

# Scapegrace

A creative work presented as part of a thesis for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide.

The thesis comprises:

Volume 1: Original novel, Scapegrace

Volume 2: Accompanying exegesis, "The (Absent) Female Body: Cross-dressing Narratives in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction."

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31 July 2020

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## Chapter 1

“Of all the stupid things –” Lily muttered to herself. Crouched on the narrow ledge stretching between two balconies, she watched the house across the street. House wasn’t exactly the word she would use, in normal circumstances. A house, to her, was one of the crammed two-storey buildings that populated the undercity. Hastily built a handful of decades ago for the booming population and left to fall apart. Crooked and ramshackle, a single room inhabited by an entire family. The better off factory workers or guiltier, quicker criminals, could occasionally afford a whole floor. *This* was not a house.

Rigid symmetry held it together; an equal number of high rectangular windows set into the yellow stone. A belt of balconies marked the separation between stories, wrought metal work curving in intricate grace. Black double doors were framed by an archway, protruding from the building proper. Not a welcome but a statement. It centred the eye, drew it towards the steps leading up to the entrance, focused it on the elaborate carvings of the arch. It would be easy to miss the gateway in the metal fence fronting the property, a gateway that led to a basement stairway. The servant’s entrance. Lily overlooked it at first; a lapse of concentration, distracted by the flourishing bushes curling out from the alcove above the arch. Her fingers itched to touch the leaves, green with life. She wondered whether they were soft or coarse.

The servants were as discreet as their entrance. They never intersected with the grand Decadent groups arriving or leaving. Their timing was a perfect choreography designed to please. Their pace constantly hurried, on the verge of a run, yet their bodies remained compressed; elbows in, heads down, shoulders

narrow. Even the largest man became diminutive. After three days of watching the house, Lily had only just begun to distinguish between them. The women blended together in their simple brown gowns and short cut hair. The housekeeper; a pinched creature, with hands that tremored constantly. The maids; worn thin by anxiety. The younger ones wore their plain dresses laced in desperate sensuality. One was plumper than the rest, brassy hair badly hidden under the frilled white cap. An air of satisfaction translated into a slower step, a cockily tilted chin. The other girls treated her with careful pity; a glance here, a soft touch there. The way people acted towards a dying person ignorant of their demise. The master's mistress, Lily guessed.

The men were dressed in bright livery, red and blue tasselled jackets a garish shock after the dull brown of the women's uniform. The footmen and butlers and valets performed the visible duties of the household; they were the ornaments in corners, standing still and silent. Statues for Decadent pleasure. Ladies preferred the handsome ones, resorting to devious methods to hire the most attractive away from their rivals. The style of the moment demanded chiselled jaws and thick brows, although before that slender blondes with dreaming eyes were highly sought after. The men saved their income while they could, knowing their looks would not be popular forever.

Lily shifted, wincing at the stabbing needles that shot up and down her calves. She had been sitting on the ledge for three hours, feeling fading from her limbs. It was the first time in years that she'd staked out a property before breaking in; even as a kit, starting out in the White Rabbits, her attention to detail had been lacklustre. The long hours, the painful positions; it didn't suit a girl whose fingers

always twitched, feet always half ready to run. The nervous energy ate at her. Demanded action where action was unwanted. As she gained seniority within the gang, Lily started robbing houses using equal parts luck and reckless cunning.

*Pride is a dangerous thing*, Leon once told her, after she scaled a four-storey factory building to steal the patented plans for the latest cotton mill. The competing factory owner had offered good money for it – a fortune in hogs for the gang, with a bonus for the thief who stole it. But Lily dropped in through a window, cat-silent, to find trenchers patrolling the floor below, accompanied by a Decadent watchdog. Grafters treated trenchers with barely concealed disrespect, but there was little feared more in the undercity than a watchdog. Second or third sons of poor Decadent houses, they hired themselves out to the trenchers for large sums, willing to debase their power to maintain their lifestyle. Lily's pride almost got her killed, and earned her a thrashing when she reported back to the gang.

She eased off the ledge, digging her fingers and toes into cracks barely discernible to the inexperienced eye. The slender stature, mocked by many of the Rabbits as weak, was an advantage in burglaries. She scaled walls they would never attempt, crawled through tiny attic windows that would trap wider shoulders.

Her feet on the ground, Lily melted into the shadows, a wraith in the dark. The house had settled for the day, lords and ladies already departed for their midnight balls clad in silk that would return rumpled from rendezvous. The servants would set the rooms to right before retiring to their beds, sleeping until the jangle of their master's needs woke them once more. Never off duty.

Skirting the glow of street lamps, Lily crossed the road and paused for a second, staring up at the house. All the windows were dark and shuttered. The

black door was slick to the touch, paint unchipped as if fresh that very morning. Drawing a pin out of her inner waistcoat pocket, Lily knelt, eye level with the brass lock. This was a time of security limbo. With the master away and the servants unable to predict the hour of their return, the deadlock wouldn't be in place. The Decadents didn't like to arrive to find their own home barred against them, to ring the bell like guests. The mechanism clicked in welcome; she tried the handle. The metal was cool, and malleable to her wishes. The door swung open, silent and well-greased, eliciting a small smile from Lily.

Darkened pine floorboards stretched across the entrance hall, covered by a thickly woven carpet. Elaborate violet flowers bloomed across gold, threadbare in patches. The choice; follow the corridor, or mount the stairs. Run her fingers over the worn banister, varnish rubbed thin by finer hands than hers, or investigate the darkened ground floor rooms. Curiosity rose; the need to touch the unknown. To draw a sense of the person from belongings loved and indifferent. She had seen the lords and ladies who lived here, but the carefully applied masks revealed nothing. The interior; that's where the truth lay.

She chose the stairs, reining herself in. The family rooms lay upstairs. If this was the façade that Lord Michael presented to the world, he clearly did not keep his wealth where others could see. This was a space of gentile poverty. Of a well-born man run onto tough times. She tried to squash the flicker of unease that rose in her breast; the voice that said *maybe there is no stash at all. Maybe this is a trap.*

The unease didn't fade. As she mounted the stairs, Lily was aware of the slight hitch to her breathing; air expelled from lungs with a whimper. The tension

in limbs usually fluid and sure. The soft carpet runner felt treacherous underfoot, so she concentrated on that; making her steps light and cautious, conditioned by years of training. Fear would not overwhelm her.

She moved through the house with a purpose she didn't feel. Her heart beat fast and hard. A lady's suite of rooms lay behind the first set of doors, innocent in its colour palette of mauve and grey. A small parlour with comfortable chairs and a fire dead in the grate. Embroidery casually discarded on a worktable; a flower emerging from the bright stitching. A tiny yellow bird, trapped in a cage, trilled a greeting at her. Lily let curiosity carry her over, a finger through the bars receiving a gentle peck. It fluttered its wings; clipped.

