isn’t much to go around,’ I said. ‘Not that you’ll have noticed.’

‘See, I don’t think he was after food. Because considering he’s a rottie and you’re a yellow-jacket, you both look remarkably well-fed. At least compared to the others.’ He cocked his head. ‘The Warden is taking care of you both. He’s doing you a favour. That makes me wonder if you’re doing him favours in return. Favours that might involve the scarred ones.’

‘All I know about the scarred ones is what you told me.’

‘Maybe your rottie friend knows more.’ He gave his cigarette a tap. ‘There was a crime in the House. They found the blood-heir with a bullet in his skull, looking a little less divine. Clearly the work of a human.’ I kept my face blank. ‘I wonder what would happen ... if I told Nashira her concubine has been sending his tenants there. To you. And to him.’

That word, concubine, needled me in a way it never had. I pictured Warden in the tower, kneeling while a tyrant struck him. For the first time, my instinct was to spring to his defence.

An instinct like that could get us both killed.

‘I imagine she’d haul us in for interrogation,’ was all I said to David. ‘Me. And Michael. And the Warden.’

‘I’m a red-jacket. My word could hold some weight with the Suzerain,’ he remarked. ‘I could pin it on the rottie. You could get a new keeper instead of the one everyone laughs at.’

‘Fuck you.’

The words snapped between us. David looked me up and down before he let out a huff through his nose.

‘Don’t lose sleep, 40. I have no proof. And I really don’t want to see you butchered.’ He lifted the cigarette back to his lips, never taking his eyes off me. ‘Still, I do wonder what you’re all up to in that tower. Perhaps a humble bone-grubber could help.’

‘You can’t help, because none of us are up to anything. I just want to spend what little I have left of my life as painlessly as possible.’

‘You, give up without a fight?’ A small laugh. ‘I don’t believe it, dreamwalker.’

‘I’m not giving up. Just meeting the æther gracefully.’ I continued on my way.
‘Goodbye, David.’

I felt his piercing eyes on me until I turned the corner.

Even if I had called his bluff, David might report what he had seen. I could almost smell the survival instinct on him, strong enough to rival mine. Maybe he had sniffed out the possibility of escape, like the first traitor had.

I shook myself. He would need proof, given the timing, and he didn’t have a scrap of it.

Did he?

Nashira had emptied the colony once before. She wouldn’t do it again, not before the Bicentenary. If the emissaries arrived and found themselves ankle-deep in a bloodbath, there would be no treaty.

Surely.

The sky began to spit as I walked past the ruined church. Raindrops opened rings in every puddle, polished the cobblestones, glistened in my hair. I entered the Residence of Magdalen just as the night-bell rang. The porter spared me a fleeting glance.

There were always some Rephaite guards in the cloisters. I avoided them and half-ran up the steps in the Founders Tower, throwing down my hood as I went. I pushed open the door, only to find his chamber deserted, the gramophone wordless for once. On his desk lay a gilded vial – the vial that had contained his final dose of amaranth, not a drop left in it.

He was close. Inexplicably, I knew it.

I returned to the cloisters and listened. There was one place where he often went for solace now. When I heard faint strains of music, I followed them to the chapel doors and cracked them open.

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Inside the vaulted chamber, the organ thundered. Sound rang in every vault and corner. I closed the doors behind me and leaned against them, eyes drifting shut as I absorbed the tremors of the music, as they rang a thousand bells inside me. His last piece had evoked regret – it had been a call for death, for an ending – but this one was all mettle and beauty and defiance. Even though it was loud enough to make my ears ache and my chest vibrate, it calmed me.

I remembered this melody from somewhere. It called to a part of me I had almost forgotten. Words, still unstrung from the notes, were honey-sweet on the tip of my tongue.

For a long time, I let the warp and weft of the music knot itself around and through me. When I stirred from the trance, I made my way up to the organ loft, where Warden sat on the bench, as straight-backed as if it were a throne, playing by candlelight.

He used no sheet music. All of this was from memory. Note after note soared from the pipes to the ceiling of the chapel. I watched his hands gusting over the keys, his leather boots keeping time on the pedalboard. He played like a storm in the shape of a man.

Too soon, he stopped. The echo faded from the vaults.

‘Paige,’ he said. ‘You were gone for some time.’

‘I fell asleep in the Rookery.’

I joined him on the bench. There was just enough room for us to sit together without touching, but his aura brushed mine.

‘One of the red-jackets saw Michael when he was in the House. David, the oracle.’ Even though we were alone, I spoke under my breath. ‘You were betrayed once before. What should we do?’

Warden was perfectly still, save his eyes, which flickered. I watched his face.

‘Did he make demands in exchange for his silence?’ he asked.

‘No. He even offered to help us.’

‘You believe he knows of our plan, then.’

‘He certainly suspects we’re plotting something up here. You, me and Michael.’

Warden seemed to withdraw into his thoughts for a while. His eyes were darker than their wont.

‘This could destroy everything,’ I said. I needed to impress the urgency of this on him. ‘If he breathes one word to the wrong Rephaite, we’re both fucked.’

‘He would tell his keeper first. Pleione is one of us.’

‘He goes to those damned feasts with Nashira.’

I wondered if he would advise me to dispose of David. In a place like this, murder would be easy. A cut throat. A body hauled into the woods to be devoured by the Emim.

Easy to do. Not so easy to live with. No matter how much I mistrusted David, a cold-blooded murder would cling to me. I would have to know that it had been the only way.

‘Nashira will not believe whispers of rebellion without proof this time. Too much rests on the Bicentenary,’ Warden finally said. ‘Does he have evidence that Michael was there?’

‘I don’t see how he could. It’s not like there are any cameras here.’

‘Then we may be safe. And she would suspect foul play if one of the red-jackets were to go missing.’

‘I thought the same. Will we call his bluff, then?’

‘If you agree.’

‘I do.’

A small nod. His gloved hand moved in and out of a fist.

‘I saw the vial,’ I said. He looked back at me. ‘You must be in pain.’

‘Do not trouble yourself on my account. I can find distraction enough in our plans. And in music.’

‘You won’t have this organ after the rebellion. Or your gramophone.’ I skimmed my fingertips over the keys. ‘I’ve seen a few pianos in derelict churches in London. I doubt they can hold a tune any more, but you could always claim one. Try to repair it.’

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‘Yes.’

‘And there’s music at the black market. Real music, not the soulless dross Scion pumps out. I could show you,’ I said, after a pause. ‘Should our paths ever cross again.’

‘I am sure you would prefer that not to happen.’ His voice was a dark wine, rich and warming. ‘To be rid of me.’

‘I don’t hate you, Warden,’ I said quietly. ‘I did, for a long time.’ I breathed out through my nose. ‘You should have told me earlier that you were a prisoner here, too.’

‘I know. I think neither of us is trusting by nature, Paige.’

‘What reason has the world given us to trust anyone?’

Silence fell like a curtain between us, heavy and velvet. The chapel was so still. I tried to imagine it as it must have been in the monarch days – as a place of reflection, of sanctuary.

‘Tomorrow, we must continue your training in the woods, out of sight,’ Warden said. ‘To ensure Nashira underestimates your skill.’ When I made no reply, he watched the absent-minded trajectory of my fingers across the keys. ‘Do you play an instrument?’

‘No. Whenever I tried to sign up for lessons at school, somehow there was never any space left.’ I permitted myself a faint, wry smile. ‘I do like to sing. Always have.’

‘I heard you in a memory. You are gifted.’

The compliment caught me off-guard.

‘Well,’ I said, clearing my throat, ‘my old Schoolmistress didn’t think much of my abilities on that front. Said my accent muddled the songs, whatever that meant.’

‘She was a fool.’

Our gazes met again. The glow in his eyes was barely there, yet suddenly it was all I could see.

Warden looked away first. He rose from the bench and used a ruby-encrusted snuffer to put out the candles.

‘We should return to the Founders Tower,’ he said. ‘Now the night-bell has rung.’

He strode towards the stairs and was gone. I sat in the gloom for a little longer, wondering at the unfamiliar ache in my stomach, thinking of a story my grandfather had once told me.

That if travellers looked to the marshes at night, sometimes they might glimpse a far-off glow, beautiful and strange. It should always be ignored, for the light would lure the careless away from the safe path. It was called *tine ghealáin*, but it had another name.

Fool’s fire.

Chapter 3

Storm

SCION CITADEL OF PARIS

6JANUARY2060

Trying to get a handle on your sanity, once it starts to slide, is a balancing act. Give a little to the broken parts of you, to keep them quiet and satisfied. Give a little more to the repairs.

With that in mind, I knew it past time for me to get out of bed. I had stayed there for almost a week to feed my broken parts. Today, I would move forward. I would wash and clothe and feed myself, if only to prove that I still could.

Heavy rain hammered the window. Though it was almost noon, the room was as dark as if dusk had fallen.

And Warden was gone.

I craned my neck to see behind me, throat aching. Since the cannula incident, he had stayed with me around the clock while I sweated and trembled my way through the worst of the withdrawal. Several times I had woken to see him in a chair by my bedside, perusing a book, keeping watch out of the corner of his eye. Now there was no sign of him.

I hadn't meant what I'd said to him. The drug had been racking me, the hunger contorting my insides, and I had lashed out at the only person I could.

Warden was patient by nature, but he was under no obligation to stay and stomach me. Now his dreamscape was gone. For the first time since my imprisonment, I was alone.

