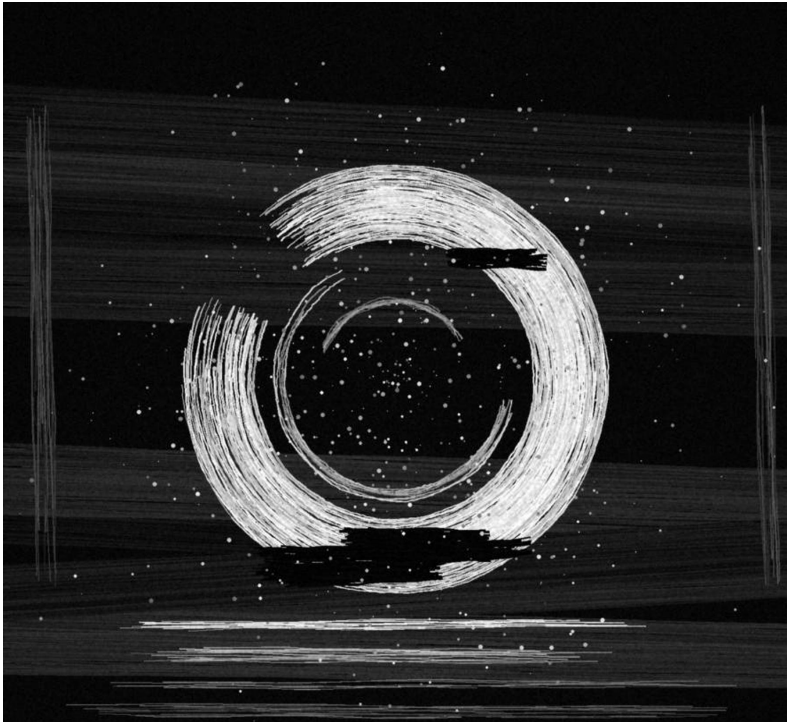


SHARDS OF OBLIVION

a novel

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Shards of Oblivion

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Аннотация

Every spell at Lungrave costs a memory. Mages pay in days, faces and voices, and no one knows what the next spell will take.

Ilva Renn arrives at the academy with no shard, the only student without one. After her fathers death she has twelve feathers, a pair of gloves she must never remove, and a gift best kept secret: she sees the memories of whatever she touches.

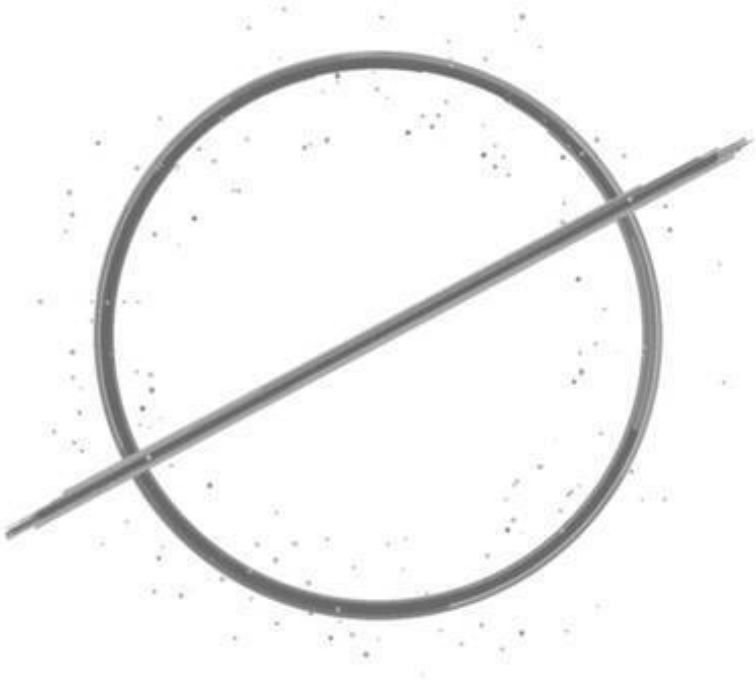
Cassian Veir is heir to an ancient house. He carries a notebook of rules in his own hand and cannot recall why he wrote them. Near Ilva, his shard stops aching, and that frightens him more than the pain ever did.

Above the academy looms the Winter Circle, a rite that draws five members of the Council, each wearing a ring on the little finger. Someone leaves white feathers at doors. Someone decided long ago who they would be to each other.

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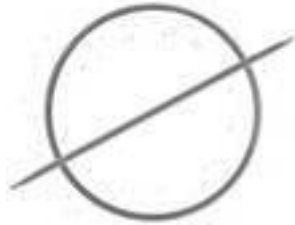
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You will pay with what you remember.

— The Statutes of Lungrave



Chapter 1. Extra on the List

THE RAIN had followed her all the way from the Sea Road, and by the time the cart reached the foot of the cliff, Ilva was soaked to the skin.

Lungrave stood at the very edge of the precipice. Dark and sharp, it jutted over the sea as though someone had driven a splinter of black glass into the sky. Waves broke far below, and in the narrow windows of the upper towers a cold, bluish light was burning. The light of shards, Ilva realised. They said you could see it from an hour away, and for the first time she believed the stories.

"You're on your own from here, girl," the driver said, without turning around. "I won't go any higher. The horses don't like the place."

"And you?"

"Neither do I."

She jumped down onto the wet stones, caught up her small trunk and the bag with her father's quills, and stood for a moment watching the cart turn and rattle off down the road. Then she straightened her gloves. Grey, darned, made of thin leather, they were the one thing she never took off. Not in her sleep, not at meals, not at her father's funeral.

The way up was a hundred steps. Ilva counted them, because counting calmed her, and she needed calming. The letter with

the seal of Aervell lay against her ribs and burned through the cloth, though she hadn't touched it since noon. It had arrived three weeks ago. *"Ilva Renn, daughter of the copyist Tamas Renn, is admitted to Academy Lungrave as a first-year student."* Not a word about what she had done to deserve it. Not a word about admitting a girl without a shard.

It was a mistake. She knew it as surely as she knew the colour of her own eyes. But her father had died in the spring, the shop had gone to pay his debts, and a mistake bearing the royal seal was the only door that had opened for her.

A gatekeeper waited under the arch, thin and sour-faced, with a sodden book in his hands. He raised his lantern and looked at her face, then at the trunk, then at her face again.

"Name."

"Ilva Renn."

He ran a finger down the list, and the finger stopped.

"Renn, Renn," he muttered. "Here. Added in different ink." He raised his eyes to her. "There's a note. 'No shard.'"

Behind him, in the dark, someone laughed softly.

"I know," Ilva said evenly. "It's in the letter. I have the letter with me."

"I've seen the letter. The seal's genuine." The gatekeeper winced as though he had a toothache. "Go on in. Madam Orvin will work out what to do with you."

The gate creaked open. Ilva stepped forward, slipped on the wet stone, and grabbed the iron grille.

A mistake. A simple, stupid, ordinary mistake.

The gates were old and cold, and the moment her palm touched the metal, something shot through her fingers, half cold, half voice. She had time for one thought only: *The glove.* But the glove on her left hand was torn at the forefinger, and that was enough.

The world slid sideways.

Hundreds of faces. Hundreds of footsteps on these stairs. A girl with plaits crying because she was afraid of heights. A boy in an expensive cloak laughing too loudly to hide his fear. Someone passing under the arch with a shard burning in his chest and nothing but emptiness in his eyes, as though no one had stood behind them for a long time. Thousands who had come in, thousands who had forgotten, and the iron remembered them all at once, and all of it crashed down on her like a wave.

Ilva snatched her hand back and pressed it to her chest. Her heart was pounding. The gatekeeper had already turned away and hadn't noticed a thing.

Careful, she told herself. *Careful, you fool. You'll lose your mind in the very first minute if you grab at everything in sight.*

The courtyard of Lungrave was paved with black stone, and the rain turned it into a mirror. Students stood along its edges. They weren't sheltering from the downpour, only standing there, and the rain ran off their cloaks without lingering, as though the air between them and the storm were thicker than water. From each collar came a faint glow. Blue on some, greenish on others,

almost white on two.

They were watching her. Not with hostility. Worse: with curiosity. The way you watch a bird that has flown into a hall.

"No shard," someone rustled on the right.

"How did she even…"

"Hush. Look at her gloves."

Ilva lifted her chin and walked across the courtyard without looking at anyone. The trunk banged against her leg. Water ran down inside her collar. Somewhere above, a shutter slammed.

At the main doors she missed her footing on a step that was wide, slick, and perfectly invisible in the dark. The trunk flew out of her hand, and Ilva was already falling backwards, knowing she was about to crack her head on the stone, when someone caught her by the wrist.

The jerk was sharp and strong. She was hauled up and forward and crashed with her shoulder into someone's chest, and the world narrowed to warm cloth, the smell of rain, and cold metal, like a freshly honed knife.

"Are you hurt?" a voice asked above her.

It was low, even, and extremely polite, the sort of politeness with distance behind it.

She opened her mouth to answer and suddenly realised that his fingers lay on her wrist over the glove, and that her sleeve had ridden up, and that between the edge of the glove and the sleeve a strip of bare skin had been left. Narrow, no wider than two fingers.

His thumb lay exactly on it.

The memory struck without warning.

Not like at the gates, not as a wave. Precise, sharp, a single point. A room she had never seen: a low ceiling, a candle, the smell of ink and herbal tea. Her own hand on someone's face, on someone's cheek, and that someone looking up at her as though she were the one thing in the world he was afraid to lose. Her own laughter. Her own name, spoken in his voice, softly, on an exhale.

"Ilva."

She recoiled so hard she nearly fell again. He didn't hold on, but he didn't let go at once either: his fingers loosened half a second later than they should have. And in that half second Ilva saw his face.

He was handsome, and that irritated her more than anything. Dark hair, wet with rain, sharp cheekbones, grey eyes where the cold lay like ice on water. His cloak was open at the throat, and there, beneath the collarbone, a shard burned: steady, calm, the colour of moonlit water. He was a head taller than she was, he carried himself as though the whole academy stood at his back, and he looked at her the way one looks at a problem that refuses to add up.

Only his hand, the very one that had just held her wrist, was trembling, faintly.

"You," he said slowly, "are not from this year."

"What?"