The bedroom yielded no surprises; plain, dominated by a four-poster bed. No connecting door, only a luxuriously appointed bathing room and walk in robe. Not the lady wife's room. Those were always attached to the master's, for ease of access. This suite probably belonged to the daughter of the house; Lily had glimpsed her several times over the course of her watch. A radiant young thing, all gold-tipped curls, barely into her teens. Lily let herself linger, fingers gliding over fine material. Wondrous dresses, replete with flouncing and lace trim. No expense had been spared here. The girl's beauty was a bartering chip; Lord Michael wouldn't want it obscured by old fashioned garments.

Lily lifted one down; held it against herself. A giddy laugh rose in her chest. She twirled, a rustle of silk accompanying the movement. For a moment, she allowed herself to imagine being held against another, spun around a glittering ballroom, waist cinched and expanse of white chest left bare. But her mind recoiled from the image. For the hands that held her would belong to a stranger. The face,

to a man eager for a purchase, not a romance.

She pushed the dress back into its place, crumpling the delicate material, making no effort to brush away the dirt marring its perfection. It wasn't a filth that could be washed away.

The next few rooms proved similar; neat sitting rooms, parlours and bedchambers of no interest. Lily didn't bother investigating. Any intimacy with lives like these set off a throbbing longing. Even poor Decadent families existed in ways grand and unobtainable for grafters. The smooth scent of every space was jarring, her nose unaccustomed to anything that didn't toe the line of disgust. The most unpleasant offering was the slight smell of stale perfume that lingered, poorly aired.

It was the master suite that drew her forward. Set at the end of the corridor, double doors oak brown and imposing. Unlocked, because no member of his household would dare enter uninvited. Inside existed a separate world. Gone was the gentle floral wallpaper. In its place was dark wood panelling, lines severe and straight-cut. No swirling ornamentation here. The floorboards were left plain, unobscured by decorative carpeting. Lily could feel their chill through thin-soled boots. This was not a place of warmth, but intimidation. No feminine for Lord Michael.

Three rooms were set off the grim hallway, similar in their austerity. Study, library, bedroom. Closeted away from the thoroughfare of the house – unusual. The lords took calls in their library, eschewing the light-hearted female drawing rooms. The sound of girlish laughter distracted from business. They would settle in uncomfortable chairs, amber liquid held with a studied carelessness. Slouched



in brittle relaxation. But visitors would never be invited up here, to the private family spaces. Maybe there was a second book-lined space downstairs, designed specifically for that purpose. Maybe this lord didn't take calls.

She shivered, and her trepidation solidified as she pushed open the study door. A shock jolted her as soon as she touched skin to wood; her hair crackled with electric life. She bit back a cry, drawing her hand back to find the palm reddened and already blistering. A curse fell from numb lips; panic closed like a vice over breathless lungs. *That didn't happen*, she thought to herself desperately, unable to tear her gaze from the burn. *Doors don't attack me when I try and open them. People attack. Not inanimate objects.*

The rational argument did nothing to distract her. She could hear the rush of blood in her ears, pulse accelerating. Peter had got her into this mess, daring her, *taunting* her. There was a reason grafters didn't touch Decadent houses. A *good* reason. She had just walked into a supernatural trip-wire; no doubt trenchers were rushing to her position. Or worse – what if the lord himself was coming to defend his property? If it was his power, surely it would notify him first of intruders. Her mind spun, unable to land on a single solution. *Leave, stay*. She had to go. She had to run. But her palm ached, and her feet remained rooted to the ground.

Something stopped her. A voice that squeezed its way into her mind and said, *no*. And her body listened. It said, *search the room*. And she did. Careful hands turned and reset books and papers, looking with blind eyes. Boots scuffed against floorboards, unwilling participants in a dangerous game. Her heart beat a cautionary rhythm. *Run, run, run*. But she itched for whatever there was to find. For the voice was calling to her, again and again, overriding instincts and will. A

compulsion that sunk its claws deep.

When she touched the stone, she knew. Discarded in a drawer, glowing blood-red against a pile of virgin paper, she knew. Shot through with shafts of the brightest aquamarine, veined with violet, it sang a siren's song. A thrill swept through her as she lifted it from its resting place. The stone was hot and smooth, and almost without thinking Lily slipped it into her pocket. It settled against her thigh, a warm weight even through fabric. It was a puzzle piece, slotting neatly into place. The rightness of it thrummed in her veins. A sigh escaped.

A smart rat-tat of shoes split the silence; Lily spun. Glanced around the room for a hiding place. As the door – the door she had left open – swung further ajar, a low voice cursing the inattention of servants, she threw herself behind the desk, curling into the foot well. Shoulders and knees pressed against unforgiving wood; a hand clamped over a mouth emitting the tell-tale hitch of panicked breathing.

The shoes moved around the desk, coming into Lily's line of sight. Smooth, well-shined uppers mocked the twisting fear that gripped her stomach. Long, trouser-clad legs stretched away from this telling footwear; dark navy, pressed. She had no doubt that a clean white shirt with a starched, upright collar added to the look. A waistcoat, neatly fitted. Swept back hair, carefully mussed; a knowing smirk creasing into a dimple. She resisted the urge to swallow, letting saliva build at the back of her throat. He was too close, close enough to hear.

Lord Michael stood in front of his desk for long moment. Only the hush-hush of shuffling paper could be heard. He hummed under his breath, a nonsense song. Off key. His foot tapped to the beat, unaware of anything amiss. There was

strange irreverence about him – in the way he mocked his upright wife, skipped down steps, laughed loudly at the smallest joke. Hedonism and debauchery defined the upper classes, but Lord Michael was different. His relative youth was unmarred by the pallor and bloat of overindulgence. An eccentric bashfulness accompanied his wild conduct. An occasional pause in motion, a befuddled glance at those around him. As if he were waking from a dream, and didn't quite recognise his location. Lily had watched him, as much as the house. Fascinated, against her will.

But irreverence didn't stretch to kindness, when discovering thieves hiding beneath tables. As he sat, slouching in the chair, one hair raking through dark locks, Lily contained the instinctual cry. If he looked down now, he would see her. She watched, paralysed, as those shoes stretched into the foot well. *What is the plan*, her body screamed, ready for action. Conditioned from years of training to do something – but her brain had no answer. No response at all. Inertia overtook thought; the world narrowed. She shuddered, already feeling the lick of his flames. A Decadent didn't need to call for protection. He had his own defensive weapons. The opal pulsed against her leg.

"Sir, a visitor!" The servant entered without announcing himself, and Lord Michael's insouciance fell away. He sat up straight, a frown tugging at his brows.

"Ashley," he rebuked.

"Sorry, sir, but...Lord Spencer is here, asking to see you urgently." The words came out jumbled, desperate. Fearful, Lily realised.

Lord Michael cursed, and her muscles braced in response. Her instincts demanded flight because this – *this* was a predator. The balled fists, the way he

slammed out of his chair; a feeble outlet for his anger. He wanted to strike out. The servant mumbled another apology.

“Where?” The question was low and terse. His hands were shaking.

“The lower ground drawing room, my lord. I set someone outside the door to watch him, as per your orders.”

“Good, thank you Ashley. You can go.” Despite his biting tone, the gratitude seemed genuine. The door clicked as the servant left, and Lord Michael released a sigh.