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Shivers rolled through me. The room was suddenly too small, the shutters hemming me in.

To calm myself – distract myself – I took in my immediate surroundings. All was tidy. The pillow I had thrown was now supporting me, and the bedclothes smelled crisp and sweet. I did not. I felt as if I was coated in candlewax, the wax being my week-old sweat.

I was going to have to face the shower. Even if it washed away the last of my sanity. I disconnected myself from the drip and took a deep breath, only for pain to spike in my chest. I coughed my throat raw.

That was all I needed. A fucking cough. Resisting the urge to lie back down and sleep for a year, I sat up.

Getting out of bed was slow-going. One foot to the floor, then the other, legs trembling. One hand on the bedpost, where a long cardigan waited. When I was up, a grey wave of dizziness almost slapped me right back down. I still had a tight headache.

Getting my arms into the cardigan was the next challenge. My shoulders were rusted, my fingers stiff. It took several tries to force them all the way down to the cuffs, longer to post the buttons through the holes.

At least I was upright. That was progress. Trying not to breathe too deeply, I hobbled across the corridor, into the bathroom. There, for the first time in days, I saw my reflection.

It was better than I had expected. Still grim, of course – I looked gaunt and tired, my eyes bloodshot, my skin dull as old newspaper – but the bruising around my eye and cheekbone was now a mottled olive, and my lip had almost healed. When I lifted my nightshirt, however, I saw that my stomach was still black and blue.

The showerhead glinted in the sullen light. I looked away. Standing under that thing would drag me back to the abyss, and I doubted I'd fare better in a bath – but I had to re-learn how to do this. I couldn't let Scion have stolen my ability to wash.

I took a facecloth from the rail, approached the sink, and turned the tap. Hot water shot out, making me start. Shivering, I held the cloth under it until it was soaked. Steam puffed from the sink.

'It isn't near your face,' I said under my breath. 'Look, you're fine. You're fine, Paige.'

Water dripped from my wrist to the floor. I fumbled a bottle of body wash from the cabinet – lavender cream, *quel luxe* – then undressed and sat on the bath.

Keeping the cannula dry slowed me down, though not half as much as the fear did. Every brush of the cloth made me stiffen. Every time I had to soak it again, I froze at the sound of trickling water. The nearer I got to my face, the worse I shook. I found it helped – just a little – if I tilted my chin down. Smaller chance of inhaling stray droplets.

Before now, I had never realised that tap water had a smell. It was faint and insidious, like creeping damp, and it threatened to unhinge me.

My throat closed. I swallowed past the lump and forced myself to keep cleaning – gently, careful with myself. I found a hard-bristled brush and scoured away the horseshoes of grime under my nails. Drained, I stood up and swaddled myself in a

warm towel.

Another search of the cabinet rewarded me with an expensive-looking facial cleanser. I dabbed at my brow and cheeks and neck. Next, I scrubbed my teeth until they squeaked.

Now for the worst part.

‘Right,’ I muttered to my reflection. ‘Time to make your hair look less like a rats’ bacchanalia.’

A steel pitcher stood under the cabinet. I filled it with hot water and took it with me to the bath.

Now for the golden question: head forward or back. Back seemed the logical option – my sodden hair would be off my face – but then, that was how I had been on the waterboard, staring up at the source of the agony. If my hand shook once, I would splash myself.

Forward, then?

I tried to think. When I was about five, there had been an outbreak of nits at my school. My grandmother had spent days teasing them out of my curls, cursing under her breath. It had been a lean month – most months had been lean – and she hadn’t been able to afford the medicated shampoo the nurse had recommended, so she had scrubbed my scalp with salt and vinegar before she attacked. I had smelled like a bag of chips for days.

She had got me to lean forward over the bath. Even now, I dimly remembered the discomfort, the incessant tug of the fine-toothed comb. But then the water would be all around me, streaming off my hair, the air would reek of it ...

This was ridiculous. I couldn't agonise over this decision all day. Head back. I was in control of the jug, not Suhail. I was in control of the water.

Except that my hand shook.

Water streamed over my brow. Blinded me. Spilled on to my lips, tasting of fear. The pitcher clanged off the floor. An instant later, I found myself crumpled next to it, dewdrops clinging to my lashes, a roar in my ears. Gooseflesh rippled all over me. Panting, I groped for the toilet and retched until I thought my stomach would uproot itself.

It was a long time before I could move. I was shaking too hard.

'Okay.' I wiped my mouth and got back on to the bath. 'One more try. Then ... food.'

This time, I kept my eyes wide open. And my hand was a little steadier.

It took almost as long as it had to clean the rest of me. When it was done, I scraped my damp curls into a bun and pulled my nightshirt and cardigan back on. Exhausted though I was, it had been worth the effort. It felt good to be clean.

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Time to look around. And eat. I was light-headed, and my stomach felt almost concave.

I stepped back into the corridor and, for the first time, switched on the light. Aside from the door to my room, there were three others. One revealed a hot press, its shelves stacked with fresh towels and linen. Behind the second was a walk-in wardrobe. I dumped the nightshirt in a laundry basket and picked out a pair of thick tights, thicker socks, and a knitted dress that almost reached my knees. Anything to feel a little warmer.

The third door led to the parlour I remembered from the morning we arrived. It needed a lick of paint here and there, but it was clean and elegant, and I imagined it would be charming in the summer, with the windows thrown open and the wooden shutters folded back to let in a warm breeze. As I took it in, I kept one hand on the wall to steady myself.

That was when I heard music.

I froze, listening. The song was unfamiliar, but I recognised the sad voice. With my heart in my throat, I reached for the æther. For his dreamscape.

A pair of sliding doors stood open on the other side of the parlour. I padded between them to find a cosy kitchen, and Warden at the breakfast bar, sorting through the contents of a box. As always, he wore a long-sleeved dark shirt, black trousers and boots.

He was here. Slowly, I released my breath.

‘Hi,’ I said.

Warden looked up from his collection. His eyes were a bright, arresting blue.

‘Paige.’ He rose. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Could be worse.’ I tried to smile. ‘You don’t have to stand when I enter a room, you know. I’m not the Queen of England.’

‘You are the Underqueen of London.’

His formality was disconcerting. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘Underqueen-in-Exile now. I can’t do much ruling from here.’ I stepped across the threshold. ‘Besides, you’re my friend, not my ... subject.’

‘As you wish.’

There was a long silence, split by a thunderclap.

I was used to the occasional lull in conversation with Warden. We could talk or sit together in silence, and it never felt uncomfortable. This did. The tension was thick as snow between us.

Then again, this was uncharted territory. We had been enemies, and then we had been something else. The space between was strange to both of us.

‘Your hair,’ he finally said. ‘I take it you were able to use the shower.’

‘Not quite. I’m working up to it.’ I held myself to conserve warmth. ‘You left.’

‘To feed.’

‘So I see.’ I smiled again. ‘Do people not go running for help when a seven-foot stranger starts draining their aura?’

‘Usually I can feed without their noticing.’ Warden returned to his seat. ‘I was cautious today. If the Sargas hear of a rogue Rephaite in Paris, they will come for us both.’

I recognised this tone. He had been reserved and curt like this when I met him again after the Bone Season. He became more Rephaite-like when he wanted to protect himself. Or me.

Part of me must have expected us to be as comfortable together as we had been in London. Even if I had broken off the ...liaison, or whatever it had been, I had never been less than certain that we would remain close friends. I had come to lean on his counsel and company as much as I did on Nick and Maria.

Perhaps he thought that I should have fought harder for our relationship. That if I had ever cared about him, I would have wanted to keep him by my side even when I was Underqueen. The thought weighted my stomach. The cause had to come first. We had agreed.

Unless this was because of what I had said to him during the withdrawal.

‘I could kill a coffee,’ I said, if only to break the painful silence. ‘Is there any here?’

‘Yes,’ Warden said, ‘but perhaps you should reconsider the wisdom of drinking it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I suspect your withdrawal has been worsened by your additional cravings for caffeine.’

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‘This from the man who must drink about a barrel of red wine every single day,’ I said drily.

‘I am aware of my own dependences,’ was his even reply. ‘I am merely showcasing an opportunity to cast yours aside. If you do not wish to become re-addicted to—’

‘Warden, please don’t dissuade me from the solitary mote of joy I have left in my tragedy of a life. I’m being hunted by a tyrant, my entire family is missing or dead, and I’m fresh out of the torture chamber. Please, just let me enjoy my coffee.’

‘Second cupboard on the left.’

‘Thank you.’

It was the real deal, not the tart dishwater I had used to keep my wits in London. I took my sweet time measuring out the grounds and boiling a kettle over the stove. It had been almost a year since I’d had time to indulge in something as decadent as making a proper cup of coffee.

Warden watched me. When I filled the press, a rich tan foam rose to the top. It smelled heavenly. Only when I was finished did it occur to me that I might have trouble drinking it.

The normality of the routine had distracted me. I blew on the coffee before I took a cautious sip. It smoked up all my senses in that familiar way.

No plummet into memory. No choking. Swallowing was hard, but the taste and scent

distinguished it from water in my mind, enough for me to keep it down. I breathed it in and took another sip.

Thunder crashed outside, and lightning flashed. The shattering din of the rain unnerved me. While I kept an eye on the storm, Warden started to unpack the food and put it away. I joined him.

‘Who delivered the box?’ I asked.

‘A courier from our new employers.’