"A first-year. Without a shard." His gaze dropped to her hands, to the gloves. To the way she held the left one pressed to her chest. "I was told someone had been admitted by mistake. I didn't think the mistake would turn out to be so…" He faltered, which was strange, because a second earlier he had been speaking smoothly. "…so real."

"Thank you for catching me," Ilva said drily. "I won't keep you."

"Your name."

"Ilva Renn."

He said nothing. He took a slim leather notebook from an inner pocket and opened it, and in the faint blue light of his shard she saw pages covered in small, precise handwriting. Every line began with a date. He leafed through quickly and with practice, like a man checking where he was.

He stopped and wrote something down. And Ilva, standing close enough, could not help reading the line above the one he was writing.

The date was three years old. The handwriting was the same, only the hand had apparently shaken more back then.

"If you meet Ilva Renn, do not let her come close. Do not trust what you feel."

She stopped breathing.

He closed the notebook and raised his eyes, and his face showed nothing. Nothing at all. Only his fingers tightened slightly on the leather cover.

"My name is Cassian Veir," he said in the same even, polite voice. "Welcome to Lungrave, Miss Renn. Try not to stay long."

He turned and walked off into the rain. The students parted before him like water before the prow of a ship.

Ilva stood on the steps and watched him go. Her wrist burned where his fingers had touched her skin. It burned so fiercely she wanted to tear off the glove and hold her hand out under the downpour. She couldn't remember ever feeling her own skin so sharply.

Do not let her come close.

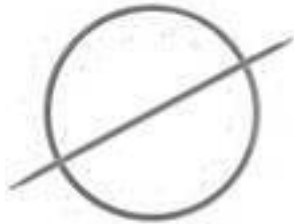
He had written that three years ago. Three years ago she had been a sixteen-year-old copyist's daughter who had never once travelled farther than the next town. They had never met. He had seen her for the first time tonight, and she had seen him.

And yet in a stranger's room, in a stranger's memory, he had said her name as though he had said it a thousand times.

Ilva picked up the trunk, wiped her wet face on her sleeve, and walked in through the doors of Lungrave. Somewhere behind her, in the black courtyard, another shard flared into light. It watched her back like an eye.

A mistake.

It isn't a mistake, she thought, for the first time since she had set out. And she was truly afraid.



Chapter 2. Rules for Himself

CASSIAN REACHED the east tower without once looking back, and only on the third landing did he allow himself to stop.

The staircase was empty. The light of his shard lay on the stone walls in a steady lunar patch, and in that light he raised his right hand and looked at it as if it belonged to someone else.

The fingers no longer shook. But he could still feel what the touch had left behind: the narrow strip of skin on her wrist, where the glove ended. Warm. Alive. Her pulse beating fast and uneven, like a bird caught in a palm.

He clenched his fist.

Think in order, he commanded himself.

The room in the east tower was small and almost bare. A bed, a desk, a narrow window onto the sea, a wardrobe with three identical cloaks. Books and papers lay on the desk in stacks, each stack under its own stone paperweight. He didn't remember why he had arranged them that way. But he knew the order mattered, because in the morning the order gave him back himself.

He took off his wet cloak, sat down, and opened the notebook to the first page. There were no dates there, only lines written large and pressed hard so they wouldn't fade:

You are Cassian Veir. You are twenty-one years old. Your shard is lunar, fifth tier.

First. Read this notebook every morning before you speak to

anyone.

Second. Do not trust the silence in your head. Emptiness is not peace.

Third. If you feel something you cannot explain, write it down. Check it later.

Fourth. Take Daren at his word, but verify it against the records.

Fifth. You do not have to remember in order to be yourself. But you must know who you are now.

He had written the last rule, judging by the hand, on a bad night. The letters lay slanted.

He had long since stopped being surprised by such things. The worst of oblivion wasn't that you forgot. The worst was that the loss didn't hurt. No hole, no scratch, only a smooth, even surface where something used to be. He knew he had loved the sea, because it was written down. He looked at it every morning from this window and felt nothing.

Every spell erased a line. Which one, he learned only afterwards, rereading his notes and finding facts in them that did not belong to him.

And today, while he held her hand, it had gone *quiet* in his head.

Not the empty silence he had learned to fear. A different one. Full. As if every line had returned to its place and stood straight, one against the next. The shard beneath his collarbone, usually aching like a bad tooth, had stilled and fallen silent. For the first

time in fourteen months, according to the records, he had stood on the steps in the rain and felt whole.

And at that moment a girl in ragged gloves had flinched as though struck and looked at him as if she could see straight through him.

He paged back through the notebook. The pages rustled, each beginning with a date. He knew what he was looking for, and still he froze when he found it.

"If you meet Ilva Renn, do not let her come close. Do not trust what you feel."

Three years ago. His handwriting, the pressure heavier than usual, the last letter torn through the paper.

He did not remember writing it.

He did not remember her.

But as soon as he closed his eyes, her face rose before him: wet dark strands stuck to her cheek, stubbornly set lips, wide-open eyes. He saw it so clearly, as though he had been looking at it not for a moment but for years.

Cassian opened his eyes and took up his pen.

"Ilva Renn. First-year. No shard. Arrived today.

On contact the shard fell silent. No emptiness. Cause unknown.

The body reacted: pulse, heat, difficulty breathing. Cause: see above."

He looked at the last line, winced, and struck it out.

When someone knocked at the door, he didn't even flinch.

"Come in, Daren."

His memory keeper came in carrying a heavy, battered volume under his arm. Daren Ollin was about forty, short, stooped, and always looked as though he hadn't slept for a week. He had served House Veir for as long as Cassian could remember, which meant, as it turned out, for as long as he remembered anything at all. Cassian trusted him because there was no alternative.

"My lord. You asked me to bring the chronicle for the past few years."

"I asked for it this morning. You're late."

"Forgive me." Daren set the book on the desk and did not look at it. "Has something happened?"

"A first-year. Ilva Renn. What do we know about her?"

He watched not the face but the hands. Daren Ollin was a man who had spent twenty years writing other people's lives; his face had learned to give nothing away. But his hands were alive.

The fingers twitched slightly and closed.

"It's the first I've heard the name, my lord."

"Truly."

"Of course."

Cassian opened the chronicle. Every line in it was neat and exact: dates, events, names, instructions to himself for the next day. He leafed through quickly until he reached the year he was after.

The pages ended and began again. There was nothing between them. The volume for the three years the notebook entry pointed

to was missing: first even sheets, then a cut, as if by a knife, then even sheets again.

"Where is the rest?"

"Some things were lost in the move from the estate to Lungrave, my lord. Part of the records…" Daren fell silent, searching for the word. "Did not survive."

"Those three years."

"It happened that way."

He wasn't lying. But he wasn't telling the whole truth either, because liars have a different voice. Daren's voice was level and careful, like that of a man walking on thin ice.

"Don't go looking, my lord," Daren said quietly. "Sometimes emptiness is a mercy."

Cassian shut the book.

"What counts as mercy is for me to decide," he answered. "Not you."

The keeper bowed and went out. The door closed without a sound.

Madam Orvin received visitors in her study on the second floor of the main building. She was a large, stern woman who looked at any hour of the day as though she had just come out of a long meeting. When he entered, she did not lift her head from her papers.

"Lord Veir. I assume this is about the new student."

"I ask that she be expelled."

"Naturally you do." At last she looked at him over her

spectacles. “Grounds?”

“She has no shard. This is an academy for mages.”

“She has a royal seal.” Orvin tapped the paper with one finger. “The order of admission did not come from our chancellery. It came from the palace, with the personal stamp of the Council. I have no right to revoke it or contest it. Do you understand what that means?”

He understood. He understood it too well to answer at once.

“It means someone in the palace wants her here.”

“It means,” Orvin said drily, “that the girl is on probation until the Winter Circle. If she fails, she leaves. That is all I can do.”

“Then I will personally make sure she fails.”

The words came out harsher than he had intended. Orvin slowly took off her spectacles and laid them on the desk.

“Lord Veir,” she said. “As a rule you don’t care who studies here. You don’t know the names of half your year. You come to me an hour after your first meeting with a girl you don’t know and demand her expulsion.” She paused. “It is the most unusual thing I have heard from you in all fourteen months.”

Fourteen months. He was surprised that she knew, and at once understood that probably everyone did.

“Perhaps,” he said evenly, “I am simply cautious.”

“Perhaps,” Orvin agreed, and took up her pen again. “You may go.”

That night he did not sleep.

He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, and listened. The

shard beneath his collarbone was silent, and the silence was unbearable. Not because it pressed on him, but because he knew that the moment she moved away, the pain would return. And he, the fool, had already managed to get used to its absence.

He remembered not her face but her wrist. Slender, the small bone showing, the pulse beating under his thumb. How she had flinched. How sharply she had drawn breath when he held her hand half a second longer than he needed to. How the tips of her ears had turned red, and she had still tried to pretend nothing had happened.

He caught himself smiling in the dark. The smile vanished as suddenly as it had come.

No, he thought. *No. Never.*

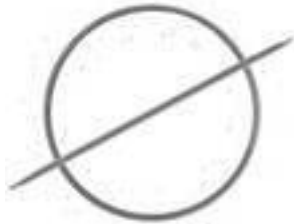
He got up, lit a candle, and opened the notebook again. He found the last line and wrote beneath it:

"Find out why. Then get rid of her."

He underlined it twice.

Then he looked for a long time at the two lines. One lay straight. The second wavered at the very end, as though the hand that wrote it did not want to finish.

He did not recognise his own handwriting.



Chapter 3. The Lunar Crescent

ILVA WOKE to the sound of someone swearing, loudly and with feeling, at a curtain.

“Come on,” hissed a girl with red hair sticking out in every direction, tugging at the fabric. “Not burning, then? You burned beautifully yesterday!”

Ilva sat up in bed. The room was cramped, meant for two, with a pair of narrow cots, a shared table, and a window onto the inner courtyard. The redhead turned, and a smile spread across her freckled face, the wide kind that belongs to someone who can’t stay angry for longer than a minute.

“Oh, you’re awake! Lina Corvin, spark shard, second tier. Sorry about the curtain. I was trying to light a candle, but I got ahead of myself.”

“Ilva Renn,” Ilva answered, remembering that she ought to say something. “No shard.”

“Yeah, I know, the whole building’s talking about nothing else.” Lina flopped down on her cot. “And you know what? It’s great. It means you won’t set my things on fire. That’s already a point in your favour.”