“Of all the goddamn times for him...” Lily jumped as a fist slammed into the wood above her. And then those polished shoes were carrying him away from the desk and out of the room, a reprieve from discovery.

She allowed a moment’s curiosity for the identity of Lord Spencer, and why his visit inspired such angst, before focussing on the real issue; the house that she thought would be empty of Decadents was presently occupied by two, powers unknown. If either was a Maledict, they would sense her furtive mind.

And no one escaped a Maledict.

## Chapter 2

Lily had two choices: slow or fast. It was an effort to uncurl stiff legs, force her body from the foot well, away from that feeling of safety. A shaky illusion. She was a rabbit who wanted to stay in the warren, unreachable. But this warren was populated by threat. Motionless, she was vulnerable. *Never be caught stationary, never be stationary*, the voice of Leon Hennessey crept into her consciousness, sly and knowing.

So she emerged, blinking warily, into the dim study light. She crossed to the door. Her boots whispered against the floorboards as she hurried down the corridor. *Disappear, disappear, silent*, she thought to herself, hands clenching and unclenching. A tremor threatened her lips; the tell-tale swirl of panic clouding judgement. She bit down on a tongue numbed, willing the tingling to fade. The familiar clamp of lungs, restricting air; the anxiety, ferociously side-lined by her usual blithe confidence, roared to life. No amount of deep breathing could calm the furious gallop of a heart ruled by terror.

She was alone with a dry mouth and closing throat.

The upper floors were empty of life, not a single flickering threat raising its head. But as Lily padded down the main staircase, her luck ran out. She reached the foyer at the same time as a man coming the other way; they slid to a stop, wide eyes assessing each other. Breath caught, Lily took stock of her opponent; the russet pants and fitted red waistcoat marked him a servant. Not a footman; lowly, but not a body slave. They'd be lucky to get such a long minute to themselves, in service or not. Taller than her, but most people were. Thickset; slow. He hadn't a hope of catching her, not in her home, not in the winding streets

of the undercity, the zig zag of nests confusing all but the denizens and the dying.

He let out a gasp, belated. The silence cracked open, spilling into the space between them, as he stepped forward, hands outstretched. Lily bolted. Not out the front door; he was blocking that path. Instead she swung away, hurtling down an unfamiliar hallway, praying that it led to the kitchen. The kitchen always linked to the servant's entrance. It would be a way out. She could already imagine the fleeting touch of fresh air on her skin, before the plunge back down, away from the green Decadent streets. Even the sewer-scent would be sweet after this dark panic.

The corridor led left then right, as she slammed into walls, training forgotten, strangled by fear. *Go, go, go*, she chanted quietly.

"Grab him," a yell from behind, loud and rough. The servant.

But a whisper followed it; a whisper that came from someone else, someone whose attention had been attracted by her flight. It was a curious brush against the walls of her mind, testing. A lingering caress, a light pressure. An imprint of the person behind that unnatural touch; an inhale, a flare of surprise. Lily's stomach twisted, her footsteps faltering. The hesitation was an acceptance of sorts; she couldn't outrun a Decadent. Yet the touch faded and nothing came in its place; no lightning grip, no tripwire of power.

She took a blind left, and the ground vanished; knees hit the pointed corners of the stairs, and she was tumbling, over and over, momentum carrying her forward. Teeth bit into fragile lip, and blood flooded her mouth. For several seconds, all she could do was lie prone on the slate pavers at the bottom, every breath sharp and sore. Masochistic fingers probed and poked at ribs; she

swallowed a groan. And then she had no more time, as louder, surer feet than hers were on the stairs above.

The corridor broadened to allow for the quick comings and goings of a large population, wallpaper gone, unadorned brick in its place. The temperature rose, and Lily caught the alluring scent of warm bread, fresh from the oven. She burst through a set of doors, and slammed to a halt.

It was a maze of bodies and bench tops. Servants froze at her appearance, pans and plates and tasks forgotten. Lily's thoughts stuttered. A slop boy, mouth set in a belligerent scowl, stepped forward. He raised shaking fists and this, at least, was a threat Lily knew how to respond to; the knife slid silently from her belt. She swung it in a showy arc in front of her; an easy intimidation. A careless show of confidence. Her mouth curled into a sneer, and she felt sick with it. She could almost see Leon adjust his top-hat, tug his embroidered waistcoat straight. A job well done, he'd congratulate himself. Lee Vance, making the weak tremble.

"Get out of my way," she ground out, deepening her voice into threat. The boy took half a step back, his expression still fierce. The girl behind him had no such pride; she motioned, drawing Lily's attention. The brown dress was typical of serving girls, skirt half tucked into her apron waistband for cleanliness, but her direct dark gaze was not. A beige cap covered short ringlet curls, no doubt carefully rolled every night before bed. A smudge rode high on one cheekbone, but her lips stretched in a defiant, knowing smile.

"That way, sir," she pointed towards the back of the kitchen, past the blackened iron stove tops and wide kitchen table laden with half-prepared meals. Something sizzled, forgotten. "Be quick, sir."

“Thank you,” Lily whispered, shouldering the bristling slop boy aside. The other servants made no effort to stop her, moving away with bowed heads. She could feel the girl’s eyes on her until she slipped out the door into the courtyard garden; a gaze heavy and expectant. A glance back saw them closing ranks behind her, shielding the exit from view.

Lily shot up the stairs that led to the street beyond, vaulting over the latched gate. Lungs filled with the soft spice of sunburry trees lining the cobblestoned carriageways, tiny pink flowers curled against the cool night air. No clatter of wheels threatened the temporary freedom; there was no one to be seen. Muscles loosened; she rolled her shoulders with a low groan. That had been close. Checking the street a final time, she turned her face for home, legs stretching into an easy, ground covering run. The shadows welcomed her back, seductive. Distracting.

The unnoticed pursuer crashed into the back of her calves. Already punished knees thumped into paving stones, taking both their bodyweights, forcing a cry from her throat.

“No, no, no,” she gasped, as unforgiving hands flipped her onto her back. The face that looked down at her didn’t belong to the storage closet servant. *His* loyalty only stretched to the limits of the wrought black fence. He would have never chased anyone, even a thief, this far. His sphere, strictly the home. This boy was young, barely out of his second decade, skin smooth. Untouched by the endless labour of the indentured. Purpled exhaustion overtook a servant’s youth, dissatisfaction etching lines where smiles should live. Faces became home to sullen unhappiness, only wiped clean under the keen eyes of supervisors, or



masters. Delight in their lot was a requirement. Delight in scrubbing rust and ash from fire grates. Delight in aching muscles, slowly atrophying from malnutrition, and days longer than nature's light allowance.

This boy was no servant. A face like his was only found in the slums. Even then – Lily took in the lines of black freckles, barely discernible against a brown complexion. Freckles needed sun. And the chest she pushed against was muscled, not the frame of a starveling scrabbling for food nor the hungry strength of a factory worker. Unease gathered, a tense knot at the back of her head.