‘Have they—’ I stifled a cough, ‘have they been in contact at all otherwise?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Scarlett Burnish implied that they would not issue us orders until you have convalesced for a month.’ I heard the fridge shut. ‘I have made a meal for you. If you are ready.’

I turned. ‘Did you say you made something?’

‘Correct.’

‘Warden, you didn’t have to do that. You’re not here to serve me.’

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘but I am here to help you recover. To recover, you need sustenance.’

Steam billowed from the slow cooker as he opened it. He ladled some of its contents into a bowl and set it in front of me, along with a spoon and three slices of golden-crusted bread.

My supper appeared to be a thick stew of chicken and vegetables. I dipped the spoon

in, cautious. It looked edible.

‘Is all well, Paige?’

‘Of course.’ I smiled. ‘Where did you learn to cook?’

‘There was a recipe book in the colony, which I once perused.’

‘Planning to throw a dinner party at some point, were you?’

‘You underestimate how little I had to do for two centuries, kept as I was like a bird in a cage.’ Pause. ‘I was ... not sure of your tastes.’

‘I don’t like to eat beef or veal if I can help it,’ I said. ‘Other than that, I’ll try anything.’

‘Noted.’

To buy myself time for a closer look, I immersed my spoon in the stew again. Nothing rang alarm bells, but I had to wonder if Warden, who had presumably never eaten a morsel of food in his life, knew enough about cooking to avoid inadvertently poisoning me. Chicken was a bold place to start.

Still, the stew was piping hot, and he was waiting. I braced myself, took a big spoonful, and chewed.

‘Wow,’ I said, with feeling, ‘it’s ... delicious. Thank you, Warden.’

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Oh, no. His eyes were glowing. The soft glow I had come to associate with contentment.

I had to tell him. That his stew was perfect in every way – the chicken tender, the vegetables cooked to perfection – except for the fact that it had no flavour at all. His recipe book must not have mentioned seasoning. There was no salt or pepper. No herbs or spices. Nothing. The parsnip somehow tasted the same as the chicken, and the chicken the same as the onion. It seemed impossible that a stew could be so devoid of taste. Surely this was an unprecedented feat.

... I couldn't do it. Let someone else crush him. Resolved to finish it even if it meant I received bland stews for the rest of eternity, I gave him a thumbs-up and ate some more. It would fill my stomach and warm me up, at least, and it was sweet of him to have tried.

'So,' I said, 'you and me. Living together.' I gave the stew a stir. 'How are we feeling about that?'

Warden narrowed his eyes. 'In what regard?'

'We haven't been alone together for a while. Not since Magdalen.' Not for longer than a night. 'Look, if – if you don't want this after all, if you'd rather go back to London to be with the Ranthen, you shouldn't feel obliged to stay with me. I'll be all right.'

A tremor stole in my voice. The thought of being alone here was unsettling, but I had to make the offer.

‘I chose to accompany you,’ Warden said. ‘You needed someone with you, and even Terebell agreed that I was the best candidate.’ Another pause. ‘If you wish for me to leave, however, I can summon one of your commanders.’

‘No.’

I made to touch his hand. It was unconscious – something I would have done in a heartbeat a few weeks ago – but I stopped just in time. His gaze darted from my hand to my face.

‘I don’t want you to go. That’s the last thing I want,’ I said frankly. ‘I just want to make sure you don’t feel beholden to me. I made you promise we’d stay together, but I meant what I said just now. You’re not my subject. If you ever want to leave, just say the word.’

‘I am with you out of loyalty and fondness, not a sense of obligation. You said I was your friend, and no matter what we are or have been to each other, you are also mine.’ He held my gaze. ‘I am here for as long as you want me with you, Paige Mahoney.’

I searched the features I knew by heart, and I found I believed him.

‘Warden,’ I said, ‘I’m so sorry for what I said to you. I wasn’t in my right mind.’

‘I want no apology, Paige. I know what it is to crave a drug.’

Of course he did. The drug he had always mixed into his wine, the only thing that ever drove him back to his decaying home.

Amaranth.

‘When the scars first awakened, I was a prisoner in my own sarx. It was as if the torture had never ended.’ Warden looked hard at the wall. ‘I saw my Ranthen-kith in the same agony and all but crawled before Nashira. Since I had conceived the rebellion, I was responsible for their suffering. I meant to ask my betrothed for mercy.’

I watched his face.

‘There was nothing I could do to persuade Nashira to banish the poltergeist,’ he said. ‘My power was a façade, after all. All I had to offer was obedience. And my dignity. In exchange for those, she agreed to provide small doses of amaranth. Of course, she made certain to withhold them from time to time.’

‘Your dignity.’ The realisation settled in me. ‘That was why you always had to kneel in front of her.’

‘Yes.’ His tone was even. ‘Do not think I have no sympathy. I know the hunger that eclipses the self. The shame and frustration of needing what your enemy chooses to provide.’

‘It wasn’t your fault, Warden.’

‘It was not your fault, either.’

Neither of us asked what it meant. It meant any of it. Any of what had happened to us.

Just then, my cough started back up. Warden went to the cupboard and returned with a spoonful of honey, which I barely managed to swallow. It soothed the inflammation enough for me to draw an easy breath again.

‘Quick thinking.’ Eyes watering, I pressed a hand to my chest. ‘You know your home

remedies.'

'Some.' He looked at me. 'You have been coughing in your sleep ever since we arrived.'

I nodded without answering.

The wind-blown rain and the quiver of the shutters was all that broke the hush for a time. Once I had finished the stew, I shuffled to the parlour and tried to get comfortable on the couch. No easy feat with so many aches and bruises. Enveloped in a blanket, I worked on my coffee and listened to the storm, eyes half-closed. Already I was tired again.

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Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

Beyond the window, Paris waited. I was a queen in London. Here I was no one. I might have a reputation, grown in whispers, but rumour was one thing. Respect was another.

My father had promised we would come here one day. Jaxon, too, had vowed to show me Paris. He had often waxed lyrical about the refined and cunning voyants of this citadel, who called themselves *anormales*, or *anormaux*. Theirs was an old and intricate syndicate. Though it had once enjoyed a genial relationship with London, the two communities had been all but estranged for over a century. Jaxon had told me only that a three-way love affair, a poisoned trifle and a cocker spaniel were involved.

The old Paige would have itched to be outside, discovering it all. The streets and rooftops were where I belonged. As it stood, all I wanted to do was huddle indoors and keep warm.

‘Paige.’

I flinched, slopping coffee down my front. Warden stood in the doorway.

‘Forgive me,’ he said.

‘It’s okay.’ Cheeks burning, I dabbed the mess with my sleeve. ‘I meant to ask. Have you checked if Burnish is still reading the news?’

‘She was this morning.’

‘Good.’

He lowered himself into the armchair. Lightning flickered again, brighter than before.

‘On the way to Dover,’ he said, ‘Burnish told me that Scion means to invade Portugal and Spain. Operation Madrigal. It will be announced to the public on the twelfth of January.’

My heart pounded. ‘There were Spanish emissaries in the Archon,’ I said. ‘Jaxon told me Weaver was trying to persuade them to convert bloodlessly, like Sweden.’

‘Spain has a popular monarchy. Under Scion, the royal family would, at best, be forced to abdicate.’

At worst, they would lose their heads.

‘We knew this was coming,’ I said. ‘We saw the preparations for war.’ I put my mug aside. ‘Abel Mayfield is remembered for defeating Ireland. Weaver has yet to live up to that legacy. Unusually brave of him to still go ahead now Vance is out of action.’

‘Nashira favoured Weaver because he was quiet, efficient and obedient,’ Warden said, ‘but he has failed to dismantle the Mime Order. Conquering the Iberian Peninsula would earn back her favour.’

Rain washed down the windows. The sound of it drew my hand into a fist, tight enough for my nails to dent my palm.

‘Paige,’ Warden said quietly, ‘if you are willing to tell me, I would know what Scion did to you.’

My fingertips pressed into the mug until it hurt.

‘They tortured me,’ I said.

‘I assumed as much.’

‘What more is there to say?’ My voice was curt. ‘Why could you possibly need particulars?’

‘To better understand.’

‘You don’t need to understand.’ I looked away. ‘I don’t want to talk about it. Ever.’

Thunder crashed outside, closer. I could sense his gaze on my face.

‘I will let you rest,’ he finally said. ‘Call if you need anything, but do not strain your voice. Use the cord.’

‘Like the cord ever works when we need it.’

‘Try.’

He switched a lamp on before he left.

As I curled up on my side, jaw clenched in discomfort, I thought of Liss, and the sixth card in the reading she had done for me.

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Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

Eight of Swords. A blindfolded woman encircled by blades. If she was to escape her prison, she would have to bleed. Liss had told me that it represented my hopes and fears. The torture had to be part of it.

The woman on the card wore no crown. She held no sword of her own. She was not a warrior or a leader or a queen – only a captive, bound at the wrists, unable to see or feel an escape.

I feared its meaning. Whether or not the swords were gone, their memory might forever shape the bounds of my existence, reducing my world to the walls of this building. I might never have the courage to leave them again, as I had left my prison – and if I did, I would not be the same as before. I would be heavier. I looked down at my wrists, where the manacles had been.

And I stared into the grey beyond the window, haunted by the rain.

PENAL COLONY OF SHEOL I

22AUGUST2059

I had worked with Warden in the woods for more than two weeks. So far, nobody had discovered us. Even the Rephaim had forgotten how many dangers lurked in certain areas so they avoided them altogether.