Ilva was so taken aback that she laughed. For the first time in weeks. It came out short and hoarse, but it was real.

She threw on her cloak and straightened her gloves. The left one she had darned the night before with red thread, because

there was no other. It had come out uneven, but sturdy. Lina glanced at her hands and asked nothing, for which Ilva was grateful.

"There's a demonstration duel today," Lina announced, gathering her hair into a ponytail. "Don't you know? Every year, in the first week, the best student goes out into the hall and shows the first-years what a higher tier can do. Everyone's waiting. They say it's going to be Veir this year."

The spoon in Ilva's hand stopped halfway to her mouth.

"Veir?"

"Cassian Veir. Lunar shard, fifth tier. There are only two of those in Lungrave, and the other one's already graduated." Lina sighed dreamily. "Handsome as an engraving and cold as winter water. Don't go near him, they say, or you'll freeze."

Too late, Ilva thought, remembering how her wrist had burned.

The combat hall lay on the lowest level, right under the cliff. Round, with a sand floor and a glass dome through which grey morning light fell. A silvery barrier ran along the edge, a thin glowing net separating the arena from the benches. The first-years sat in tiers, noisy and keyed up. Ilva squeezed in next to Lina and tucked her hands into her sleeves.

Master Holvin Tarn, dry, wiry, bald as a knee, with the face of a man who had seen everything and been surprised by none of it, walked out onto the arena and thumped his staff on the sand.

"Silence! Today you will see what the fifth tier is. Don't gush. Remember. In two years half of you will be standing on this sand,

and the other half will be dead or forgotten."

The rows fell quiet. Someone giggled nervously.

"Against him," Tarn swept his staff out, "three upperclassmen will take the field. All of the fourth tier. The bout lasts until the first loss of balance. Begin."

Three came out from the far side: a broad-shouldered youth with a fire shard, a girl with green light, and a tall, thin young man who gave off a faint smell of thunderstorm.

And then Cassian came out.

He crossed the arena slowly, unhurried, like a man with nothing to prove. He had taken off his dark cloak, leaving a thin shirt with the collar open. The shard beneath his collarbone glimmered with a steady lunar light. His hair was tied back, and for the first time Ilva saw his face by daylight: pale, calm, almost bored.

He never once looked at the stands. He didn't look at anyone at all.

Only on his left forearm, where the sleeve was rolled to the elbow, Ilva made out something dark. Ink. Lines of small handwriting.

"What's that on his arm?" she whispered.

"No idea," Lina whispered back. "A crib sheet, maybe?"

Master Tarn raised his staff.

"Begin!"

The youth with the fire shard moved first. The air around him shuddered, and an orange ball tore loose from his palm and

struck Cassian in the chest.

Cassian did not recoil.

He simply raised his right hand, and a thin silver arc stretched from his palm, as though the moon itself had broken off a slender crescent. The crescent cut the fireball in two. The halves flew past without touching him and slammed into the barrier.

"Lunar Blade," someone behind her breathed.

And in that same instant Ilva saw what the others did not.

Sparks flew from the shard in his chest. Pale, barely visible, like ash, and they did not go out but rose quietly and dissolved beneath the dome. One. Two. Five. As if someone had scattered a handful of other people's thoughts.

She clenched her fists inside her sleeves.

That's the price.

Cassian was already moving. The other two attacked at once: green vines shot out from the left, lightning broke loose from the right. He didn't dodge. He drew breath, and the air in the hall turned heavy, like the air before a storm over the sea.

The sand rose beneath his feet.

It didn't fly up; it *flowed*, in a slow silver wave, as if the hall itself had turned into a tide. The wave swallowed the vines, knocked the lightning aside, and threw the boy with the green shard to his knees. He fell, gasping for air as though pinned by an invisible palm.

"The Tide," someone said, enraptured. "That's the Lunar Tide!"

And again Ilva saw the sparks. This time there were more.

For a fraction of a second Cassian froze. His gaze slid down to his left forearm, to the lines of ink, and returned. The movement was almost imperceptible, but Ilva caught it. As she caught that the fingers of his right hand faltered for a moment, like those of a man who has forgotten what he meant to do.

He had checked his notes. In the middle of a fight.

It made her cold. Colder than she had been even in the rain at the gates.

Two of the upperclassmen lay on the sand. One remained, the tall one smelling of thunderstorm, and he had plainly decided not to give up. Bolt after bolt he hurled, until the air crackled. Cassian gave ground, unhurried, but with each attack something new showed on his face: concentration, strain, a faint weariness.

He pays with every step, Ilva thought. *It's hard on him, and he pretends it isn't.*

She didn't notice herself rising. Didn't notice going down the steps all the way to the barrier and stopping a few paces from the glowing net, staring at the arena. Lina whispered something after her. She didn't hear.

Cassian raised his hand. Silver threads stretched from the shadow beneath his feet, fine as spiderweb, and wrapped his opponent from head to foot. The young man jerked, lunged, but the threads held him and would not let him take a step.

That was the third ability. The strongest and the most costly. Ilva waited for the sparks.

There were none.

Not one. The shard beneath Cassian's collarbone burned steadily and clear, as though nothing had happened. The Lunar Threads closed, his opponent lowered his hands, and Master Tarn thumped his staff.

"Victory! Lord Veir. Worthy."

The hall erupted. The first-years shouted and clapped, someone whistled. Ilva stood at the barrier and looked at Cassian.

He was looking at her too.

Across the arena, across the rows of flushed faces, across the silver net of the barrier. Grey eyes, cold, attentive. His chest rose and fell quickly, sweat glistened at his temple, and the open collar showed his collarbones and the dark line where the shard glowed under the skin. Then he slowly looked away and walked off.

When the students began to disperse and the crowd drained toward the exit, he stopped beside her.

Not close. At arm's length. He smelled of ozone, sweat, warmed skin, and something else, elusive, like the scent of moonlight, if moonlight had one. Ilva forced herself not to step back.

"You stood too close to the barrier, Miss Renn," he said quietly.

"I could see better from there."

"Don't come so close."

"And if I do?"

The words flew out before she could stop them. She felt the

tips of her ears turn red.

Cassian said nothing. He looked at her as though she were a problem whose answer refused to come out. Then he raised his left hand to straighten his sleeve, and the sleeve slid down.

The ink on his forearm was fresh. Small lines, names, dates, brief notes. *Vard. Issen. Kort. You are in a fight. It is not dangerous.* And at the bottom, the last line, smeared with sweat but still legible, a single word written harder than the rest:

"Renn."

He noticed where she was looking. The sleeve came down. For a moment such a silence hung between them that Ilva could hear the blood pounding in her own temples.

"Good day, Miss Renn," Cassian said, and left.

Lina came running up, breathless, eyes shining.

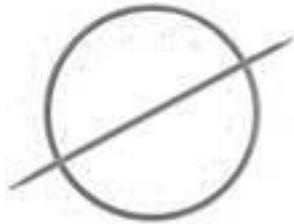
"He spoke to you! Do you hear me? Veir himself! What about? What did he say?"

"Nothing," Ilva answered, looking after him. "He warned me not to stand so close to the barrier."

But the words he had chosen were not the ones that lay behind them. And the name on his arm stung her eyes as though it had been written not in ink but in fire.

He wrote that name before every fight. To remember that she existed? Or to remember what to beware of?

She didn't know. And for the first time she understood that she wanted to find out more than she wanted to stay in this academy.



Chapter 4. The Control Test

THE OLD training hall smelled of dust and cold stone.

Cassian had not chosen it by accident. It lay at the very bottom of the Academy, beneath the combat arena, and nobody had used it since the ceiling came down last winter. No Tarn here, no students, no prying eyes. Only bare walls, a heap of broken benches, and five white cards laid out in a row on the floor.

He stood over them with a quill in his hand, rereading what he had written.

Each card held one small thing. Nothing important, nothing dangerous: the sort of thing he still remembered on his own, without notes.

"1. My first morning at Lungrave. A window facing east, mint tea."

"2. Master Tarn once called me by someone else's name. I said nothing."

"3. The crack in the third step of the main staircase. I always step over it with my left foot."

"4. Daren keeps dried apples in his pocket. He thinks I haven't noticed."

"5. The smell of the lake. I was about nine. Someone was holding my hand."

The last one had taken him longest. His hand had stopped by itself over the word "someone," and he had not changed it.

It was a plan for a test. Clean and tedious, like all good plans: five spells, five distances, five memories at stake. He could not know in advance which one the shard would take. But he knew that on the arena floor there had been no price, and he needed to find out whether he had imagined it.

Third rule, he thought. *If you feel something you cannot explain, write it down. Then test it.*

He stepped into the middle of the hall and raised his right hand.

The first crescent came out thin and cold. The familiar silver scalded his palm, the arc struck the far wall and left a white line on the stone. And the shard under his collarbone answered the way it always did: with a short, icy stab, as if a needle of ice had been driven into his chest.

He lowered his hand and waited. Then he went to the cards and read the first one aloud.

"My first morning at Lungrave. A window facing east, mint tea."

The words lay in the air flat and empty. They were correct, comprehensible, polite. He knew it was his handwriting. He knew there had been tea, a window, a morning. And nothing stood behind any of it. No smell, no light, no taste. A page from which the picture had been torn out and the caption left behind.

He reread the second card. Tarn, a stranger's name, silence. All of it was still there.

He reread the rest. All still there.

"One," he wrote on his forearm. *"Standard price. One memory per crescent."*

"Do you always do it like this?"

Cassian did not flinch. He only turned his head, very slowly.

On the stairs leading down, in the gap of the collapsed wall, stood Ilva Renn. A cloak thrown over her nightgown, bare feet shoved into boots, hair in a careless braid. In her hands she held an unlit lantern. She was wearing the gloves, of course.

"Miss Renn. It is the dead of night."

"I know. I couldn't sleep." She came down a couple of steps and stopped, studying the cards at his feet. "And then I saw a light down here. Somebody casts spells at night. I got curious."

"Curiosity is bad for first-years."

"Everything is bad for me already." She said it simply, without defiance. "What are you doing here?"

He could have said "nothing." He could have ordered her to leave. He could have finished the test some other night. All three options were reasonable, and he realised he would choose none of them.

"An experiment," he said.

"On what?"

"On myself."

She came down the rest of the way. She stopped ten paces off, by the broken benches, and tilted her head to one side. The light of his shard lay soft and cold on her face.