Lily lost her breath as their gaze met. He had eyes the colour of sunlight through veined leaves, set under thick straight brows. But it wasn't the strange beauty of the narrow, clever face that shocked her. Her heart pulsed in strange, unexpected recognition; it blocked out all other sound, thumping in her ears, as winter blue clashed with summer green. Heat rocketed through her, and Lily cried out. Their connection was agony, her skin rejecting his. She was an inferno, and everything from fingertips to toes were aflame. Something unfurled beneath her skin, and a howling rage slammed through her. An endless, eternal strength with no beginning and no end. The opal throbbed.

Horror coloured the boy's face as he released her, swearing. Fire licked up her arms. The scent of burning flesh filled her mouth, as she slammed her hands against his chest. An unforgiving palm clamped over her mouth before she could scream again.

"Get yourself together." The boy ordered, as she writhed against his hold. Lily barely heard him. The beast inside her fought him – *she* fought him.

"Gods, a lord's brat who doesn't know control," his mouth pinched. "Take

a deep breath. Good. And another. Everything is fine. Keep breathing like that...hold it. And out.”

The noise dulled to a faint ringing. Lily closed her eyes, sucking in breath after calming breath. She could feel the power writhing, pushing for release. Another breath. It guttered.

“What the hell?” She rasped.

“Don’t pretend with me. I don’t know why you’re wearing street clothes...”

“WHAT was that?” She interrupted, glaring up at him, caution smothered by panic.

He paused, brows pulling together. Considering her. A decision made, he released his hold, pushing away. No helping hand was offered as Lily scrambled to her feet. “What you just did...only the gifted possess that strength.”

“You’re wrong.” She stepped back, shaking her head.

“There isn’t any other explanation.”

“It’s impossible. Impossible.” And it was. Every law, every lesson insisted. No woman had ever been gifted with the power. Not one.

“Bastard boys sometimes inherit. It’s not unheard of, even if they try to cover it up.”

The word *boy* made Lily hesitate. She’d forgotten. He could only see Lee.

“I’m no bastard.” She let her chin cock arrogantly. “My parents were married.”

“Women stray.” He shrugged. “No question.”

“You’re not part of the house, are you? Lord Michael’s?”

“I wasn’t the one chasing you, no.” Not quite an answer. His eyes remained

direct, unwavering; an experienced liar. No hint of indecision. Of course men always lied. Lily knew that. She was the best of them. Yet that uncanny recognition remained, tugging at her common sense. Warping it. Begging her to believe him, when the dishonesty was plain.

“Why did you tackle me?” She didn’t wait for his answer, letting her voice deepen with jeering teenage brashness. “Let me go.”

“There’s others who’d like to meet you. I could take you to them,” he said, shifting slightly into the centre of her path. Blocking escape. Cold swelled in her chest, and with it came certainty. She flicked a glance down the street behind them, as the knife slid from her belt.

“No,” she replied, taking a step back and to the side. “Stay away from me.”

“You don’t want to do that,” he said quietly, and the hairs on the back of Lily’s neck rose.

“Stay back.”

“I can help you.” He reached for her, and Lily swept the blade up, slashing across his forearm. She didn’t wait to see the blood; the hoarse cry enough to encourage flight.

As she ran through the clean swept streets of the upper city, his face came to her again and again. Despite the threat, despite everything, he could have helped her. Those words had rung true.



The window catch slipped free soundlessly, and she swung herself through the

narrow gap with lightness cultivated from years of breaking into houses. Dead bolts on doors didn't stop her. Those drawn across her own included. The slumped figure by the fire didn't stir as her soft-soled boots padded across the floorboards. His grey hair had thinned rapidly over the last few years, age overtaking youth.

She covered him with a blanket, picking up the cane from the floor and hooking it over the armchair. He panicked if he woke with it out of reach. It had become a crutch in more ways than one. After the accident, too poor to afford a physician, they were forced to wait; wait out the infection, wait out the broken bones. He hadn't been able to walk for a long time, as Lily struggled to make the few saved coins stretch to food and board. She went to their landlord for an extension, and he suggested alternate payment methods, palm moist against her skin. A refusal made him cruel, and she hid bruises from her father for the following days. She sold the furniture, piece by piece, until they lived in empty rooms with emptier hearts, stomachs lined by scraps and pity.

He learnt to walk again but barely; too slow and too lame to restart work at the mills. Every rejection sent him deeper into the bottle, drinking away their last coins. For a girl of thirteen, not old enough to offer herself on the marriage mart, a single choice remained. One already recognised by her landlord, months before. Desperation pushed her into the streets, down into the darker, winding paths of the undercity. Deeper than she ever ventured before, unsure of what to offer or where to be, until she was lost and the way home shut behind her.

Leon found her. No more than a boy himself, he offered her help in a city where it always came with a price. His required no transaction – genuine feeling made him hesitate at the muffled tears, and search out the huddled figure in the

dim. They started as allies, kindred spirits. The mistrust grew later. His idea; joining the gang. Hers; the disguise. She knew the way men were, better than him. Lily became Lee, a thief, a scoundrel. Off the marriage mart forever. Out of greedy reach. The last four years had stolen something from her, though; the innate knowledge of who she truly was.

The gang was home. A bickering scrum of misdeeds, but it was the only family she had known for a long time. Nothing would remain without it. Leon was gone. The strings tying her to the gang were fraying, the time before the inevitable *snap* counted in heartbeats rather than seconds. She would be a kite, untethered. Unanchored.

Lily carefully shut the door separating the small living and sleeping area. A brick kept it shut; a small privacy to hold close and savour. The room barely qualified as a closet in size but it was hers alone.

The bandages unwound, ribboning towards the floor, revealing darkening welts. Lily's chest loosened; she took her first full breath of the day, hands running up and down her waist. She knew invisibility; how to win it, how to maintain it. The breast band a necessity; the breeches and waistcoat lending straightness to a form flawed with the dips and dimples of womanhood. She stretched, revealing the dark sparse hair sprouting from her pits. Thirteen she called herself, year after year, in a city where births were left unrecorded and celebration days passed unnoticed except in the higher classes. Decadents showered their youth with gifts, bright-wrapped. Mercers taught frugality to their workers, but rarely practiced it. Here, in the undercity, the disguise worked. No one paid attention to yet another starveling, hollow hearted. The crueller taunts about her size were turned into

triumphs of her own. A break-neck, they called her. Willing to throw herself out of any window, scale any wall, go up against any opponent. Second only to the Hennesseys for pluck. The thought gave her pause, nails cutting into skin.

Lily pulled the opal free from her pocket, where it had lain warm and strangely comforting against her thigh. It was incongruous against a hand tarnished by life in the undercity; dirt buried deep in every crevice, nails cracked and rimmed in black. Threading lines of gold winked back at her from the stone's smooth surface.

She placed it in under the floorboard with the rest of her treasures, its unnatural glow out of sight. Even hidden, the wrongness of it called to her. Leon never let them take objects of power, the caution repeated over and over, but she had anyway, a strange compulsion guiding her hand. The sick feeling of it lingered, like a freshly remembered guilt.

Like her, it was magic. Like her, it was dangerous.