All but Warden. Every night, he had taken me to a safe clearing and pushed me to the limit. Every night left me with a nosebleed and a headache from trying to break into his dreamscape.

You're not trying to kill her, Liss had said. Just do something to show them she's not all-powerful.

Tonight, I was determined to do that to Warden, to really rattle him. I would crack his dreamscape before sunrise. I would possess him. If I could do that to him, then I could do it to Nashira. I could survive this place.

Rain thrashed against the windows, and somewhere in the distance, thunder rolled. There had been rumours of a storm. I zipped my coat as I headed down the stairs to his chamber.

The first thing I saw was the glow of ectoplasm on the rug. Unsettled by the metallic smell of it, I followed the trail to the armchair, where Warden sat, calm as you please.

'Again?' I said flatly.

'Again.' He shifted. 'Fear not. I have already taken blood.'

'And aura,' I observed.

Warden spared me a glance. His eyes were orange, like amber struck by sunlight.

'Yes,' he said. 'I will soon heal.'

I walked to him to see the damage. His shirt was drenched and torn where the Emite had ripped into his back, right above his shoulder blade. I was surprised he was conscious.

'Why the hell do you keep doing this?' My tone was cool as I looked him dead in the eye. 'Why keep endangering yourself?'

‘I asked you the same about your visit to the Rookery.’

‘This is different. You’re the only one forbidden to fight the Emim, yet you keep going out there.’

‘They will kill and consume even more humans if some Rephaim do not help from the shadows.’ He reached for the cup of wine beside him. ‘I was a warrior once. I stand a better chance of defeating them. No matter what the blood-sovereign decrees, this is my calling.’

‘Why not just send Rephs to defend the colony, then?’ I stood in front of him. ‘If you have a better chance than we do. Why not cut the soldier charade and just use humans to feed on?’

Warden held my gaze for so long that I should have felt self-conscious.

‘It is complicated,’ he said, ‘but there are reasons.’

‘Reasons you never see fit to tell me.’

He drank. ‘For further reasons.’

Like the fact that we could never fully trust each other in this place, where everyone was a potential enemy. He still had too much power over me. I still had too much power over him. We could never be friends or confidants here, in the pressure cooker of our own suspicions.

‘The humans sent to fight the Emim are mostly red-jackets,’ I said. ‘The fewer of them are there during the rebellion, the better.’

‘You do not mean that.’

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Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

‘I do.’ I smiled thinly. ‘But no ... I don’t wish them all dead. I’ve a softer way to make sure they won’t trouble us.’

‘I will not ask.’ Warden glanced at me. ‘There is no food. Forgive me. I will see to it that you have a meal by dawn.’

A nod was all I gave him.

I had asked him about getting more for the harlies, but he was powerless in the matter. The next consignment of food would arrive on the day of the Bicentenary. What little remained here was rationed among the red-jackets, with scraps tossed into the Rookery. Michael knew an amaurotic in the Residence of Suzerain who was sometimes able to slip him leftovers, which he shared with me. Not enough to make a difference to the harlies.

‘Let me stitch the wound.’ I took off my coat. ‘You’re bleeding all over the show.’

Warden studied my face. ‘You wish to help me.’

‘I won’t offer again.’

‘Are you skilled at needlework, Paige?’

‘It won’t be tidy,’ I said, ‘but given where the wound is, I doubt you’d do it any better.’

‘A sound point.’ He nodded to the cabinet. ‘There is a sewing box in there. And salt.’

It sat on the top shelf. Inside were all the instruments I needed and more: a heavy pair of scissors, a stitching awl, bodkins and thimbles, spools of thread, surgical needles in a velvet-lined case.

A crack sounded right above the tower, followed by a full-throated rumble that seemed to shake the foundations of the residence. I longed to breathe in the sweetness of a summer storm again. I opened the nearest window and savoured the feel of warm rain on my face.

‘That seems unwise,’ Warden stated.

‘I love thunderstorms.’

I waited to see if he would order me to close it. All he did was take another drink of wine.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I’m sure you won’t get hit by lightning.’

The fire wavered as I moved the sewing box to the table. I almost asked Warden to take his shirt off before I remembered the scars he likely wanted to keep hidden. And the prohibition of flesh-treachery.

Warden leaned forward a little. I peeled a scrap of his shirt away. Beneath it was a deep and filthy gash, which leaked slow-pouring ectoplasm.

‘Gloves will make me too clumsy for this,’ I said, businesslike. ‘I’ll ... try not to touch you.’

Warden gave the barest nod.

Ectoplasm behaved like molten glass. Left for too long, it would set. This was still

fresh enough to wipe away with a cloth and salt water. I got on with that first, trying not to look too hard at the skin around the gash. I would show an ounce of respect for his privacy, even if he had destroyed mine by sifting through my memories. I would be better.

When the wound was as clean as I could get it, I set about drawing it shut. Though it looked like satin, his skin was tough to pierce; I had to exert a lot of force to get the needle through it, enough to make my arms tremble. It had to be hurting him, but he never made a sound.

In an effort to keep my balance, I forgot myself. I pressed a hand to the middle of his back.

He tensed under my touch. At once, I remembered myself – but it was too late, it was already done. I could feel his strong heartbeat, the muscle coursing under his skin.

It wasn't flesh-treachery. Yet he held himself now as if I had scalded him.

'Does it really disgust you that much?' I huffed a small laugh. 'Even through your shirt?'

'It is not disgust.'

'What, then?'

No answer. I shook my head and pushed the needle into his skin a little harder than necessary.

Nick had taught me to do this. He believed everyone should know how to treat their own wounds. I settled into a rhythm, into a trance, soothed by the heaviness of the storm.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

It was an extensive wound, but stitch by stitch, it was closing, smothering the glow of his blood. Now and again, lightning turned the room blue. Rain darkened the windowsill.

Warden endured my tender ministrations in silence. My stitches were askew, as usual, but pulled the skin together well enough.

‘You have a soft touch,’ he remarked. ‘For a criminal.’

‘Surprised?’ I drew the needle upward. ‘Criminals have the softest touches of all. Light-fingered pickpockets. Coiners and card-sharps. Even cutting a throat takes a certain finesse.’

‘You know this from experience.’

‘I’ve seen it done.’

‘Is it Jaxon Hall who revels in murder?’

‘No. Jax never gets blood on his hands,’ I said. ‘We do that for him.’

‘But you do not kill for him.’

It was a statement, not a question. ‘You know I’ve killed,’ I said. ‘Killing those two Underguards was what landed me here.’

‘Self-defence. Or accidental. I do not believe you have ever committed a cold-

blooded murder.'

'Stop making assumptions, or you'll be my first.' I moved another shred of his shirt. 'It was the Underlord. In Flower and Dean Street. He murders voyants who piss him off and leaves the bodies there as warnings. I saw him do it to a courier.' When I started on the next stitch, I was softer. 'Even the Vigiles are afraid to cross Haymarket Hector.'

Warden looked over his shoulder at me. He was close enough for me to see every strand of light in his eyes.

'Tell me,' he said, 'do you believe the syndicate could ever be cleansed of such cruelty?'

'Could the Rephaim?'

'Perhaps with different leaders.'

'Likewise, but a dethroning would cause untold chaos in itself. It could set off a war. Loyalists and reformers,' I said. 'Violence like that might not end for months. Years.'

Warden returned his attention to the flames.

'Many years,' he said.

The fire snapped and roared. I let myself get lost in the close work. Patience had never been my strong point, and the heat of the fire could have sent me to sleep, but the intricacy of this task – trying to sew him up without touching him, without being too rough – kept my focus as sharp as the needle. I was careful with the placement of my fingers, only ever letting them touch his shirt. By dint of care and concentration, I managed not to brush his skin.

All the while, he said nothing. Just sat there, through stitch after stitch, never flinching.

‘I am not well-versed in human expressions,’ he said at last, ‘but you seemed ... exasperated when you saw me like this.’

‘I was.’

‘Why?’

‘Because if you get your throat ripped out, I’m leading this rebellion with no help from you. And I don’t think that’s fair.’ I tugged the last stitch tight. ‘Could you resist the urge to be a hero for just a few more days?’

‘I am sure I can manage that.’

‘Good.’ I snipped the thread. ‘All done.’

I returned the instruments to the box. Warden reached over his shoulder to the stitches while I massaged my aching fingers.

‘They may not be tidy,’ he said, ‘but they serve. Thank you.’ He gave his shoulder a roll. ‘How is your wrist, Paige?’

‘A little sore. I’ll live.’

‘May I?’

Warden held out a hand. Wary, I went back to him and placed my arm in his grasp. Even with the gloves, he was gentle as he rolled up my sleeve, exposing my swollen wrist.

‘Extend your fingers as far as you can, if you would,’ he said. I did, and he touched the teardrop-shaped hollow that appeared at the base of my thumb. When he applied a little pressure there, it twinged, and I stiffened. ‘The healing seems very slow. You should wear the brace I gave you, or the bone may not settle in the correct position.’

I wished, yet again, that I understood him. He needed me alive and strong until the Bicentenary. Beyond that, he had no reason to care whether or not my broken wrist healed.

‘Okay,’ I said, and he released my hand. I stepped back as he rose to his full and daunting height. ‘Are we going to train now?’

‘No.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little rain.’

Warden opened a drawer, moving a little slower than usual. ‘Your training is over, Paige.’ He removed a taper from inside. ‘You may do as you please.’