"Do you want me to go?"

"I want you to stay exactly where you are."

She blinked.

"What?"

"Don't move. Please."

He did not know why he had added "please." The word had come on its own, as though someone else had said it.

He exhaled and raised his hand.

The second crescent came out a little wider than the first. The white line landed on the wall beside the other, and the shard pricked more faintly, as if the needle had gone blunt on the way. Cassian went to the cards and reread the second, the third, the fourth, the fifth.

All there. So whatever could not be got back, he had lost the first time, and not once since.

"What are you testing?" Ilva asked.

"What is left."

"Left?"

"Shards take memory." He made his voice come out level. "Every spell carries something away from me. I used not to know what, until I reread my notes. Now I choose in advance what I am prepared to lose."

She was silent for a long time. Then she asked quietly:

"And what did you lose the first time?"

He picked up a card and held it out to her.

"My first morning here."

She came closer. She took the white rectangle between two

fingers, the way one takes something fragile, and read it. Her lips moved slightly on the word "mint."

"And you really don't… remember it?"

"I remember that it happened. I don't remember what it was like."

He waited for sympathy. For the pity he was used to, from Daren, from Orvin, from everyone who knew about the fourteen months. He bore pity worse than he bore oblivion.

Ilva did not pity him. She looked at the card the way one looks at a stranger's diary found by chance: with respect and dread.

"Then why do you do it?" she asked at last.

"To understand why there was no price in the arena."

She raised her eyes.

"Ah."

He waited for more. There was no more. Her face stayed shut like a door, and only her earlobes pinked in the bluish light.

"You know something," he said.

"I know that you stopped at the third spell and didn't wince." She held the card out to him again. "If you like, I can stand closer."

"Closer."

"For the experiment."

"For the experiment," he repeated, and felt his mouth go dry for a moment.

She took three steps forward and stopped seven paces from him. He raised his hand.

The third crescent came almost without effort. It struck the wall like a knife into butter, and the stab in his chest was barely perceptible, no worse than a gnat bite. Cassian read the cards. All five.

Except no, four. One of them, the third, the crack in the step, sounded muffled, as if through thick glass. He remembered that he stepped over it with his left foot, but not why.

"Seven paces. Weak price. The memory dims but does not erase."

"What," said Ilva very carefully, "did you just write?"

"The distance." He did not raise his eyes. "Closer."

She came four paces nearer, then three. She stopped so close that he could make out the small red darning on her left glove, crooked, clumsy, done in a hurry. It occurred to him all at once that she must be cold in that nightgown. And that in her place he would have felt awkward, standing barefoot in a dusty hall before a near stranger.

He raised his hand and immediately lowered it.

"What?" she whispered.

"Nothing. I was thinking."

He raised it again.

The fourth crescent went up into the ceiling and left a thin crack there, and the stab in his chest did not come at all. No ice, no needle, only a faint warmth, as if the shard had breathed out and relaxed.

He stood with his arm still raised, listening.

The fifth card. The lake and someone's hand. He remembered it whole. The cold water. The smell of wet reeds. A palm holding his palm, with a callus on the thumb. He remembered all of it.

"You're smiling," Ilva said quietly.

He lowered his arm.

"No."

"A little."

"You imagined it."

But he knew she was right, because his face answered her words with a slight pull at the corner of his mouth. He wiped the smile away, but too late.

"The last test," he said. "Closer than this."

"How much closer?"

"Within arm's reach."

She did not answer. She simply took two more steps and stopped.

Now there was less than a yard between them. He felt her breath, uneven, quick. He saw the pulse beating in her neck under the collar of the nightgown. She smelled of rain, ink powder and something warm, something entirely unsuited to a cold hall. Bread, perhaps, and lavender, which Lungrave did not have.

He suddenly realised he could hear her swallow.

"You're trembling," said Ilva.

"It's cold in here."

"It's warm in here."

She said it very quietly and, it seemed, regretted it at once. She

looked away and bit her lip. Cassian looked at her profile, at the stubborn line of her chin, at a strand that had slipped from the braid, and at some point caught himself with his left hand raised, not knowing why. His fingers hung in the air beside her face.

He did not touch her. He should not have done it at all.

"Forgive me," he forced out, and snatched his hand back.

"I didn't…" she began, and fell silent.

They stood like that for a second, two, three. Then he turned to the wall and let out a hard breath.

"The last crescent."

The silver tore out of his palm as easily as if it had been drawn on a fine thread. The arc swept across the hall and dissolved under the ceiling. The shard was silent.

Completely silent.

And then something happened that he had not planned.

The world shifted.

Not much: for a moment, as though someone had opened a shutter a crack. He saw a window. Low, with a wooden frame, and beyond it grey water. A candle on the sill. The smell of ink. Someone's laughter, soft, mocking, very familiar.

"*If you forget, I'll remind you,*" said a voice. Her voice.

And fingers, slender, stained with ink, touched his cheek.

Gone.

The window vanished. Only the walls remained, and the dust, and the cold moonlight.

He stood with his palm pressed to his chest, breathing as if

he had been running.

"Cassian?"

She had said his name. For the first time. He had not even had time to decide whether he liked it.

"What did you see?" asked Ilva.

He turned to her. She was looking at him with huge dark eyes, and there was something in them he could not read: not fear, not curiosity. Recognition.

"Nothing," he said. "Exhaustion."

She did not believe him. It was plain at once. But she did not argue.

"Then I suppose you'll want me to go."

"I need several more tests." The words came out cold and level, as always. "Twice a week, here, after lights-out. I do not promise not to seek your expulsion."

"I don't promise not to get in your way."

"Understood."

"Fine."

She walked to the stairs, stopped at the gap in the wall and looked back.

"Lord Veir."

"Yes?"

"That evening, at the gates. You said 'not from this year.' What did you mean?"

He was silent for a long time. Then he answered honestly:

"I don't know."

She nodded, as if that was exactly the answer she had expected, and vanished into the dark.

Cassian stood among the cards a while longer. Then he gathered them up, folded them into his palm and climbed to the tower. He sat at his desk, opened his notebook and wrote two lines on a clean page.

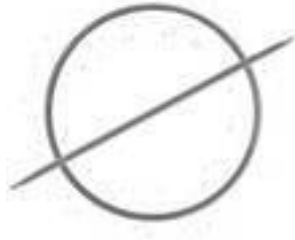
"Distance to Renn determines the price: the closer, the less. At three paces and nearer, no price. Within arm's reach, the shard is wholly silent."

"At that moment I remembered her voice. Or invented it."

He looked over his notes, then turned the notebook back to the old rule, written in a hand three years gone.

"Do not believe what you feel."

He laid the quill between two pages like a bookmark. He underlined neither line.



Chapter 5. The Empty Stone

THE MORNING began with Lina waking her with a question:

"Did you sleep at all?"

"A little."

"Liar. You've got two bruises under your eyes, and you went out in the night. I woke up and your bunk was empty." Lina sat up in bed, tousled and tremendously pleased with herself. "Where were you running off to?"

"The privy."

"For two hours?"

Ilva pulled on her boots and pretended to be very busy with the laces. The night stood so clearly before her eyes that she feared it would show on her face: the dusty hall, the white cards on the stone floor, and a man who had looked at her as if she were an answer he had not expected. *You're trembling. It's warm in here.* She still did not understand why she had said it.

"Fine, don't tell me." Lina sighed, but she was not offended. "Just so you know, the whole dormitory is already gossiping. Somebody saw a light in the lower hall. They say there's a ghost. Or Veir."

"Is that the same thing?"

"For a lot of people, pretty much."

The first lesson was the theory of shards. It was taught by Magister Oivin Crow, an old man with a long nose and a dry,

even voice that sent you to sleep even in the second row. The lecture hall rose in an amphitheatre. Ilva took a seat at the very top, against the wall, and laid her notebook in front of her. She copied lectures faster than anyone around her: since childhood her father had guided her hand across parchment, and now the quill ran by itself.

"The shard," Crow droned, "is not a source of power but its conduit. It chooses its bearer between the ages of ten and sixteen, when the body is still sufficiently pliable. The tier determines the depth of the bond…"

"And if it hasn't chosen?" someone asked from below.

The voice was ringing, mocking, almost tender. Ilva did not at first grasp whom it was aimed at.

The speaker was a tall fair-haired young man in the third row. An expensive ivory doublet, a silver chain at his neck, a wind shard, pale grey, glimmering at his collar. He sat sprawled, legs stretched into the aisle, addressing the magister but looking over his shoulder at her.

"Forgive me, Magister, I'm merely curious. This is an academy for bearers, after all. But if, say, someone got in by mistake? What is done with them?"

"Mr. Solvane," said Crow drily.

"Edrik," the young man corrected, and smiled broadly. "Edrik Solvane. My uncle is on the Council. He is very fond of order."

Lina groaned dully beside her.

"That's him," she whispered, not turning her head. "Wind,

second tier. His uncle decides everything at the palace, so he thinks he decides everything here too. Don't listen."

"I'm not listening."

"You are. Your hands are clenched."

Ilva looked down at her hands. They really were clenched into fists.

Magister Crow raised his palm.

"Practicum. Today we test resonance. Each of you takes a test crystal and holds it in your palm. If your shard responds, the crystal begins to glow. This is not a grade, merely a measurement."

He went along the rows handing out smooth matte pebbles the size of a quail's egg. Lina's flared at once with a warm orange spark, and she squeaked with delight. Edrik's lit with a cold grey haze. The other crystals kindled one after another, green, red, blue, until a motley scatter of lights spread across the amphitheatre.

The stone in Ilva's hand stayed dark.

She squeezed it harder, as though that might help. The stone was smooth, cold and utterly dead.

"Empty," someone behind her said, and giggled.

"Quiet," Crow snapped, and came over to her. The old man's look was tired, without malice. "Miss Renn. You are, of course, aware that you are not obliged to… No. In fact you must. Academy rule: the test is taken without gloves. Take them off, please."

Silence fell over the hall.

Ilva slowly raised her head.

"Is that mandatory?"

"The statutes."

"Magister, I have…" She faltered. "I have a skin condition. I'm forbidden to…"

"Then you need a permit from Madam Orvin. Do you have one?"

She said nothing. She had no permit, because she had not known she would need one.

"Miss Renn," Crow said more gently, "take off the glove. The stone doesn't bite."