Lily slipped the nightdress over her head, cloth whispering over her unbound body. The straw mattress rustled as she wrapped the thin blanket around herself. The air was heavy and heated from the fire, weighting her eyelids. For this one moment, in the safety of her home, she could allow herself to be a girl. To sleep without guard in a room that had been hers since childhood, under a roof that her mother once breathed and laughed and lived under too.

Tomorrow only brought lies.

### Chapter 3

A thin veneer of respectability coated the market during daylight hours. The brash cries of vendors, muted. Soft conversations underscored by rhythmic, metallic hammering; blacksmiths emerged during the day, dominating an entire corner of the square. A bay horse tugged against its tether, impatient. Impervious to the bustle around it. Lily let her gaze linger on the long lines of its flank and leg, both powerful and fragile. A creature out of place in the undercity. Mules provided the backbone of animal labour here; in the mills and on the streets, hooves and spirits unchipped by the tough cobblestones and tougher conditions. Only Decadents and Mercers had the vanity and time for horses. Still, Lily was drawn to them. All silky coat and towering strength.

The scent of warm bread rose, welcoming. A line stretched away from her favourite stall. Lily ignored it, heading to the front. No one questioned her as she propped irreverent elbows against the counter top. She called out to the owner, tuning out the hustle and noise as he turned with a curse. The cratered face, courtesy of childhood disease, and perpetual frown made a smile rise, unbidden, to her lips.

Her mother first brought her to this stall at seven, slipping away from the house with an excuse and a kind touch. That's all she had ever needed to shape her husband. Lily's birthday was coming up; they stopped at the stall and a little cake deposited into her grasping hands. It hadn't been the only stop that night, but all Lily could remember was the sweet taste of jam as it dribbled down her lips.

"Gods own, why do you keep coming around?" He grumbled, dusting hands against an already dirtied apron. "Chasing off honest customers, line jumping?"

Surprised someone hasn't knifed you already."

"Those aren't my worst sins, Matthias." She laughed, yesterday's weight sliding off her shoulders. She could almost forget the heart-pounding flight.

"Fool," he muttered, scooping pastries into a cake box without asking for Lily's order. "You look like you've been up to no good."

"That's not a question." Lily accepted the box and the affectionate berating.

"Ripped breeches, scraped knees. I don't think I need to ask a question here. You've blood on your face. Have you even washed?" Without waiting for an answer, he hollered into the darkened doorway behind his stall. Matthias' bakery backed onto his stall, meaning the bread and treats were always fresh. The smaller packages, tucked into a nook under his stall, also contributed to his success. Edible in a different way, the powders promised oblivion. A darkness of welcome instead of threat. He paid the Rabbits handsome tariffs for the privilege of running his side-business, and they cleaned up the occasional body in return. Oblivion liked to keep its occupants close. "Where is the next tray?!"

A mumbled response drifted out, and Matthias swore harshly. "Useless, damn – never get yourself a wife. They're nothing but nags and – Kel GET OUT HERE."

A grey shape emerged from the house, stooped and hesitant, cradling a tray heaped with sugared morsels. Her arms trembled. Matthias lucked out in the marriage mart last year. A Mercer daughter, the family down on their luck, desperate for any coin purse. Even the low one that accompanied enrolment in the grafter auction. No Mercer family would take a dowriless girl.

Lily remembered him gushing over her – a better wife than any of his



neighbours. The paid-out auction ticket crumpled and re-flattened, as a shaking hand checked the collection date over and over. Lily laughed at his nerves before he went to get her. The carefully slicked hair, the unusually neat clothes free of flour. Shoes, polished for the first time since Lily met him.

Kel was younger than him by a decade, still firm-muscled and lithe. At least she was then. A marked change had come over her. The light-hearted girl who smiled at Lily the first day was gone. Blonde ringlets were flattened and limp with grease, and dark bruises stood out against wan skin. She flinched as Matthias snatched the tray from her, and unease crept up Lily's spine.

"Hello, Kel," her smile became forced, teeth bared. The girl ignored the greeting, hurrying back into the shop to collect another tray. And then another. "Matthias, I have some free time. Do you need some help?"

"Don't worry yourself," he replied, serving another customer. "She's got everything handled back there. How's your father going then?"

"Oh, you know." Matthias occupied a strange space within Lily's life. He knew her family, but never commented on her male clothing. Never used either one of her names. It was a living secret between them.

"That leg must still give him trouble."

Lily shrugged. "We get by."

"Mhmm." It was a well-used phrase in the undercity. We get by. A deflection of concern. A recognition of the struggles they all experienced. No one did better than surviving; that alone was an achievement.

The fourth tray proved too heavy for Kel. She tripped, pastries crashing to the ground, breath leaving her with a painful huff as she landed on elbows and

knees. Not even a single second was wasted on herself; immediately hands grasped for the ruined food. As if some small hope lingered that Matthias would fail to notice the mistake.

He finished the transaction before turning, changing. No trace of the person Lily had known for a decade remained. A different man faced Kel. Rage clouded brown eyes, mouth a fixed line. Hands in fists, animosity unfeigned and bleeding from every pore.

“Stupid bitch.” The words attracted attention, even in the crowded space. Kel’s shoulders bowed, body caving in. A defensive position Lily recognized. The reason for it obvious; Matthias drew back a heavily booted foot and slammed it into her side. She cried out; a swallowed sound of familiar agony. Lily heard the thud of leather against flesh above the market’s noise, above her thunderous pulse.

“Matth –” She gasped. Her limbs felt locked to her side, helpless. It wasn’t her place to step in, but Kel’s tears were ugly, loud. Impossible to ignore. A crowd grew around the stall; curious spectators jostling for position. No one made a move to intervene. Matthias sensed the weight of extra eyes; his chest swelled, stance widening, shoulders broadening. Puffing himself out to his full height and width.

“Stay out of it.” He drew back his leg to strike again and Lily stepped away from the stall, only to be met by a wall of bodies. Waiting to witness the punishment.

“Stop.” The authority of this new voice cut through the tension. Matthias hesitated.

A boy appeared out of the crowd. Without pausing, he vaulted the counter,

landing beside Matthias. Despite the older man's greater stature, he radiated confidence. Simple breeches, simple shirt, both worn but repaired with a careful hand; an unremarkable appearance. Well scuffed boots, soft-soled like her own. A thief's choice. Dark hair was cut short enough for her to see the scalp beneath; she knew without a doubt, that Matthias was struggling not to look away from a scorching, sunlit gaze.

A strange certainty took hold, as if she had known all along.

He had been looking for her. The boy from Lord Michael's.

*Of course*, she thought, although there was no of course about it.

"Who're you to say what I do?" Matthias ground out. "She's mine."

"Is this what you want to do?" The boy replied with eerie calm. His gaze didn't waver. Pressure began to build behind Lily's eyes; the air seemed to thicken, blur. Some otherworldly tension snapped between the two men. Nausea rose in her throat. Matthias stepped back, unmistakable fear clouding anger. Either he too sensed the change in the atmosphere, or was responding to the blatant threat in the boy's body language. Danger lurked beneath a benign surface; medium height, medium build. No visible gang tattoos. Nothing to indicate anyone would come looking for his body.