‘Over,’ I echoed. He walked to the hearth. ‘Warden, we have more than a week until the Bicentenary. I could still get better in that time.’ I paused, realising. ‘You’re

giving up on me. You don't think I stand a chance against her. That's why, isn't it?

‘Quite the opposite.’

Those words caught me off-guard. I waited for him to explain.

‘Nashira knows you are capable of possession. She will expect you to try to use that ability against her. She will also expect you to fail.’ He dipped the taper into the fire and used it to start lighting the candles on the mantelpiece. ‘Fortunately, you will have the element of surprise on your side. To my knowledge, she has never been possessed. If our luck holds, the sensation will stun her, even if you cannot seize full control of her body.’

‘What if it doesn't stun her?’

‘It will. You have stunned me before.’ One by one, the candles flared to life. ‘There is no more we can do in the time we have. Pushing you any further may do more harm than good. It is time for you to gather your strength, Paige. To rest, and to make ready.’

‘But it still hurts when I do it. It still feels like tearing myself in two. I want—’ I turned away in frustration, eyes hot. ‘Fuck it. I'm not ready.’

Warden said nothing as I walked across the room and gripped the windowsill. The next swell of thunder vibrated right the way down my spine, through my breastbone and my ribs.

‘Scion calls us unnatural,’ I murmured, ‘and sometimes, when it hurts to use the part of me that makes me different ... I wonder. If it was always a curse. Never a gift.’

A creak from the floorboards, and then he was beside me.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘To the storm. It has the potential to destroy. It is neither quiet, nor gentle, nor soft. That does not make it unnatural.’ Lightning illuminated his features, the blue making his eyes stand out. ‘Let the storm into you, Paige. Hold it inside. See yourself as a force of nature, vast enough to defeat a god, and carry that image for all of your days.’

He needed to comfort me, to keep me on side. That was what I told myself. And yet there was passion in his voice – quiet, restrained, but present. If he had been human, I would have thought he meant it.

‘In short,’ I said, ‘if I tell myself I can beat her, I will?’ I shook my head. ‘You don’t believe that.’

‘I believe it would be a start,’ he said. ‘Your spirit responds to fear, to anger, and to danger, both to you and to those you love. You will never be in more danger than when you stand before Nashira on the night of the Bicentenary.’ His gaze burned into mine. ‘Perhaps we should both trust that you can save yourself, Paige Mahoney.’

As we stood together at the window and watched the storm move on, I realised he was right. Dreamwalking in his presence would never be the same as it would be with Nashira.

With him, I was no longer afraid.

Chapter 4

The Witching Soul of Music

PENAL COLONY OF SHEOL I

31AUGUST2059

After that, time moved quickly in the colony. All at once, it was the last night, and the stars were bright and clear above the Residence of Magdalen. I looked at them through the bars on the window.

The day after tomorrow, for better or for worse, there would be no bars around me.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

Warden had let me sleep on the daybed of late, so I could keep warm by the fire. I was only up here, at the top of the tower, to retrieve my backpack. I left my cell for the final time and closed the door behind me.

At the bottom of the stairs, I found the chamber empty. A meal waited for me on a silver tray.

Warden had said very little for the last week. Since he had ended our training, he had been distant, though he had responded if I requested help with anything to do with the rebellion. Some nights I would find him in the chapel, though I never disturbed him. Just soaked up the music. Other nights he disappeared, and I assumed he was with the scarred ones.

His allies remained in the shadows. Terebell Sheratan was one of them – that much I knew – but I had no idea how many Rephaim, if any, would come to our aid.

I had visited the Rookery one last time, to see Liss and Julian. We would have no time to speak at the Bicentenary. Liss would be on the silks, ready to run to the meadow with a flare gun straight after her performance, and now Julian had scavenged enough fuel, he would lead the arsonists.

Liss had embraced me when we parted. I could still feel the strength in her thin arms, smell the lavender she often tucked under her pillow. She had held me as if for the last time.

She would be fine. We all would. I had to believe it, or I would never sleep. This rebellion was happening in no small part because of me and Julian. I had seen the

same understanding in his eyes when we said goodbye. He would get no rest tonight, either.

I set the backpack down by the daybed. Warden must have gone to some effort to cobble a meal together, and I needed to eat, but even the smell of it made me nauseous. For want of a distraction, I lit a few candles in the next room and filled the bathtub. I was chilled to the marrow of my bones.

Soon I would face Nashira Sargas and, in all likelihood, she would succeed in binding my spirit. Warden, Liss, Julian – they knew as well as I did that my chances were low. If I had been able to use my gift for longer than six months – if my father had acknowledged it when I was a child, or if Jaxon had found me earlier – then perhaps I could have defeated her.

As things stood, I was fucked. My best hope was to do as much damage as I could before the end, then pray that someone would be kind enough to free my spirit one day.

Death would be the easy part. My silver cord would snap – that might hurt – but otherwise, I was familiar with the sensation of leaving my body. What I had yet to learn was how it would feel to be a fallen angel. Warden had said that the boundlings despised Nashira, so they must retain some degree of their former selves, but that unnerved me more than the thought of mindless servitude. I would have to obey her, to yield my gift to her, while remembering how I reviled her. While seeing all the suffering she would inflict as a dreamwalker. I would know that I was fuelling her reign.

Rephaim could live for ever. How long would I have to bear witness to her tyranny?

I sat in the bath for a long while, shivering even as the water gave my skin a rosy tinge. At last, I got out, dressed in a clean yellow tunic, then sat on the rug beside the

fire with my knees pulled to my chest. The gramophone played violin music as I untangled my curls.

As a dreamwalker, Nashira could do as she pleased. Make puppets out of politicians. Force her enemies to fling themselves from buildings. She could install herself in the very heart of the Unnatural Assembly. No one, and no place, would be safe.

All I was now was a weapon. I had to turn myself against her, and then, if I could, stop her from using me.

‘Paige.’

A deep and familiar voice brought me back in the present. Warden stood on the threshold.

‘Hello,’ I said.

‘I did not expect to find you here.’

‘Technically, I live here.’

‘Hm. Not for much longer.’ He closed the door and locked it. ‘I assumed you would prefer to spend your last night with your friends in the Rookery.’

I shook my head. ‘Everything is in place. We agreed to just try to get some rest. And Liss pointed out that knowing my luck, I’d wind up getting into a scrap if I stayed there.’ I looked back at the fire. ‘I can’t afford to get hurt.’

‘Liss is sagacious.’

She had all but thrown me out at sunset. Suhail will soon be on the prowl, was her

warning. If he finds you in here, he'll beat the ten bells out of you, and then you'll not have a chance against Nashira. Her face had softened. You get some sleep now, Paige. Even if you win tomorrow, the battle to unearth the anchor has only just begun.

Something about her tone had unsettled me.

Liss could glimpse the future. I could only allow myself to think of the next few steps. At noon tomorrow, Michael would drug the red-jackets at their feast, using the concoction he had coerced Duckett into making. That was the final and most crucial stage before I attacked Nashira. Perhaps I should have felt guilty for planning to leave them all here to rot, but they had chosen their side.

Warden approached his desk. I teased my curls apart to help them dry, willing the small task to absorb me. My gaze soon followed him.

After six months of living with Arcturus Mesarthim, this might be the last evening I ever spent in his company. The thought should have delighted me. Not so long ago, I had resented his mere existence, plotted to kill him, thought of him as an enemy.

Now, months later, his presence was something of a comfort. He was a fellow prisoner, if not a friend. And I didn't want to spend what could be my final night on earth alone.

Warden served himself some red wine. 'Mind sharing?' I asked.

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Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

He glanced at me before taking another goblet from the cabinet and filling it. I accepted it and drank. The wine was sweet and rich and soft, and it warmed me in a way nothing else had.

‘So,’ I said, a little hoarsely, ‘how does the blood-sovereign execute her victims?’

He sat in his wing chair. ‘That knowledge will not ease you.’

‘Horrifically, then. Let’s see, now,’ I mused. ‘Cut throat? Decapitation? Maybe a good old-fashioned noose. I’ll wager they’re building a scaffold in the Guildhall as we speak.’

No reply.

The music kept playing. I wanted to ask what it was, but my mouth was suddenly like paper, my palms sweating.

‘I owe you an apology.’ Warden broke the silence. ‘If the first rebellion had succeeded, it would not have come to this.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up about it. You tried.’

‘Not enough.’

He looked into the flames. I watched the play of light in his eyes, wishing I could decipher it.

‘I could have fled the colony after it happened. Refused to take any further part in the cruelty. Lived a life in exile,’ he said. ‘I stayed because I thought it craven to run. And a part of me – small, but tireless – clung to the belief that one day, I would have a second chance to change this place. I was right to keep the faith. When I saw you flee across the rooftops on the night you were arrested – when I watched you leap over a precipice – I hoped it was you.’

I held his gaze.

‘You were faced with a stark choice on that night, Paige. Surrender to certain arrest,’ he went on, ‘or risk death for a chance to keep your liberty. You chose the latter.’

‘All that should have shown you is that I’ll do anything to save my own skin. I abandoned my father that night.’

‘It was too late for him. I imagine you knew that,’ Warden said. I looked away. ‘It was no great stretch to imagine that a determined voyant, sure enough of her own self-worth to fight to the death for her freedom, would also be sure of others’ worth. Enough to fight for theirs as well.’

I was still lost in thoughts of my father. His arrest had bought me enough time to run.

Warden moved from his chair. Next thing I knew, he was at my side, holding out a bundle of dark fabric.