Not the stone, thought Ilva.

Through bare skin the crystal would tell her everything. Everyone who had held it before her, everything that had been put into it, the whole dark, sooty memory of a thing touched by hundreds of hands. She remembered the gates far too well, and after them she had dreamed of strangers' faces for two days.

"Let's help her," Edrik offered lazily from the third row. "We're considerate, aren't we?"

He did not stand. He merely moved his fingers slightly, and a thin gust of wind went through the hall. It tore at the hem of her cloak, rustled the pages of her notebook and swept the quill off her desk. Then it snatched the stone from her hand and flung it into the aisle.

"Edrik!" Lina cried.

"What? I only blew." He spread his hands. "If you have no shard, Miss Renn, what right have you to sit among us? You were enrolled by mistake. My uncle read the order. He laughed a great deal."

Ilva froze.

"He read it?"

"The Council signed it back in spring," Edrik informed her confidentially, leaning forward. "The seal was pressed, and then everyone wondered who on earth Ilva Renn was. My uncle says it's the most absurd order in twenty years. But an order is an order."

Spring. Her father had died in spring, and the letter had come three weeks ago.

"Mr. Solvane, enough!" Crow struck the lectern with his palm. "Out, and go and have a word with Master Tarn!"

Edrik rose, lazily straightened his doublet, sent Ilva a smile that made her want to wash her hands, and walked to the door.

Ilva did not hear what the magister said next. She did not hear Lina whispering in her ear. One thing was hammering in her head: *back in spring.*

The corridor was crowded and drafty. Ilva leaned against the wall by the window, breathing in the cold air off the sea, trying not to shake. There were no tears. There was only anger, thick and hot, like that of a person made to hold the lid down on a boiling cauldron.

"Renn."

She started. Edrik stood three paces away, one shoulder against a pillar. Alone. The smile on his face like a stain on a tablecloth.

"I wasn't finished," he said. "You probably think you have patrons here. That someone up there will stand up for you."

"I don't think anything."

"Quite right." He pushed off from the pillar. "Because anyone can be removed here. Quietly. No fuss. An accident on the stairs, for instance. The steps here are very slippery."

"Is that a threat?"

"Friendly advice."

A gust of wind struck her in the face so sharply that she recoiled and fetched up with her back against the windowsill. Edrik stepped closer, and she realised there was less air between them, as though it had been squeezed out. Her throat closed.

"Mr. Solvane."

The voice was not loud. Even, calm, polite and utterly icy.

Edrik froze. The wind dropped as if cut with a knife.

At the end of the corridor stood Cassian Veir. No cloak, a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a bundle of papers under his arm. His gaze was calm and empty, like that of a man who has just been reminded of an errand he forgot.

"Lord Veir," Edrik said warily. The smile stayed on his face, but grew thinner. "I wasn't expecting you."

"Master Tarn is looking for you." Cassian did not look at Ilva. At all. "Now."

"We were only talking…"

"Now."

One word. Quiet, without threat. A cold went down the corridor, almost tangible, and Edrik, after a moment's hesitation, bowed stiffly and left. His footsteps died away.

They were alone.

"Thank you," said Ilva.

"Don't mention it." He shifted the papers to his other arm. "You are mistaken if you think I was defending you. I dislike noise near my tower."

"Your tower is at the other end of the Academy."

"All the more reason."

He turned to go, and stopped. For one second, for one breath. She saw his back tense.

"You haven't slept," he said, without turning around.

"There were reasons."

"I'm told strong tea helps."

"I'm told you don't like being contradicted."

"I don't."

He left. But at the threshold Ilva managed to see his right hand clench into a fist for an instant, like a man who had wanted to say something and thought better of it.

In the evening the room was quiet. Lina had run off to some girls' gathering, leaving behind a smell of burnt sugar and three empty cups on the table. Ilva locked the door, sat down on her bunk and drew the letter from under the pillow.

The paper was thick, cream-coloured, with a deep impression of the royal seal. She had learned it by heart long ago: every flourish, every comma. But this time she held the sheet up to her face.

The smell.

Faint, elusive, it lived on the paper as it lived on her fingers, on her cloaks, on the quills in her father's satchel. Lavender.

Her father put a drop of lavender oil in his ink to keep the moths from the parchment. It was his quirk, his small secret. "Good ink should smell of home," he used to say. "Then the words will be warm." He never sold the blend to anyone. He brewed it only for himself.

Ilva slowly turned the sheet over. The lines were set down flawlessly, in the calligraphic "royal" hand used to copy out decrees. She knew that hand. Every "r" ended in the same slight curl her father added when he was tired.

She closed her eyes.

Careful, she thought. *Don't. You don't know what's in there.*

But the voice inside was more stubborn than good sense.

She took off her left glove slowly, finger by finger. The red darning still held. The hand beneath looked unfamiliarly pale and thin, almost a stranger's. Ilva held her breath and laid her palm on the line where her name stood.

The world lurched.

A workshop. A low ceiling, a candle, a smell of ink and lavender. Her father sits at the table, hunched as always, and

behind his shoulder stands someone tall, in a dark cloak with a deep hood. The face cannot be seen. Only the hands: pale, long-fingered, with a ring on the smallest finger, in which a shard glimmers.

"*Write,*" says the man. His voice is even, ageless, nameless. "*Word for word. As I said it.*"

"*She does not bear a shard.*"

"*Write.*"

Her father writes. His hand trembles, and still every letter lies down clean. He sets down her name: *Ilva Renn.* And holds the quill on the last letter, so that a tiny drop is left on the paper.

"*She knows nothing,*" he says softly.

"*Yet.*"

"*I didn't… I never wanted…*"

"*You gave your word, Master Renn.*"

And her father, her quiet, stooped, kind father, who had never raised his voice, suddenly covers his face with his hand and weeps without a sound. His shoulders heave. Then he takes up the quill, writes the last line, and whispers so quietly that her hearing, the hearing of another's memory, barely catches the words:

"*Forgive me, Ilva. Forgive me.*"

The vision snapped off like a thread.

She sat on the bunk with her hand pressed to her chest. Her heart pounded. The letter had slipped from her fingers and lay on the blanket like an open wound.

Her father had known.

Not merely known: he had written this letter himself. In his own hand, with his own ink, at the dictation of a man she could not name. He had wept as he wrote, and told no one a word. He had died in spring, and the order for her enrolment had been signed while he was still alive.

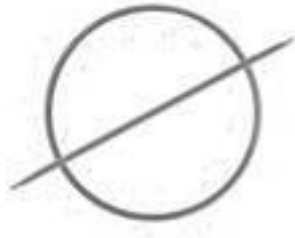
Ilva slowly pulled the glove back on.

She did not cry. She sat looking at the snuffed candle until the night damp began to creep in at the window, and thought of only one thing.

I'm not here by mistake, she kept saying. *I was brought here.*

A ring with a shard on a pale little finger. The Council. Spring.

And a man whose face she had not seen had said: *Yet.*



Chapter 6. Five Seats at a Round Table

IN THE morning Cassian read his notebook from the first line to the last, as he did every day, and stopped at the page he had written three days ago.

"Edrik Solvane, first-year. Wind, second tier. Nephew of Marren Solvane, member of the Council. Behaved provocatively toward Renn. Tarn punished him. I find this distasteful. Reason: see above."

He winced. "See above" again. He had begun to notice that the formula appeared more and more often these days, like a cataract on every page, a blind spot he could neither name nor get around.

The Council, he thought. And suddenly realised he knew almost nothing about it.

He knew that it existed. He knew it held five seats and five houses. He knew the name Marren Solvane, because he had only just written it down. But as soon as he searched his memory for anything more, he found a smooth surface, like ice after a thaw.

Daren came, as always, at seven sharp, with a tray: tea, bread, honey, dried apples in a small cup. Cassian watched him set out the dishes and thought that his memory keeper was probably the only person in Lungrave who in fourteen months had never once been late or made a mistake.

"Daren. What do you know about the Council?"

The memory keeper's fingers stilled for a moment on the

handle of the teapot.

"It is the highest advisory body to the crown, my lord. Five seats, five houses: Solvane, Askar, Helder, Dorvald, and…"

He stopped.

"And?"

"Veir, my lord."

Cassian slowly set down his bread.

"Our house."

"Your house."

"Who holds the seat?"

"Your father, my lord."

The word fell into the silence and moved nothing in it. It stirred no pain, no warmth, no recognition. Just a sound: *father*. Like the word "step" or "ink." Something he knew only from his notes.

"He is alive."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the capital, my lord. Occupied with the business of the Council." Daren poured the tea without looking at the cup. "He does not like to be disturbed."

"Has he written to me?"

"My lord…"

"In fourteen months. Has he written to me even once?"

The memory keeper put the teapot down on the tray. Very carefully, with a faint clink.

"No, my lord."

He said it so softly that Cassian barely caught it. And at once, as if catching himself, he added:

"He sends word that you are in safe hands."

Whose? Cassian wanted to ask. Instead he said:

"Thank you. You may go."

Daren bowed and left without touching the apples. And Cassian sat a long while over his cooling tea, thinking that fourteen months ago he had woken in a stranger's bed with no past, and that his father, alive, healthy, seated on the Council, had not once asked how he was.

It is written down, he realised. He turned to the first page, and beneath the five rules he found a sixth line, in small handwriting, like a postscript: *"Do not expect letters from Father."*

He had not been surprised then. He had simply accepted it as a given. Now that word, "given," struck him as very cold.

That night he came to the hall earlier than usual.

He laid out five new cards on the floor, not because he needed them but because it was the proper thing: every action must have an order. He stood by the wall, arms crossed, and waited, listening to the sea below, where the cliff dropped into the water.

She appeared half an hour later. Not barefoot this time, and not in a nightgown: in a cloak buttoned to the throat, in boots, her braid neatly pinned around her head. Only the gloves were the same, grey, with the red thread on the left.

"You're early," said Ilva.

"So are you."

"I couldn't wait."

She came closer and stopped three paces away. Not ten, as on the first night. He noted it and pretended he had not.

"I want to propose a new experiment," she said.

"I thought I was the one who proposed experiments."

"Then you've designed it badly." She raised her chin. "You tested distance. But in the arena I wasn't standing beside you. I was at the barrier. So it isn't only a matter of distance."

Cassian said nothing.