"Don't touch her again," he said, tone perfectly even. Unaffected. He offered a hand to Kel; she flinched. "I'll know if you do."

He swung himself back over the table, and tipped his chin at Lily. A clear request for her to follow. *Of course*, she thought again. She obeyed simply to get away; the crowd parted in front of him, and Lily knew the benefit of taking an escape route when one opened. She rubbed her forehead, tension lingering. A

glance back saw Matthias glaring after them, face still contorted with anger. *Sorry, sorry, sorry* fell in a garbled rush from Kel's lips. As if an apology would save her. As if an intervention from a stranger would save her. No. Lily knew it only prolonged the inevitable. He may not strike her again now, if the fear was genuine, but later – later it would be worse.

Bodies blocked the couple from view. Lily knew guilt would not allow her to visit again, another link to her mother severed. Guilt, over what, she wasn't sure – not protecting Kel, or not protecting Matthias. Only one needed it, but – doubt gnawed at her. She had watched, as bad as the voyeuristic crowd.



He didn't speak as they left the market behind, walking ahead of her in the growing gloom. Even in the day, the undercity was dark. Guttering gas lamps acted as guides through crooked streets, but even these grew further apart the deeper you stole into the slum's decomposing heart, where the buildings rose in cracked walls around you. Trapping the unwary. But Lily didn't need the light. She could find her way blindfolded, feet following familiar paths over uneven cobblestones. This was her playground as a child, and later her workplace. Garbage and bitter piss had lost the power to disgust her. Each lungful reinforced her reality.

"You got a name?"

"Connor." A pause. "And yours?"

"Lee. Lee Vance." Lily stumbled over the lie for the first time in four years.

He noticed the mistake, stride faltering, but made no comment. He swung into an

alleyway, stopped. Lily kept a healthy distance between them, only a couple of steps away from the entrance and the street beyond. Alleyways were dead-ends, and people who walked in often didn't walk out.

"What do you want?" She said, voice steady. She checked her knives; blades slid free silently from well-oiled hip sheaths. Their handles were bound in leather, iron dulled to avoid catching the light and forewarning opponents.

"Weapons might make you feel more comfortable, but aren't necessary. I don't want to hurt you." Amusement coloured his tone. "You'll find I can see remarkably well in the dark. A benefit, you could call it –"

"A benefit of what?"

"I rather think you know."

Lily bristled at his sardonic tone. "I rather think I *don't*. What do you want?"

"Why do you think I want anything at all?"

"I know you do. You followed me. I don't like that. I'm friends with people who don't like that," she snapped.

"Threats so soon in the conversation? I saw your gang mark, don't worry. Consider me warned." A low laugh scraped against her already agitated nerves. "But not warned off."

"Stop evading my question."

"I did follow you."

"Why?"

"I can answer your questions, Lee. I can help you." Sympathy curled into his voice. She couldn't read his face, couldn't see it in the dark, but perhaps he could read something of hers. It had fallen into cold, still lines as the mind behind

it whirred.

A beat, while she considered. “No. Curiosity isn’t a weakness of mine. I can walk away now and sleep just fine at night.” Lily frowned, focussing on his vague outline. Maybe, just maybe, she could see the white of his teeth despite the lack of light. “You want something from me – need something, perhaps.”

“Ignoring things doesn’t make them disappear.”

“In my experience –”

“Your experience, judging on your upbringing, doesn’t involve any sort of...”

“Magic that is bound to bring down the lords on my head? Yeah, you’re right. I’d like to leave it that way, thanks.” The words were flip, irreverent. Masking her fear. There were rumours. People gobbled up by the city, buildings destroyed by no natural fire, purple flames swallowing the structure whole, men drowning in floods during the height of summer when no rain fell. Some swore nothing was left of the victims. Others hinted at horrors, of bloody warnings and ripped apart families. Interventions from above, the whispers said.

Above. The Mercers left the common folk alone, as long the factories stayed open, pumping black smoke from towering chimneys. Never closing. Never ceasing production. They squatted above the slums, watchful masters. And the Decadents... surely they cared for nothing except the continual trains of food and wares that made the journey to the glittering mansions. In return they withheld their wrath, contained their gifted. Ask any grafter, and they would eagerly agree it was a fair trade. They lived in poverty, unquestioning. Fear was enough to hold them. The stories prevented dissidence.

“Magic? I forgot that’s what you call it.” All humour disappeared. “You’re

young – ignorant. It isn't something to be disregarded, pushed away, bottled up. *Magic* needs to be used, or it destroys you. Eats you from the inside out. Devours your heart and lungs and liver. Do you want that to happen?"

"Heart and lungs and liver." She repeated, reed-thin words evaporating into the still air.

"You need to understand the risks. It's not just you that's in danger. Everyone is. From your family to friends to passersby on the street." A footfall, muffled; he moved closer. "It's not magic, Lee. Cradle-stories don't apply here. Mischief and pranks aren't its purpose. Destruction is. Control. At least the way the lords use it. So yes. I *do* need something from you; to take responsibility."

Lily saw the uncanny glow of his eyes through the dark, growing brighter and clearer by the second. Nearer than expected. Threatening and comforting and predatory all at once. Her stomach lurched and an inexplicable urge rose to fall into that comfort. To simply, finally, give in. Why shouldn't she? Others did. Others didn't fight until fingernails bled and they forgot how it felt for muscles to be whole and without aches. She wanted relief.

She knew responsibility intimately – the heft of it and the immovable weight – although this boy couldn't know, couldn't realise that. Her life may appear, from the outside, peered into unawares through smeared windows, to be a rag-tag bundle of accepting challenges and scrambling past mistakes. But all that hid the truth. The White Rabbit gang was a necessity.

"Why were you in Lord Michael's house?" She asked, instead of giving voice to the mire of emotions inside her. "Why did you tackle me?"

"I – I don't know." Confusion, finally, broke the smooth confidence. An

answer unprepared.

“Did you sense my power? Can it be tracked?” She pressed, troubled.

“No, I just –”

“Just what? Do you work for him? For *them*?”

“Yes –”

“Then we have nothing to talk about.” A sliver of regret threatened her resolve.

“No. Don’t think that.” Fingers wrapped around her shoulders, gentle but insistent. Not a restraint but still a barrier to flight. “There’s a difference, Lee. A difference between working for someone and pretending to. Being there for a purpose.”

“And you’re the latter? What’s your purpose?” Lily leant into the contact, a part of her desperate to believe him, *in* him. An intimacy unwarranted.

“I can’t tell you. It’s bigger than just me – I can’t risk the others. Not when you’re an unknown.” His grip firmed slightly before slipping away. “You have to decide.”

“Decide what?”

“Whether you want to be on our side. Whether you want the responsibility.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’m sorry for what comes next.”

An apology and a threat. It stayed with her long after he vanished from sight. She turned it over in her mind, examining every angle. Trying to pick holes in the fabric of his intent, separate truth from deception. His ultimatum shook her.

Be on our side or no side at all.