‘You should not wear yellow tonight.’ His voice thrummed low in his throat. ‘You are no coward.’

Slowly, I took the bundle from him. He turned away as I shed the yellow, leaving me in a sleeveless undershirt, and slid my arms into a black sweater. I freed my hair from it before I gathered up the yellow tunic and threw it into the fireplace.

‘I keep asking myself what I’m going to do if I survive this.’ I watched it catch fire. ‘I can’t just go back to being the Pale Dreamer. Not now I know what created Scion, and why voyants are hunted. I’ll ... try to rally the syndicate. Get the Underlord to listen to the survivors. Whatever happens, I won’t be silent about what I’ve seen.’ The fire crackled. ‘What will you do, Warden?’

‘Reunite old allies. Sow resentment of the Sargas. Weaken them wherever they stand.’ Warden filled his goblet again. ‘Perhaps we will meet again one day, Paige. In London.’

‘You wouldn’t like who I am in London. I’ve tried my best to shield people here, to be decent, but there ... I’m a mollisher,’ I said. ‘The Pale Dreamer is a name people fear.’

‘Because she is the heir of the White Binder. You have done what you needed to do to survive.’

‘We both have.’

‘Yes. Besides,’ he said, ‘as we have long established, you do not like me. You should not care if I like whoever it is you are in London.’

I managed a faint smile.

‘Maybe I could have liked you. Maybe we could have been friends.’ It flowed out of me as if I had already dreamed it. ‘Maybe, if I was just me and dreamwalkers had never been hunted, I could have overheard you playing this old music and realised it was the same music I loved ... and maybe we could have got talking about it over coffee. If we’d met in another world.’

‘A world where I was not a Rephaite.’ Warden studied my face. ‘Or you were not

human.'

'Not even that. Just a world where we had nothing to fear. From each other,' I said, 'or anyone else.'

Warden never broke my gaze. The wine had loosened my tongue.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

‘Would that such a world existed,’ he said.

We sat there in the firelight for a very long time. The tunic burned. When the gramophone stopped playing, Warden made no attempt to wind it again. The silence was forgiving. The world I had painted might never exist, yet here – for a night, at least – it could.

He would linger in my thoughts when I left this place. I would always wonder. I would think of him as I would a story with no end, forever writing my own tales of what he had become.

‘I have a confession,’ I said. ‘Think they used to do those in churches. Since I might die tomorrow, I’d better absolve myself.’

Warden tilted his head. I took a small object from my backpack and tossed it to him.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t read it.’

Warden held up the small key to his journal. ‘You must enlighten me as to how you took this.’

‘I’m just a very impressive, competent person.’

With a tiny shake of his head, he placed it on the table. ‘So you are.’

The mantel clock gave a chime. We both looked at it, then at each other. I needed to start trying to sleep, but I might not have a chance to take my leave of him tomorrow.

‘Warden,’ I said.

‘Yes, Paige?’

‘I’m not going to say I’ll miss you, but meeting you was ... an experience.’

‘As was making your acquaintance, Paige Mahoney.’

He snuffed the lamps so I could rest. I shifted a cushion under my head and closed my eyes.

By two in the morning, I was no closer to drifting off. Cold sweats soaked me. My heart thumped and my thoughts raced. In the rare moments my mind quietened, Nashira would burst into it and jolt me from the verge of a doze. Knife across the throat – possibly. Disembowelled – no, that would be too far, too disturbing for the emissaries to witness. Blood drained from my body – too messy. Head struck off my shoulders. Hanged.

I had seen the bodies that swayed on the Lychgate. The jut of their broken necks.

Warden had retired around midnight. He lay still in his bed. Heavy-eyed, I got up and used the tongs to move another log on to the embers of the fire. I stood by the window and looked at the stars. I drank another small measure of wine, hoping it would knock me out. And at last, I sank back on to the daybed and continued to stare at the ceiling.

The clock mocked me with its ticking. Finally, a hand on my shoulder made me turn my head.

Warden. He pressed a different goblet into my hands, half-full of a pale drink.

‘This will help,’ he said.

Too tired to ask questions, I sat up and knocked it back. It was rich and milky, with an herbal aftertaste.

‘You will be all right.’ He took the goblet away. ‘Sleep. You have earned it.’

I nodded and laid my head back down, warmer.

Whatever he had given me, it worked for a while. When I woke, the delicate glow of dawn tinted the room, and Warden was a silhouette by the window.

‘Wild oat.’

I stirred. ‘What?’

‘When you were fevered, you asked if I would plant wild oat on your grave.’ His voice was so low that it was little more than a tremor. ‘Why do its flowers speak to you?’

‘I like their meaning. The witching soul of music,’ I murmured. ‘Music seems as good a thing as any to die for, doesn’t it?’

Even though his face was almost hidden by the shadows, the cord whispered of understanding.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I suppose it does.’

Chapter 5

Scars

SCION CITADEL OF PARIS

7JANUARY2060

I could no longer sleep without any light. Since our arrival in the safe house, I had kept the shutters cracked by day and a lamp on through the night. Light had always disturbed me before, but if I turned it down to an ember-like glow, I could just about drift off. I always did it. There was always light.

So when I woke to absolute darkness, I knew why.

There was no alarm clock this time. Just the never-ending black of the Westminster Archon.

Fear paralysed me. Even my jaw was locked. I breathed hard through my nose, staring at where the ceiling had been, where now there was a void.

Darkness. Chains around my limbs. And close by, unmistakable, the drip, drip, drip of water.

Flux. The new versions must be doing this to me. Taunting me with visions of safety

and freedom. Giving me hallucinations so solid, so authentic, that they were indistinguishable from reality. I had fever-dreamed myself to Paris, lived for seven days there. How long had it been in the cell?

How long until my execution?

Heat wavered in my eyes. I clenched my fists. If Nashira wanted me to beg for death, I would. Let Suhail come. Let it end.

As if I had summoned my death, the door opened.

The rush of my blood was deafening. A flood in my head, the herald of the water. I had thought I would be brave, even grateful, when my killer came – but now the moment was at hand, I remembered all the things Nashira had said to me. About witches, drowned and burned for nothing. About traitors, hanged and drawn and quartered.

I was a witch. I was a traitor. The executioner would butcher me with a red-hot blade, drag out my entrails while I was alive. Nashira would hear me scream before I left this world. She would make me suffer for standing against her, for taking what had once been hers ...

Whimpers escaped my lips. A tear seeped past my temple and soaked into my hair. I had to move. I struggled to escape my chains, but my limbs only half-worked. Held in place. Buried alive.

Somewhere in the roar, a voice. More questions. More threats. More whispers about sordid humans. Whatever it was, I refused to let it be the last thing I heard.

I sensed movement. Suhail Chertan, come to take me to my doom. Blood pooled in my middle, turning my fingertips to ice. I wrapped them around the nearest object

and flung myself at the monster in the dark.

Colliding with the bulk of Suhail was almost enough to knock me back on to the waterboard. I swung my weapon with all my might. It rushed through empty air. The momentum buckled me. With a scream of frustration, I struck again, with such force that my weapon flew from my hand.

The darkness kept me blind on one plane. Not on the other. I reached for the æther, lunged for the dreamscape, and then I was on him again, groping for his throat. I could hear my own voice, but the words had no shape. This was the language of terror.

Yellow eyes ignited in the dark. Rephaite eyes. I went limp with dread, my fingers loosening, every bone and nerve giving up in one go. His aura was all over me. Before I knew it, a huge pair of hands had scooped under my arms, and I was weightless.

I found myself on a soft, flat surface. For an instant, there was space. I was unbound. I could breathe. Moments later, panic kicked in again. The darkness grew and thickened until it smothered me. Coughing and heaving, I scrambled back until my head smacked into wood, and I curled up like a child in the womb, pleading for mercy.

The fight was lost. Even if I could escape this room, I would only run in circles until someone caught me, hauled me away. I would die in this place, in darkness and agony—

‘Paige,’ a voice barked.

My name.

Suhail had never used my name.

In an instant, a hush fell in my mind. Every breath was magnified. I could feel the mattress under my knees, the headboard grating on my spine. A bed. Not the waterboard.

‘Who is that?’ I tasted salt. ‘T-tell me.’

‘Only me, little dreamer.’

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

Warden. The disembodied voice did sound like him.

‘What—’ I could hardly breathe through my pinhole-sized throat. ‘What time is it?’

‘It is almost midnight.’

My heart was hammering.

‘No.’ I slid my fingers into my hair and let out a weak sob. ‘No. I’m not here. It’s not you. It’s not real.’

‘If you are not here, and I am not me, and none of this is real,’ was the tranquil reply, ‘then I cannot think how this conversation is taking place. We seem to have entered the realm of metaphysics.’

The darkness tempted me to trust it. It knew my weaknesses. Only Arcturus Mesarthim would have snuck a word likemetaphysics(whatever that meant) into his attempt to calm me down.

‘The lamp.’ There was a rattle in my voice. ‘I left a light on.’

‘The storm has caused a power outage.’

Even as his words sank in, I kept a firm grip on the headboard. This could still be a trick. There were no borders left between illusion and reality. If the light came on and itwasSuhail, I would shatter. I would shriek with laughter until I was hanged.

My nightshirt was drenched in sweat. I heard the hiss of a match being lit, saw the flame appear. What it revealed was Warden. I almost buckled with relief before I noticed his dishevelment. His hair was awry – more so than usual – and the top of his shirt was ripped open, two of the buttons pulled right off.