"Try it with touch." Her voice was steady, but her gloved fingers stirred slightly, as if she were holding something invisible. "Through clothing. I won't take off… anything. I'll simply lay my hand on your forearm while you cast."

"On the forearm."

"Yes."

"Where I keep my notes."

"Over the sleeve."

He looked at her for a long time. She held his gaze, and only the tips of her ears began to pink.

"Very well," he said at last.

He rolled his left sleeve above the elbow, then thought better of it and let it down again. The writing on his skin beneath the cloth lived a life of its own: he could feel every line, especially the last, small, set down more sharply than the rest.

Ilva came up. She stopped so close that he could see the collar

of her cloak rise and fall. She reached out and, carefully, as if afraid of being burned, laid her palm on his forearm.

Through the cloth, through the wool and the leather of her glove, he felt her warmth.

Not heat, not a spark. Something quiet and steady, like the warmth of a hearth in a room where you have never been, yet already know where the armchair stands.

"Now," she said in a whisper.

He raised his right hand.

It was Lunar Threads. The costliest spell, the one he had dared try in the arena only at the very end. The silver drew up from the shadow at his feet in thin, living filaments, climbed the wall, wove through the beams beneath the ceiling and hung in the air, shimmering like frozen moonrain. The shard under his collarbone did not so much as stir.

No stab. No cold. No emptiness.

Cassian went rigid, looking at his own threads, and realised he was not breathing.

"Is everything all right?" Ilva whispered.

"Yes."

"You didn't… lose anything?"

"No." He turned his head. She stood so close that her hair almost brushed his shoulder. "And you? Do you… feel anything?"

She shivered. Barely perceptibly, but she shivered.

"What should I feel?"

"I don't know. You look as if you're cold."

"I'm not cold."

The Lunar Threads went out, crumbling into silver dust. The hall grew darker. Only the shard on his chest glowed steadily, and in its light he saw that she was trembling. Finely, almost invisibly, the way someone trembles after standing long in the wind.

Without thinking, he took off his cloak and settled it over her shoulders.

"What are you…"

"You're freezing."

"I'm not…"

"Freezing," he repeated, in a tone that allowed no objection, and straightened the collar.

It was a mistake. He understood it the moment his fingers touched the edge of the cloth at her neck. The skin there was warm and very thin, and a pulse beat beneath his knuckles. He knew he should take his hand away. He watched her lips part, watched her lean toward him, by half a breath, by a hair, and his hands would not obey.

"Lord Veir," she breathed.

"Cassian."

"What?"

"You called me by name last time. Now it's my turn."

They stood very close. He felt her breath on his chin and smelled lavender, the very same one, foreign to Lungrave. He wanted to say something more, but the words had run out.

Ilva was the first to look away.

"There's something I need to show you," she said hoarsely. "No, not show. Tell." She stepped back, but did not take off the cloak: she held its edges in both hands like a shield. "I was brought here."

"What?"

"I'm not on the rolls by mistake. It isn't a mistake. Someone wanted me here, and he worked hard to make sure nobody understood why." She lifted her eyes to him. "Edrik says the Council signed the order. Back in spring."

Cassian was silent for a second.

"I know the order came from the palace," he said. "This morning I found out that my father sits on the Council."

Ilva froze.

"Your…"

"He is alive. He has not written to me in fourteen months. He did not write while someone was erasing three years from my head, and then he brought you here." He said it evenly, almost dispassionately, and was himself surprised at how easily the words came. "Either that is coincidence, or it is not."

"Do you believe in coincidences?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

They looked at one another across a yard and a half of night darkness.

"I don't know what binds us," said Ilva. "I don't know why your

name sounds in my head as if I had been saying it all my life. I don't know why I…" She broke herself off. "I don't know who is behind this. But I don't want to be a pawn, Lord Veir. I don't want to be moved about the board while I understand nothing."

"Cassian," he said once more.

"Cassian."

"Then we are in the same boat." He caught her gaze and held it. "I propose an alliance. Temporary. Until we find out who has arranged us so neatly."

"And the tests?"

"And the tests. Twice a week. After lights-out."

"And my probation? You promised…"

"I promised to see that you failed. Now I promise that you will succeed." He paused. "It will be simpler."

She smiled. Quietly, awkwardly, a little crookedly, like someone who had long ago forgotten how. Something in Cassian tightened strangely beneath his ribs, in the place where the shard lay silent.

"That isn't simple, Lord Veir."

"Cassian."

"That isn't simple, Cassian." She spoke his name slowly, the way one tries unfamiliar food. "But I agree."

He walked her to the stairs and halted on the bottom step, not climbing higher. She turned at the bend, still in his cloak.

"I'll return it tomorrow."

"There's no hurry."

Her footsteps faded. Cassian stood a little longer, looking into the dark, then went back to the tower.

Daren was waiting at the door.

Not in the room, not in the corridor: precisely at the door, right on the threshold, hands folded in front of him, with the face of a man who had not slept at all. He did not bow. He only looked, the way one looks at a child caught doing something improper.

"My lord," he said quietly. "You were seen in the lower hall."

Cassian stopped.

"By whom?"

"It does not matter." The memory keeper shifted from foot to foot. "With a first-year girl. Twice."

"And?"

"I am obliged to report it to your father."

The silence was so thick that the sea could be heard in it.

"You are not obliged," said Cassian, very calmly.

"My lord…"

"You are the keeper of my memory, Daren. Not his."

Daren said nothing. His face stayed motionless, but his hands betrayed him entirely for the first time in fourteen months: they clenched into fists, the knuckles whitening.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I cannot do otherwise."

He left. His footsteps died away along the corridor, and Cassian was alone on the threshold of his own room.

He went in, locked the door, sat down at the desk and opened the notebook. His hand did not shake. The line came out even

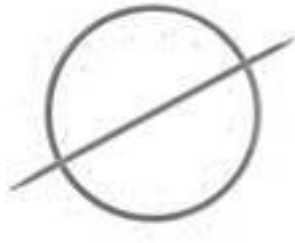
and calm, as if written by another man.

"Daren writes to Father. For some time. Find out what exactly, and since when.

Renn knows more than she says. So do I."

Then he looked for a long while at the cloak that was not on the back of the chair, at the empty place on it. The warmth in the air had not yet gone.

He wrote that down too, and then crossed it out.



Chapter 7. Someone Else's Coat

"Right," said Lina.

She stood in the middle of the room in nothing but her nightshift, her hair sticking out in every direction, holding a long black coat with silver buttons by the collar, pinched between two fingers. The coat that had been hanging over the back of Ilva's chair that morning, and which Ilva, on waking, had absolutely no memory of hanging there.

"Right," Lina repeated. "This isn't yours."

"It's… borrowed."

"I can see it's borrowed. I have eyes. Man's size, cloth where a single sleeve costs more than my whole room, and a crest embroidered on the lining." Lina flipped over the hem. "A silver moon above a wave. I only know one house with that crest."

"Lina."

"Veir!" The redhead bounced, and the coat flew up in the air like a banner. "This is Cassian Veir's coat! You weren't going to the privy last night!"

"Quiet!" Ilva darted to the door, listened, and turned back. "Please, be quiet. You said yourself that everyone here hears everything."

"Fine. Quiet." Lina pressed the coat to her chest, squeezed her eyes shut, and exhaled like someone about to jump into cold water. "Tell me everything."

"There's nothing to tell. We were… studying."

"Studying."

"Experiments. He's testing how his shard works. And I stand nearby."

"You just stand nearby."

"Yes."

"At night."

"Yes."

"And he gave you his coat."

"Because I was cold!"

Lina stared at her for five full seconds. Then, very softly, almost reverently, she whispered:

"He gave you his coat."

"Lina…"

"Lunar Veir. Cold as winter water. The man who doesn't say good morning to the instructors. He gave you his coat." Abruptly she set the coat down on the bed, seized Ilva by both hands, and said firmly, "I swear I won't say a word. Not to a living soul. But you're going to tell me everything later. In detail."

"There's nothing to—"

"In detail."

Ilva sighed and laughed. It was the second time this week that she had managed to laugh around Lina, and she suddenly realised she hadn't felt this light in a very long time.

"All right. In detail. Someday."

"Deal." Lina wiped away an imaginary tear and turned

serious. “Listen, though, if you two are looking for something, you do know about the Lower Archive?”

“What archive?”

“The chronicle vault. They keep the records of every house there, three hundred years’ worth. And the ones that aren’t supposed to be shown, so they say. It’s closed to first-years; the masters and the upper years hold the key.” Lina narrowed her eyes. “Fifth-years definitely have one.”

Ilva froze with a boot in her hand.

“How do you—”

“My brother graduated from Lungrave three years ago. He still can’t tell me what he read there, because he gave his word.” Lina shrugged. “But he did say the Lower Archive has everything the Academy wants to forget.”

Everything the Academy wants to forget, Ilva thought.

And she remembered the three years that had been cut out of her.



Madam Orvin summoned her after lunch.

Her office was on the second floor of the main building, at the very end of the corridor, behind a heavy oak door. Inside it

smelled of ink and wax. Orvin sat at a broad desk heaped with papers and did not raise her head until Ilva had stopped right in front of her.

"Miss Renn. Sit."

Ilva sat.

"You have probably heard that you are on probation until the Winter Circle."

"Yes, Madam Orvin."

"Do you know what that is?"

"No."

"It is good that you're honest." Orvin set down her pen and at last looked at her over her spectacles. "The Winter Circle is held at the end of the first term. Every first-year goes out onto the arena. Each is assigned an opponent by lot. The bout lasts until the first loss of balance, as in your demonstration. The result decides whether the student remains at the Academy."

"A bout."

"Yes."

"Without a shard."

"Quite correct."

Ilva let out a slow breath.

"Against whom?"

"The lot decides. You will draw it yourself, in the presence of the commission." Orvin folded her hands. "The royal seal protects you from expulsion on the grounds of having no shard. It does not protect you from losing."

"So if I lose…"

"If you lose, the Academy has the right to expel you on the strength of the Circle's result. It is a standard rule. No seal overrides it." Orvin paused. "Six weeks, Miss Renn."

Six weeks. Ilva tightened her fingers in her lap.

"May I ask a question?"

"You may. I do not promise to answer."

"Who signed my order?"

The office went very quiet.

Orvin did not move. Only the corners of her mouth twitched slightly, like those of a person who has heard a familiar question, long expected.