## Chapter 4

The streets looked strange to Lily during the day, vibrancy dimmed and motion stalled. Hazy light, filtering down through the overhanging canopy of crooked buildings, highlighted the empty places. The corners where the molls usually stood, skirts hitched over skeletal ankles, tempting passersby with blackened smiles. Desperate for coin. The beggar-stands, set to claim spaces for the nights to come, left undisturbed by all. Even destructive starvelings avoided those makeshift tables, wooden boards propped up on bricks and debris. Tattered signs throughout the city declared that the wasting disease was spread with contact, a diagnosis endorsed by Decadent physicians. No grafter wanted to end up like those poor creatures, twisted in endless agony as their limbs rotted away. Families cast out the afflicted to live on the streets; the more affluent placed relatives in asylums to die behind bars. Senseless by the end. The stands were skirted, gazes averted, hands shoved into pockets. The few hogs that rattled in those bowls were donated not from any charitable emotion, but superstition. As if they could pay to keep the disease from touching their families.

The only people awake at this hour were factory workers, blue clad shoulders broad with muscle but stooped with exhaustion. They walked in neat rows, arms brushing with each measured swing. The discipline of their working hours changed them. Children entering service learnt to speak in low voices and avoid eye contact; it was too easy to catch the notice of a whip-armed supervisor. Boisterous enjoyment could never be reclaimed; even in taverns, deep in their cups, or crowded into the night market, the workers were the silent ones. Huddled in groups, still dressed in their daily uniform. Lily's father had been like that once.

Quiet, solemn.

Lily moved against the crowd, a noticeable swagger to her step. Anyone who glanced at her received a direct stare in return, challenging. She took up space on the street. Among her own kind, it was safer to be a ghost. These men were unarmed except for their scorn; she drew comfort from their notice. It meant she passed. And they, in turn, took reassurance from her. Her cocksure dishevelment affirmed their own choices. If the choice was between factory life and hers, they invariably chose the factories. She was an emblem of uncertain existence, one eked out on little pay and unsavoury deeds. They thought her fresh from a night of sin, pockets emptied by pleasures unneeded. Their high-mindedness was a solace Lily did not grudge. She too took satisfaction wherever she could find it, often at the expense of others.

The Warren stood in unassuming anonymity between a butcher's shop and a seamstress that sold not much at all. The few times Lily ventured in, the stone-faced owner had shooed her back out, grumbling under her breath. *Only women's clothes here, sonny.* Yet no women ever entered. Lily paused in front of the plain-faced building, eying the broad, blackened front windows. Leon Hennessey had designed them to be one-way, and you never knew who stood just beyond, watching your every move. A skitter of movement from behind had her glancing back, hand falling to her knife; just a street cat, ribs pressing through thin white fur. It hissed angrily under her scrutiny, and Lily kicked a loose stone at it.

"Mangy creature," she muttered under her breath. Turning her attention back to the Warren, she pressed a palm against the rough-worn wood of the front door. She let her lungs fill; inhaling, with the smoke and sweat that emanated from

the building, her other self. He flowed through her limbs, each breath drawing him further and firmer into her body. Anchoring mannerisms and memories she shared with the boys within. Preparing. Lee never left her, but sometimes she stored him away, pushed him to the back of her mind. Her shoulders squared, any trace of weakness purged. She pushed the door open, striding into the Warren.

The entrance hall was a conceit. Dark carpets covered grey slate, tarnished brass sconces enclosing flickering candles. A room of shadow and flame. A place designed to intimidate; it never failed to work on her. It was here that emissaries from other gangs waited, or citizens desperate to beg for leniency, drawn faces full of a misplaced hope. Leniency was almost never granted. Not by Leon. He claimed that leniency was an invitation for exploitation. His citizens paid their tariffs on time. It was yet to be seen what route the new king would take with his law-making.

She had been safe, or what counted as an approximation of safety, while Leon had ruled. At least, she thought she was. In that last year, doubt had crept into her limbs, weighting them with uncertainty. Leon had changed. He wasn't the boy that had saved a thirteen-year-old girl from the streets and their inevitable hardships. At fourteen, he was full of compassion for a hungry eyed girl, crouched beside the bedlams and beggars. Compassion. Lily had grown out of naivety in the years between. Leon wanted to ease her sorrow, so he gave her what she needed. A shoulder to bear the burden. A friend and sanctuary. At eighteen, she began to see the darkness in him that her fellow thieves feared. *Blood runs true*, they whispered as he passed, *blood always tells*. But Leon never knew his family, had laughed at the notion of kindred. He once said that Lily was his only family.

But still, he had sunk into the shadows without her.

In his youth, Leon ran with a pack of cutthroats that terrorised the undercity. Little more than a child, he already dreamt of bigger things than small thefts and beatings in back-alleys. He wanted power. He wanted infamy. And he got it in spades.

The White Rabbit gang controlled this part of the city with startling efficiency and a complete lack of remorse for any misdemeanours. It resulted in an absolute respect from their citizens, who came to the Warren for favours and loans, both to be paid back with maximum interest, or requests for services. In return for tariffs, the Warren's leader provided protection for its population along with a promise of retaliation for any gang who stepped onto their territory. All of this was relative, of course. The dishonest could rarely be counted upon for honesty. Discrepancies happened, and were cleaned up or ignored. Complaints were rarely met favourably. The complainants invariably disappeared, their relatives left to hang posters and beg for their safe return.

Leon's presence still hovered at the edge of her vision, especially here, where his likeness remained in the redwood panelling and lion-head knocker. Lily paused, eyes closing. She could almost feel the weight of Leon's phantom hand on her shoulder, a silent encouragement. Exerting just the smallest amount of pressure.

"Can't face him?"

"I'm not scared –" Lily spun. "Oh. Grace."

Lashes lowered, the girl ducked a curtsy. Lily knew her irises were the colour of clear skies rarely seen above the city, but few would. Eye contact was

for equals. Gang women were unclaimed domestics, rejected from the marriage mart, below all others. Below Lee, if not Lily. The high-necked smock Grace wore covered the brand; a gaping oval slashed in half. The ruined flesh haunted Lily. Every domestic received one, at the beginning of their life-long service. She was one of the few gang members who knew this; one of the few who saw the girls in any stage of undress. They were off-limits.

Lee was considered young enough to still supervise the women on occasion, without temptation. A task Leon assigned her years ago. He wanted her out of the way. Safe. Secure. He didn't realise that was the exact fate she longed to escape. A prison of protection. It was a point of contention between them that Lily refused to drop. In truth, he nurtured an abiding yet inert pity for the domestics – he thought that she too must have some feeling for them. Because of sisterhood. The hypocrisy of it escaped him. His power enabled him to act, his strength allowed for it. Yet he expected her to be roused by sisterhood when there was no space in her for such sentiment.

On such shifts, she watched the girls with a necessary absence of feeling. Cruelties ignored, transgressions noted. Sloppily completed tasks or laziness punished. When it came time to sell a domestic on, facts ruled decisions. Never attachment or emotion. She kept the good workers. They had learnt not to speak out of line around her. Other than Grace, who persisted out of some strange solidarity that Lily found herself unable to ignore. The girl crept under her skin, insidious and unwanted. A friendship of shared glances and unacknowledged kinship. Of whispered words and unheeded rebukes. She pressed her interest onto Lily, and Lily knew why.