‘Warden.’ Shock rooted me in place. ‘Warden, I didn’t – I didn’t mean – I didn’t think it was you.’

‘Suhail.’

‘Yes. I’m s—’

‘If you are about to apologise, Paige, I bid you remember our agreement.’

No apologies. On the day we arrived, we had decided.

‘Why the hell did you let me attack you?’ My chest heaved. ‘You could have stopped me.’

‘Because I would have had to restrain you.’ He spoke quietly. ‘I did not think that would be the wisest course of action.’

He was right. If his iron-hard arms had come around me, it would have been akin to being chained. Instead of trying to hold me still, he had lifted me away from him, back into my own space. With a whimper, I tucked myself against the headboard and gave way to the shaking.

Warden knelt beside the bed, so his gaze was about level with mine. I stayed exactly where I was.

‘Paige,’ he said, ‘I want you to come and sit with me. As we used to sit together in

Magdalen.'

Hair clung to my wet face. 'Why?'

'Because I want you to tell me what happened to you.'

I shook my head. 'No.'

'We spoke of it when we arrived here. You told me about your room. I told you about mine.'

The rooms where we had lost part of ourselves. For him, it was the tower where he had been mutilated. For me, it was the pitch-black basement where I had been meant to die.

'I was tortured alongside my Ranthen-kith.' His eyes pierced me. 'There was cruelty and design in that – I often wished it otherwise, wished that no one I cared for had borne witness to my ruin – but I knew, at least, that there were others who understood what I had suffered. In the end, it became a comfort. You were alone, Paige.'

Tears seeped down my cheeks.

'A secret, held within, can become a poison.' He kept hold of my gaze. 'Even if you cannot tell me the whole story, perhaps you could explain what has changed since that first day.'

He was right. I had been able to talk to him, to touch him, on the day we arrived in Paris. I had held on to his shoulders and let him guide my breaths while I bathed for the first time. He had carried me when I was too weak to stand. Perhaps it was because there had been no time to look back in those hours after the escape – only forward, to survival.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:33 am

Then I had recollected it all. Every vile detail of the room. He was an oneiromancer, the master of memory, but I needed to forget. His gift was a threat to my sanity.

Warden seemed to accept that no reply was coming.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘if you prefer, we can speak of other things. You are not, in fact, obliged to say anything to me at all. Either way, I would be glad of your company.’

I recovered enough clarity to take a deep, slow breath. The now-familiar stab echoed it. If I stayed here, I would have no choice but to sit in the dark until the power returned.

‘Okay,’ I said.

Warden took the candle with him. Once I was bundled up in my cardigan, I followed him down the corridor, arms crossed. He went to the kitchen. I went to the parlour.

He had lit a few more candles. They glowed on the mantelpiece and the coffee table, painting the walls with light and shadow. I sank on to the couch.

When Warden came back, he was carrying a mug of coffee and a bottle of illegal wine.

‘Your vice,’ he said, ‘and mine.’

He set the mug in front of me. I took it between chilled hands. Warden sat in the armchair.

The coffee had more flavour than the stew. He must have taken note of how I made it. I wrestled with myself while he sat, wordless, and poured himself a glass of wine.

I had feared this opportunity to bare my soul to him. When such a chance arose, I always wanted to take it. Warden was patient, and he listened. The screaming inside me longed to be heard.

And I realised I did want to tell him. Hiding what had happened made it feel filthier than it was.

‘If I do this, I want you to promise me something,’ I said. ‘That you will never look for yourself. That no matter how curious you are, and no matter how much you want to understand, you will never look at my memories of what happened in that basement. Promise me, Arcturus.’

‘I promised you I would never invade your privacy again. It is not a promise I mean to break.’

‘Not even if you think it will save me. No matter how you try to justify it, I will never forgive you.’

‘You have my word.’

The moment of truth. I took an unsteady sip of coffee and put the mug down. My hands remained so cold that my fingernails had a grey tinge, the way they did after I dreamwalked.

‘I woke up. Everything was dark and silent.’ I stared at the wall. ‘At first I thought I was in the æther, but then I realised I was chained. With my arms above my head.’

As soon as I started talking, there was a small and distant sense of relief. The slightest

relaxation in my back, as if something there had been clenched for days. At the same time, most of my body was on edge, as if I was about to jump from a height. My palms began to sweat. My pulse quickened. A deep ache gnawed at my wrists and shoulders.

‘Have you ever seen a waterboard?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’ll know it’s angled so the head is lower than the rest of the body.’

‘I have never seen it done.’

I gave a stiff nod.

‘You feel as if you’re drowning from the moment it begins. You are drowning,’ I said.

‘The water makes you gag, and there’s a cloth on your face, like skin over your mouth. Like you have no mouth or nose at all. Air comes up, so you need to breathe in straight away. You know you can’t. You still do, because your body gives you no choice.’

‘I’ve never been afraid of water. I always thought I’d manage, somehow, if I ended up on the board. A dreamwalker knows how to go without breath ... but it took me five seconds to understand. Why a person would say anything to make it stop. Why they break their own bones trying to get free.’

‘I tried to be quiet. I wanted to endure it in silence, to not show fear. Part of me must have thought I could just lie there and swallow pints of it down like a fish. That it wasn’t going to hurt.’ I smiled mirthlessly. ‘Sounds absurd when I say that out loud. Arrogant.’

‘No, Paige.’

The air turned to cotton wool in my throat.

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‘And then it was just ... agony,’ I said. ‘It was in my stomach, in my lungs, my head. I screamed. I couldn’t stop myself from struggling. I didn’t answer his questions, but that might be because half the time I couldn’t even understand what he was saying, I was so desperate for air.’ As I spoke, I rubbed my wrist, where a manacle had rubbed shallow wounds into my skin. ‘I’ve always had an ... awareness of my body. As separate from me, I mean. It was a cage, but I had a key to it.’

‘Your gift.’

Another small nod.

‘In the Archon,’ I said, ‘they took the key. Stopped me escaping from my body.’ I clenched my fist. ‘They turned me into one of their torture devices. My ribs were the bars. My muscles were chains. I was doubly imprisoned. Suffocated by the water, but also by my own skin.’

I was shivering now, remembering the cold.

‘I don’t know exactly how long he kept me in there. In the cold. There was no light, except when he turned one on. The blinding light above the board.’ I circled the jutting bone of my wrist. ‘I might have slept. I don’t remember. It was so dark, I couldn’t tell the difference. I still can’t. And I still can’t get warm. I’m so cold. All the time.’

My face burned. I hid behind my hair.

‘He—’ I drew my knees closer. ‘He never unchained me. Not for days. Not until they

moved me to a cell. And of course, I was swallowing more water than my body knew what to do with.'

I waited for him to draw the right conclusion. Shame washed over me in hot waves.

'I see.'

His voice was soft and cold. I closed my eyes as the silence returned – a silence filled with what I knew, and what he could only imagine. What he was likely trying not to imagine.

'Did Jaxon know what was being done to you?' Warden finally said.

'I don't know exactly how much he knew. But he can't have been oblivious.' My arms quickened with gooseflesh. 'I was sick. Over and over. When it got into my stomach. And—'

I could smell and taste the flood again, so strong it clenched my throat.

'The water didn't taste ... clean,' I managed. 'I keep thinking about what he might have put into it.'

Warden was very still. His jaw formed a hard line.

'He said that if you could see me, you'd be repulsed. Kept telling me how sordid I was. How low your standards must be.' Closing my eyes again, I forced myself to keep talking. 'At the time, I didn't really listen. I was trying to survive. To not betray my friends. To find the will to keep fighting for long enough to get to Sensshield. But now—'

My voice cracked into nothing.

‘You have had time to remember,’ Warden finished. ‘To reflect on what happened.’

The golden cord was taut.

‘I wondered if it was the beatings,’ he said. ‘If that was why you were afraid to be touched.’

‘They did beat me. That was another kind of degradation. Like I was back at that f-fucking hellhole of a school.’

Now I was talking to him, it was all seeping out of me like blood from a wound.

‘So,’ I went on, ‘when it happened in the Archon, I thought I’d be able to stand that, too. But they kept calling me brogue, boglander – all the things those girls used to whisper in the corridors – and I realised that nothing had changed in Scion since then. And I tried to be brave, Warden. But now I just – everything hurts, and I remember it all, and I can’t even – I can’t—’

My arms tightened.

‘I still feel trapped. I’m afraid I won’t ever be able to touch anyone again, because even the lightest touch will feel like a chain,’ I forced out. ‘I see what Suhail was trying to do. Jaxon did almost the same thing, and I took the bait. They wanted to restore the natural order between you and me. To make me fear the touch that makes us equal.’

‘The idea did not come from Suhail, if so,’ Warden said. ‘He is not cunning enough for that. This is Nashira.’

‘That’s the worst of it. Suhail is a coward and a brute. That was deliberate on her part. Choosing him to degrade me.’ The candles flickered. ‘Glimpsing the trap doesn’t make

me any less caught in it. Every time you've been close to me, I've remembered what he said. Thought about how disgusting I must seem to you. I j-just want—'

A wordless sound ground up my throat. I pressed my face into my hands to stop it. Shudders racked my frame, each one jolting my bruises. All I could feel was pain.

Warden rose. The couch sank a little as he sat beside me, leaving space between us.