"Miss Renn," she said at last. "There are things one should not ask aloud within these walls. That is not a threat. It is advice."

"Do you know?"

"I know what I am supposed to know." She picked up her pen. "And what I suspect, I will not tell you, because I am not certain my suspicion is not dangerous to you. Go. Study. And, Miss Renn."

"Yes?"

"Rumours about you and Lord Veir have reached me." Orvin did not lift her head. "Be careful. Not because I object. Because rumours have an owner, and their owner is not a kind one."

Ilva stepped out into the corridor and leaned against the wall.

Edrik, she realised. He hadn't just been gossiping. He had been sowing.



The hall was colder than usual that night.

Cassian was already waiting, but this time he wasn't standing by the wall; he was pacing the empty hall with his hands clasped behind his back. A long training blade lay on the floor, blunt, worn, its hilt wrapped in black leather. When he saw her, he stopped.

"You've brought the coat."

"I've brought the coat."

She held out the folded garment. He took it, not at once, and for a second their fingers were so close that she felt her stomach clench.

"Thank you."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"No," he said. "There's no need."

He slung the coat over his arm and looked at her closely.

"Madam Orvin summoned you today."

"How do you—"

"Everyone here knows who gets summoned and where." He smiled slightly, barely. "What did she say?"

She told him. About the Winter Circle. About the lot. About

the six weeks. About the advice that shouldn't be given aloud. He listened in silence, his face growing steadily more impenetrable, and when she finished, for a moment it seemed he had stopped breathing altogether.

"Six weeks," he repeated.

"Yes."

"Against an unknown opponent."

"Yes."

"Without a shard."

"You're the third person to point that out."

He drew a hand down his face and suddenly, to her surprise, laughed quietly.

"Then you need to learn to fight."

"With what?"

"With this." He picked up the training blade. "My shard won't help you. Near you, it's quiet, but I can't fight for you. What I can do is handle a weapon. I don't remember where I learned it, but the body remembers." He held out the hilt. "It is the only thing I have left from that life."

Ilva took the blade. It was heavier than she had expected.

"I've never held a weapon."

"I know. Stand like this."

He showed her the stance. Feet wider, body turned half to the side, elbow bent. She copied it, clumsily, like a pupil, and he frowned.

"No. Hip lower. Shoulder back."

He came closer, and she felt everything inside her go still.

He stood beside her, on her left, and carefully, with two fingers, touched her elbow through the coat. Turned her shoulder. Then laid his palm on her hip, through the thick cloth of the coat, to show how to lower her weight. His hand was large, warm, and very sure.

"Like this. See?"

"I see."

"Now hold."

He took her right wrist and moved the blade higher. Between the edge of the glove and the sleeve there remained that same narrow strip of skin. No one was ever meant to see it. No one was ever meant to touch it.

His thumb brushed it, for half a second, for the span of a single movement.

The world tilted.

A candle. A window. The smell of herbal tea. His voice, a little hoarse, laughing: "No, not like that. Higher. There." Her hand on the hilt of a wooden sword. His palm over it. Warmth at her back, breath against the nape of her neck. "You're doing this wrong on purpose." "Of course I am." Quiet laughter. His lips at her temple…

Ilva recoiled so sharply that the blade clattered to the stone.

"What?" Cassian froze, his hand still outstretched. "What happened?"

"Nothing." She pressed her wrist to her chest. Her heart was pounding wildly. "No, I… just… I'm clumsy."

"You've gone pale."

"I'm cold."

"That's the third time you've used that excuse."

"Because it still works."

He looked at her for a long while, intently, his head tilted slightly. Then he asked, very quietly:

"Why do you never take off your gloves?"

"Because I feel calmer this way."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have right now."

A pause. He could have pressed. She saw him deciding whether to.

"Very well," he said at last, and picked the blade up from the floor. "Then no touching. Only words. Stand again."

She stood. He didn't touch her again, only spoke: "Lower. Shoulder. Elbow." His voice was even, patient, and at some point she caught herself looking at him not as at an instructor. He stood three paces away with his sleeves rolled to the elbow, and in the pale light of the shard she could see the lines of ink on his left arm. Fresh. He renewed them every day.

The last line still read: "Renn."

She recognised it by its shape.

They trained for almost an hour. By the end her arms ached and her hair was plastered to her forehead, but Cassian said drily, "It will do for a first time," and that was perhaps the warmest thing he had said to her in all these days.

“Friday again,” he said. “And one more thing. We need to get into the Lower Archive.”

She jerked her head up.

“I was just about to tell you. Lina said the upper years have a key.”

“So it’s no longer a secret.” He winced slightly. “I have my pass. They don’t check who comes with me, if I’m a fifth-year and alone. Tomorrow night.”

“And Daren?”

“Daren will write to my father exactly what I want him to write. I told him you’re helping me with the chronicle.” He winced again, slightly. “It isn’t a lie. Just an incomplete truth.”

“Did he believe it?”

“No. But he’ll have to pretend he did.”

She nodded and walked to the stairs. She stopped on the bottom step, as she had the last time.

“Cassian.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for the coat.”

He said nothing, but the corners of his mouth twitched.



The room was dark.

Ilva came in carefully so as not to wake Lina, eased the door shut, and tiptoed to her bunk. Lina slept curled in a ball, snuffling softly. On the table, a candle had burned down to a stub.

Ilva sat down and reached under the pillow for the letter.

The pillow was empty.

She froze. Then she flung back the blanket and ran her palm over the sheet. Looked under the bunk, in the small chest, in the bag with the quills. Turned everything over. The letter was gone.

"Lina," she whispered.

The redhead sat straight up, yawning.

"Mm? What?"

"Did anyone come in?"

"No. I haven't gone out since evening. The door's locked, I checked." Lina blinked sleepily. "Why?"

"Nothing."

Ilva went to the window. The latch was open. Not flung wide: nudged back just a little, just enough that it wouldn't show from inside. Cold and the smell of the sea drifted in from outside, and below, on a narrow ledge three hands wide that she doubted would have held even a cat, a faint mark remained.

Someone had been here.

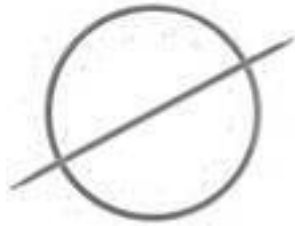
Someone had known where the letter lay. Someone had known she had touched it.

She closed the window and turned around. A faint scent lingered in the room, almost imperceptible. Lavender.

Dissolving like smoke.

And on the pillow, where the letter had been, lay a single object. A white feather. Slender, clean, without a single speck, laid down so neatly that it was clear it had been left on purpose.

Not a warning. A signature.



Chapter 8. The Lower Archive

THE DOOR to the chronicle vault lay beneath the library, at the end of a narrow corridor where no one went except the upper years and the masters. It was a low slab bound in black iron, locked with an intricate key. Cassian had worn that key on a cord beneath his shirt for twelve months now and had never once used it.

He knew this because it was written down.

“Will you be long?” Ilva whispered.

She stood beside him, wrapped in a dark cloak with a deep hood, holding a faintly glimmering lantern with its glass shuttered. At first glance she might have passed for an ordinary student returning to the dormitory after a late lesson. Unless one looked at the gloves.

“No,” he said, and turned the key.

The lock clicked. The door swung open without a creak, and out of the darkness came a dry chill, the smell of parchment and of dust, the thick kind of dust that gathers only where no one has looked for centuries.

“We’re here,” she breathed.

He stepped in first. The moment he crossed the threshold, lamps flared along the walls, row after row, soft and bluish like the shards at the students’ collars. The light rolled inward through the hall in a wave and faded somewhere far beyond the bend of

the shelves.

"They respond to bearers," he explained quietly. "The more shards in the room, the brighter they burn."

Ilva stepped over the threshold behind him.

The lamps did not change. No flare, no tremor.

"See?" She smiled faintly. "As far as they're concerned, I don't exist."

"As far as they're concerned, you don't exist," he repeated, and a strange feeling touched him somewhere beneath the ribs. It struck him that this was the most accurate description of her place in this world, and he did not at once understand why it hurt him so unpleasantly.

The archive was immense. Shelves ran off into the dark in rows, tall, reaching the ceiling, packed tight with volumes in worn bindings. Gilded crests gleamed on the spines: waves, lightning bolts, wolf heads, branches. Every house had its own section and its own aisle. They passed the Askars, the Dorvalds, the Solvanes, whose cabinet was noticeably wider than the rest.

"And the Veirs?" asked Ilva.

"At the very end."

"Why?"

"Because we are the oldest house." He said it so drily that she could not help a short laugh. "In libraries, the elder families are shelved last. The idea is that they remember everything and have no need to hurry."

"And you?"

"I remember nothing."

She fell silent.

The Veir section turned out to be like all the others: two long shelving units, a silver moon above a wave on every spine. But on the third shelf from the top, a gap gaped black.

He stopped in front of it.

"Here," Cassian said quietly.

"What?"

"A volume is missing."

He ran his fingers along the edge of the shelf. The dust lay evenly everywhere except one spot, where a fresh mark showed: the book had been taken out recently, no more than a year ago.

"Look." Ilva crouched at the foot of the shelves, where a thick ledger of withdrawals lay on a stand made for it. She brought the lantern closer. "This lists everyone who has taken out a chronicle."

He knelt beside her. The pages rustled dryly, like autumn leaves. They turned them together, the little flame trembling over the yellowed lines, until Ilva stopped.

"There."

The entry was written in a neat, sharp hand. The date: fourteen months ago.

"Ollin D., on the instruction of Lord Veir the Elder. Removed: volume 'Chronicle of House Veir, Years 16–19.' Grounds: order of the Council. Not to be returned."

Cassian looked at those lines for a long time. Long enough for

the lantern to sway several times.

"Daren," he said at last.

"You're not surprised."

"I'm surprised that I'm not surprised." He closed the ledger. "He said the records were 'lost in the move.' He neither lied nor told the truth."

"He did what your father ordered."

"Yes."

"Cassian…"

"Don't." He raised a hand. "I don't want comforting."

"I wasn't going to."

It was so unexpected that he turned his head. She sat on the floor with her legs tucked under her, the lantern in her lap, and looked at him steadily and directly.

"I was going to say that you're kneeling in the dust right now, holding proof that your father took three years of your life." She shrugged slightly. "In your place I wouldn't want comforting either. I'd want to find the missing volume."

"It's not to be returned."

"Then we'll find what can be returned."

She stood, took the lantern, walked along the shelf, and suddenly stopped.

"There's something here."

Behind the shelf, in the narrow gap between the wood and the wall, the corner of a sheet of paper stuck out. Yellowish, brittle, with a black border. Ilva carefully slipped in two fingers and drew

it out the way one draws out a splinter.

It was a scrap. Not a page but a scrap, torn off along the bottom, with a ragged edge. The lines were set down in the same chancery hand, but the ink had faded.

She held it out to him. He took it.

"…carried out in the presence of the petitioner and a witness, the scribe T. Renn. Subject to oblivion: the years from the sixteenth to the nineteenth. Exception, at the petitioner's demand: …"

After that came the torn edge.

Cassian reread the entry. Then again. By the third time he realised he could not tear his eyes from a single word.

Renn.

He slowly raised his eyes.

Ilva stood motionless. Her face had gone white as parchment, and the lantern in her hand trembled slightly.

"T. Renn," he said quietly. "A scribe."

"My father."

She said it evenly, but her voice wavered on the last word.

"Tamas Renn," she went on, looking somewhere past him. "For years he took commissions from the royal chancery. He never once said he had been present at… something like this." She swallowed. "It's not a coincidence."

"No."

"He was there. He watched them erase your memory. And he said nothing. Not to me, not to anyone."

"Or couldn't."

She met his gaze.

"Or couldn't," she repeated slowly.

In the silence of the archive, something creaked.

Cassian did not at once understand what. He simply felt the hair rise on the back of his neck, and then he heard it: footsteps. Heavy, measured, drawing nearer. Somewhere by the entrance an iron bolt scraped.

"The night warden," he breathed. "He makes his round once an hour."

"Not tonight!"

"Tonight, precisely."

The little lights on the walls flickered, sensing a new presence. The blue lamps by the entrance swelled brighter.

Cassian seized Ilva by the elbow. He looked around: shelves to the right, to the left, tall, dense, almost no gaps between them. But at the very back of the section, beyond the last row, stood a narrow reading alcove hollowed out of the stone itself. A metre and a half wide, a little deeper than that. A bench for one.

"In here," he whispered.

They ran in. She ducked in first, he followed, clutching the darkened lantern to him and quenching his own shard by sheer will: beneath his collar the last moonlit gleam went dim. Pitch darkness settled over the alcove.

And it was cramped.

He understood how cramped when the warden's steps entered the hall and stopped at the third row. There was no room in the

alcove to stand apart. Ilva stood with her back against the stone wall, he faced her, one hand braced on the rock above her head so as not to crush her. Half a breath was all that lay between them.

He could hear her breathing.

Quick, shallow, barely audible. He felt her heart beating beneath the thin cloth of her collar. He saw her eyes shining in the dark, wide and black, and how she parted her lips to draw breath and at once bit them shut.

The footsteps passed. Stopped. The lantern's light swept along the shelves, picking out the volumes one by one.

He did not move.

"Cassian," she whispered, so quietly he read it on her lips rather than heard it.

"Quiet."

"Your hand…"

His right hand, the one not braced against the stone, lay at her waist. He did not remember when he had put it there. Did not remember how his fingers had closed on the thin cloth of her cloak, how his thumb had come to rest on the jut of her hipbone. He should have taken it away.

He did not.

The warden's lantern swung. Its light slid along the edge of the alcove and went out, and in the darkness that followed Ilva suddenly leaned forward. Not from fear, not by accident. Her forehead touched his collarbone, just beneath the shard. Softly, weightlessly, the way one touches when one is afraid and wants

to at once.

He stopped breathing.

"It's warm here," she whispered into his shirt.

"You've said that before."

"And I'm still right."

His fingers tightened on her waist. Barely noticeably. Just enough for her to feel it.

He bent his head. Her hair smelled of lavender and cold stone, and suddenly on his tongue was the taste of a word he had not spoken aloud in a long time. He couldn't remember which. He wanted to ask whether she did.

Iron creaked very near.

They both froze.

The lantern's light flashed again, farther off, at the exit of the section. The footsteps turned the other way, echoing, indifferent, and died away at the very door. The bolt clanged. Silence returned to the archive, thick as honey.

"He's gone," Cassian breathed.

"He's gone."

They did not move for another second, two. Then Ilva drew back first, in a single gliding movement, and at once it was cold. He lowered his hand.

"We need to leave," she said hoarsely.

"Yes."

"Before he comes back."

"Yes."

He took the scrap, folded it carefully, and tucked it into an inner pocket. She picked up the lantern. Neither pair of hands shook, because both were being held too carefully still.

At the door he stopped to lock up, and his gaze fell on the ledger lying on its stand by the entrance. He had no intention of opening it. But the page lying on top was not the one they had read. It had been turned.

Beneath the warden's last entry, today's, neat and tidy, it read: *"Veir C., one bearer. Entered: first hour."*

And at the very bottom of the page, under the tidy line, lay a feather.

Slender. White. Clean, without a single speck. Placed as though left on purpose for him to see.

Cassian went still.

"What is it?" Ilva asked over his shoulder.

He did not answer. He lifted the feather with two fingers, the way one lifts something that might burn. It was perfectly cold.

Ilva was looking at him, and in the lantern light he saw the blood drain from her face.

"It's the same," she said quietly. "There was one like it on my pillow."

"When?"

"Yesterday. The letter went missing." She swallowed. "I didn't have time to tell you."

"What letter?"

"The order for my enrolment. It was under my pillow." Her

voice broke to a whisper. “Someone took it and left a feather.”

He turned the feather in his fingers. On the very tip of the quill, barely visible, was a tiny, almost worn-away mark. A circle crossed by a thin line.

He did not know what it meant.

But his heart sank, because somewhere deep within, where his memory held nothing at all, a coldness stirred. Not a memory. Something worse: the sense that he had seen this mark before. Many times.

“We’re being watched,” he said very quietly.

“I know.”

“You don’t. You thought it was you.” He raised his eyes to hers. “They’re watching both of us.”

He slid the feather into his pocket beside the scrap, locked the door, and led her away down the dark corridor.

In the tower he sat at his desk and took out his notebook. The lines lay evenly, but the handwriting on the last words was foreign, as though someone else had written them.

“Daren removed the volume on Father’s instructions. Witness to the erasure: T. Renn, Ilva’s father. Years 16–19. Exception made at the petitioner’s demand (mine?).

Someone is leaving white feathers. The mark: a circle crossed by a line. I know it. I don’t remember from where.”

He stopped. Then he turned the pages back and found the old entry from three years ago, the very one.

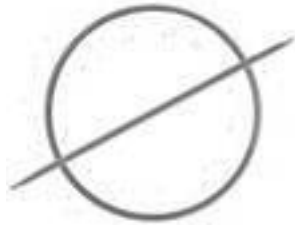
“If you meet Ilva Renn, do not let her near you. Do not trust

what you feel."

He looked at it for a very long time.

And for the first time he thought that the man who had written those lines might not have been warning himself of danger.

He had been protecting her.



Chapter 9. What the Hands Remember

MASTER TARN handed out pairings the way other men hand out sentences.

"Lord Dorvald with Miss Askar. Miss Corvin with Mr. Helder." He ran his staff down the list. "Mr. Solvane."

Edrik, who had been leaning against the wall with the air of a man long since bored of everything, lazily raised his head.

"You had the pleasure of conversing with me after class yesterday," Tarn said drily. "Do you remember what the subject was?"

"Restraint, Master."

"Precisely. Today you will practise it. Your partner is Miss Renn."

A whisper ran through the hall. Ilva felt her fingers go cold.

"Master," Edrik began slowly, "she has no shard. This isn't a duel, it's—"

"It, Mr. Solvane, will be a bout without elements. Not one gust of wind. Not the faintest draught. Only blade and the skill to keep your feet." Tarn rapped his staff on the floor. "If I feel so much as a breath, you are out of the practicum and writing an explanation to Madam Orvin. Is that clear?"

Edrik was silent for a moment. Then he smiled, genuinely this time, and she liked that smile even less.

"Clear, Master."

They were issued blunted training blades, light, wrapped in leather. Ilva stepped into the centre of the circle and set her feet the way Cassian had taught her. Hip lower. Shoulder back. Elbow bent. Palm on the hilt, glove over glove.

"Begin!"

Edrik attacked at once, with a wide, handsome, careless stroke, the kind you use on a training dummy. Ilva did not parry it. She stepped aside, and the blade whistled past her ear. A second stroke. A third. She retreated, holding her blade before her and counting: *one, two, three*. The way one counts steps on a staircase.

"She's running away!" someone shouted from the stands.

"She isn't running," came Lina's voice. "She's learning."

Edrik frowned. He had clearly counted on her collapsing at the second attack, and now he grew angrier by the moment. The blows came sharper, shorter, nastier. On the eighth, Ilva slipped on the sand and the blade flew from her hands. Edrik swung, and in that instant she did what no one expected: she did not leap back but ducked under his arm, the way one ducks under a low branch, and drove her shoulder into his chest.

He staggered. By only half a step. But the air around him shivered.

Instinct moved faster than thought. From beneath his palm tore a thin gust of wind, sharp and biting, and it hurled Ilva onto the sand.

"Enough!" Tarn's voice cracked like a whip.

Silence.

Edrik froze with his arm outstretched, slowly grasping what exactly he had done.

"Mr. Solvane," Tarn said, very evenly. "You lasted eleven strokes. That is two more than I had calculated. Out of the hall."

"Master, she—"

"Out."

Edrik shot Ilva a look that sent a chill down her spine. Then he turned and left without looking back.

Lina ran over, helped her up, brushed off her cloak.

"Did you see?! You got to him!"

"I didn't… I just…"

"Lasted," said Tarn, stopping beside them. His face remained impenetrable, but something like respect flickered in his eyes. "Eleven strokes against a well-trained student. Who taught you, Miss Renn?"

"No one, Master. I… read."

"Read," Tarn repeated. "How curious."

He walked away, and Ilva thought he hadn't believed a word of it.



That night she came to the hall fully resolved to tell him.

Everything. From the beginning. The gate on the first night, his wrist, the visions. She had rehearsed the words all the way down, and none of them seemed right. But when she descended the crumbling steps and saw him standing in the middle of the empty hall with a training blade in his hands, everything inside her went still.

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