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‘If you never want me to touch you again,’ came his soft voice, ‘I will not. But if your fear is based on the lies of Suhail and Nashira, then I urge you to fight it. Do not let them win.’

In silence, he held out one hand, palm up. I lifted my raw face to look. No glove. Just him.

At first, I thought it would be impossible. Suhail hissed into my ear. A part of me still lived in that room and, as hard as I pulled, it refused to come back.

Warden watched my face. I thought of how my body answered to his hands, in a way it never had to anyone but him. How careful they always were when they touched me.

‘Not that it should matter to you, for it would mean I was undeserving of your notice,’ he said, ‘but if Iwererepulsed by you, I ask you why I would have taken you in my arms in the Guildhall.’

Shaken by his frankness, I looked at him.

‘The prohibition of flesh-treachery had been repeated to me like a chant, for centuries, by the time I met you. I was blood-consort. Nashira made sure I was well-informed of the vile nature of humans. All that Suhail said to you, I have heard many times,’ he said. ‘After Jaxon betrayed the rebellion, I almost came to believe it. Almost.’ He held my gaze. ‘You restored my conviction. You confirmed to me that the Sargas are wrong.’

A rush of tenderness went through me.

‘I resisted their indoctrination in the past, and I have no intention of falling to it now.’
He kept his hand out. ‘You must not, either.’

When I placed a hand into his, my muscles tensed. In a flash, I saw my fingers as they had been a week ago, covered in blood, the nails plum-dark with bruising. They looked so brittle.

Warden held very still. He made no move to keep my hand where it was. Just let it lie in the cup of his palm.

‘We Rephaim were graced with immense strength,’ he said. ‘In the tower, I could scarcely lift my head after the Ripper had done his work. I could not rise to comfort Terebell, though she was so close to me that I could feel her aura. Nashira ensured we were side by side, forced to watch each other suffer.’ The words stemmed from deep in his chest. ‘I can never fully understand what was done to you. Only you know that. But I know what it is to believe oneself broken, Paige. To feel the chains even in liberty.’

Shivers kept coursing through me, but the longer my palm was against his, the easier my breath came. I traced the familiar lines, the scars that almost encircled his fingers.

‘See me now,’ he said. ‘I will always carry the scars, and the memories, but I regained my strength. I found myself again. So will you.’

Very carefully, he grazed his thumb across the backs of my fingers. Heat surged into my throat.

‘I hate you seeing me like this.’ My voice shook. ‘You chose me because I was strong. Because I was resilient. I overheard you telling Burnish.’ Exhausted, I shook my head. ‘Look at me now. I am not the person you chose to lead a war.’

‘I am looking at you, Paige Mahoney.’ He was. ‘I see a warrior who sacrificed herself to a brutal enemy for a better world. And despite all the wrong that was done to her, all the pain and humiliation she endured, she did not speak one word to betray the revolution. She did not condemn her friends. And yet, as always, she is blind to her own courage.’

‘I have no courage left.’ A tear ran down to my jaw. ‘I spent it all in that room.’

‘It will return.’

‘But I’m always afraid now. I’m afraid of the dark. I’m afraid of water.’ My shoulders heaved. ‘I’m afraid I’ll never be able to fight again.’

‘Fear does not extinguish courage. Suhail Chertan did not steal anything from you. Had he been tortured for half the time you were, he would have surrendered all he knew of the Sargas.’ His gaze burned into mine. ‘I survived. So will you. Neither of us is going to let our enemies win by hearkening to their lies. Are we agreed?’

My eyes filled. I turned to him with a weak exhalation, and at last, I put my arms around him.

Warden drew me to his chest. He was gentle enough that I could pull away, and I almost did. I almost broke. I no longer knew what to do with my hands, and I didn’t fit against him as easily as I once had. Same puzzle, wrong pieces. It was as if we were both spun from glass. As if holding on too hard would fracture us both.

But I could touch him. I could still bear to be close to another person. Warden set his chin on the top of my head as I softened against him, as I let myself breathe into his shirt. His left hand cupped my head, while the other came to rest in the middle of my back.

I don't know how long I stayed in that strange, fragile embrace. Warden murmured Gloss and held me until, at last, I fell asleep.

Epilogue

SCION CITADEL OF PARIS

11JANUARY2060

One embrace was never going to put me back together. Only I could do that, and I sensed that it would be a lifelong task.

As the days passed, I still woke often from restless sleep. I still flinched at the sound of rain and the hiss of water from the tap. I still needed space, to the point that even my clothes, even the sheets I slept in, could sometimes feel like shackles – but every time I rose, I found that I was just a little bit stronger. And the room was just a little bit farther away. And I craved oblivion just a little bit less, even though the hunger still gripped me. Even though I still looked at my reflection and wished that I could fade away.

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Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:34 am

I woke early one morning to birdsong. To Warden, seated at the table, looking out of an open window, where a crisp breeze drifted in. I was on the couch, covered by a couple of blankets.

It took me a moment to remember what I was doing in the parlour. He had started trying to teach me chess the night before, and we had ended up playing deep into the small hours. I must have fallen asleep straight after.

‘Good morning, Paige,’ he said.

I propped myself up on one elbow. ‘Morning.’

On the table in front of me stood a coffee press and a mug. I sat up, pulling the blankets around my shoulders.

‘The dawn chorus,’ Warden said quietly. ‘I seldom heard it in the colony. The Emim drove the birds away.’

I listened. It was faint, but somehow, it was there.

‘I’m surprised we can hear it in the middle of a citadel,’ I said.

‘This is the first time.’

I rubbed sleep from my eyes. ‘In London, it was usually traffic or costermongers that woke me up,’ I said. ‘Or Jaxon, banging on my bedroom door with his cane at some unholy hour.’

‘You must miss your life in Seven Dials.’

The small hollow in my chest – the one that had been there for weeks – seemed to deepen. I poured the coffee.

‘I never thought I would think of London as my home. Never thought I’d come to love it.’ I blew on the mug. ‘I wonder how long we’ll be in Paris. Whether it will be a fleeting visit, or if this will feel like home, too.’

‘We will find out,’ Warden said. ‘When Domino arrives.’

He kept his gaze on the open window. The light of dawn limned his face.

‘You seem entranced.’ I had to smile. ‘Does your love of music extend to birdsong?’

‘Perhaps the dawn chorus speaks to me,’ he said, ‘as a creature of the in-between.’ His hands were clasped on the table. ‘The birds sing in the twilight that bridges night and day. While they sing, we exist on the threshold between two states.’

His words gave me a shiver. I drank and listened to the song.

When I had finished the coffee, I rose to wash, which was no easier than it had been the first time I tried. I managed, though, and when I was dressed, I padded to the kitchen and searched the cupboards for something to eat. Warden was leafing through a copy of theDaily Descendant.

‘Anything of interest?’ I asked as I slotted bread into the toaster.

‘Only promises and platitudes. Frank Weaver vows to destroy the Mime Order.’

‘Of course he does.’

I cracked two eggs into a pan. As they bubbled themselves white, I started to cough again. Each one wrenched my torso, as if a hook was buried right in my middle.

‘Sorry,’ I croaked. Warden looked up. ‘I must be driving you spare with this cough.’

‘No.’

I shot him a sceptical look. ‘I sound like a seagull in the throes of an agonising death, and it isn’t testing your patience?’

‘I confess myself unfamiliar with the sound of seagulls in their death throes.’ His gaze darted over my face. ‘It may or may not resolve itself without proper medical attention, Paige.’

As if to confirm his suspicion, the sharp pain hit me in the chest again. I shallowed my breathing.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it’s not as if I can just check myself into hospital, is it?’

He looked back at the Descendant. We both knew.

Source Creation Date: June 26, 2025, 6:34 am

For a while, the only sound in the room was the sizzle and sputter of the eggs and my half-stifled coughs.

‘You did not like the stew,’ Warden said.

I turned, wary. ‘What?’

‘The stew I made you was not to your taste.’ He kept reading as my eyes widened and my lips parted, as a quick denial leapt to my tongue. ‘Fear not. I knew from the first bite. However, I would be obliged if you could tell me where I went wrong.’

‘Wait, you knew I didn’t like it?’ I abandoned the pan to stare at him. ‘And you still let me eat it?’

‘I did.’

When I realised, my cheeks warmed. The glow in his eyes had been amusement, not delight at his culinary success. He had been amused.

‘You utter—’ For the first time in days, I laughed. ‘How did you know?’

‘Perhaps I am growing more experienced in reading your expressions.’ He looked back at me. ‘I suppose you were trying to spare my feelings. Kind of you, but I would prefer to know how I might improve.’

I tried to think of how to phrase it without denting his enthusiasm. Warden watched me, head tilted in expectation.

‘Well,’ I began, ‘it may not have tasted of ... much. Of anything. Which is fine, by the way. Some humans enjoy mild food. I just personally like a bit of flavour. A pinch of salt and spice. And foods are generally supposed to taste distinct from one another.’

‘I see.’ Warden folded the newspaper. ‘You had better show me, then.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘You want me to teach you to cook?’

‘I was your mentor once. Now you can be mine. Besides,’ he said, ‘we have little else to do but wait.’

The reminder made me glance towards the window, at the laden clouds that were on their way.

‘Yes,’ I said, too low for Warden to hear. ‘Wait for Domino to collect its life debt.’

He came to stand at my side. Hitching up a smile, I reached into the cupboard and set out a few ingredients.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘This is pepper.’ I gave the grinder a tempting shake. ‘And we’re going to use it liberally.’