Out of everyone, Grace suspected the truth.

“They’ve been talking about you,” Grace lowered her voice, “everyone’s noticed.”

“Noticed what?” Lily said evenly, although a sliver of disquiet pricked at her. The domestics knew every secret, every nuance of relationship. Lily may have imagined herself a ghost but the domestics haunted every corner of the Warren. The boys would say anything in front of them. Girls silently lit fires and swept ash from grates in the middle of important meetings, mere shadows. Shadows with attentive ears and curious minds, often unaccounted for. They would be invaluable spies for rival gangs, if any man stopped for a second and considered them human.

“The recent mood. Since Leon’s death. They’re restless.” A momentary flicker of blue, a whisper of connection. “Peter’s turning them against you.”

Lily let out an involuntary hiss. Peter, the new king of thieves, was a snake. “Peter can go to hell.”

“It’s more likely you will, if you don’t do anything.” Grace replied, a slight edge to her voice. Lily’s brows drew together, looking closely at the girl. Tension held her frame, lying in the curves of elbows and the hunch of narrow shoulders.

“Grace –”

“No, don’t.” She stepped away from Lily’s outstretched hand. Her arms banded around her midsection, an uncharacteristic display of emotion. “You need to fix this, Lee.”

“Fix what? I don’t know what you expect of me.” But she did. She did know. If Grace lifted her face, if she showed the coarse features deemed undesirable by

the auction committee, Lily knew that the skin would be mottled with bruises. The rounded cheeks white with sickly pallor beneath. The square jaw would bear the brunt of it; split above the bone, cut in the undeniable shape of Peter's signet ring that he wore with such pride. Heavy gold, embossed. Stolen from some petty Mercer, low-ranked enough that no recrimination would fall on the thief. Peter had no pity for domestics. Few did.

"The boys listen to you." The quiet recrimination in the words made Lily flinch.

"Not about this. Not anymore."

"Even if you don't want to save us, surely you want to save yourself?" Grace said, mouth twisting. "First Peter will make you an enemy, then he'll cast you from the gang. No one on the streets will let you in, with the Rabbits against you. Then you'll be nothing. No better than —"

The vitriol was cut short by a door slamming open; Grace shut down at the noise. Her body crumpled in on itself, every inch of self-righteous rage vanishing. Hands folded subserviently, she stepped back into the stretch of shadows. Effectively disappearing from view.

"Lee," the boy called down the corridor. Lily could hear the mocking smile in his voice. Braiden was one of the least harmful of Peter's cronies. His delight in tormenting her was restricted to benign verbal jabs, and the occasional exhibitions of friendliness made Lily's antagonism towards him minor. He was just a mindless follower. "He's ready."

"I'll be there in a second." Lily shot back. The door creaked shut.

"Grace," she hissed. But the girl was gone. Her judgement remained heavy

in the air, coating the back of Lily's throat with the sour taste of self-disgust.



Peter made her wait. She slumped in the wooden chair outside the office, ignoring the protesting twinge in her back. It was a tactic Leon had used; heightening anxiety, prolonging the fall of the axe. The opulence of the entrance was absent here; Lily found herself counting cracks in the pavers, tracing the patterns in the faded floral wallpaper with her eyes. The rise and fall of voices was audible through the door, but no single word discernible. Sometimes an expletive came through clearly. Restless feet twitched and she stifled the urge to barge into the conversation. Hardly an action that would solidify her adherence to the Rabbits' law and hierarchy. She couldn't afford to play the child. No tantrums. No stamping feet.

It took an hour for the door to open, by which time Lily had mentally catalogued every detail of the corridor. From paver to wallpaper to the brown stain the colour of dried blood outside the door. Unwashed as if left as a warning.

Peter ushered her into Leon's office – no, *his*. A satisfied smirk twisted his fleshy red lips as he took in her appearance; dirty, dishevelled. Fingers tapping impatiently against thighs. He enjoyed her discomfort.

He sat behind the desk, folding his hands on the scratched wooden surface. Lily's chair creaked as she sank into it, numb, chest twinging. It hurt to be a guest in this room, where she had bantered so easily with Leon in the early years. And then later, when banter gave way to something else. She missed him with an ache



that refused to recede.

Peter slid an envelope across the table, black eyes sharp and assessing. Lily clenched her fists in her lap to keep them from visibly shaking. From grief, anger – she wasn't sure. "An assignment."

"An official one?" Sarcasm overtook her resolve to be polite. "A real one?"

"You chose to go, Lee. You made that decision, so wear the consequences." Peter smiled; slow and wide. "The rules are clear. No Decadents."

Lily pushed away from the table, chair toppling behind her. Her voice rose. "You *dared* me and then went behind my back, like a *snitch*."

Peter slammed a hand against the wood, smile gone. "I am not a snitch. I am your King."

Their eyes locked across the desk. A sudden heat burnt into her chest; the opal flared into life, pulse changing to match her own racing heartbeat. *Thump, thump, thump*. As if attuned to anger. Feeding off it. Some strange emotion curled in her stomach, unsettling. Her fingers twitched, desperate to pull it away from her skin. She hadn't intended to bring it with her, to the Warren of all places, but that strange compulsion had once again gripped her, guiding her hand.

If she was found with it... the Warren law was clear. No Decadents and *no* objects of power. Nothing traceable. Gangs who attempted it learnt the consequences; steal a bauble or ten without recourse, because it was all part of the dance between the Mercers and the undercity, but take something more – a death sentence. It could be a dagger wrought with strange symbols, a book in an unknown tongue, a necklace set with a ruby that contained a live flame. Or an opal larger than any on the market, black or otherwise. Who knew what value it had;

what danger it held. Enough to rouse them from cushioned divans, to pursue it? Would snarling watchdogs soon be at her heels?

“You told me there was a stash,” Lily took a deep breath, finding a central point of anger to focus on. “You told me that, and there wasn’t one. An unlocked safe, an easy mark. Did you make that up? Just to catch me?”

“Yes.” Blunt, now. The truth. “And you fell for it. How would I know about a stash in an upper city house? I don’t make a habit of breaking the law. Should the Rabbit’s second be such a fool? Do you deserve the position after falling for such an obvious trap?”

A small part of her flinched at this truth. “You’re –”

“Deceitful? Lee, I respect you, I do. Your pride, particularly.” He paused, tapping the desk thoughtfully. “But I wonder – what did you think would happen when you walked down that path with Leon? We didn’t like you before that – gods, we didn’t like him, but he wielded our fear like a weapon, and you never had that power over us. For you it was quick slide from disliked to reviled.”

“But –”

“But he was your king? He asked you to?” He smiled; she had betrayed her shock. “The boys are scared. Of what Leon might have done. Of what you were involved in. We know what you did together, in the dark. Even thieves have honour, Lee. And we don’t want you here.”

Lily flinched. The words hit her, one after another, but she refused to show him their effect. She knew the rumours. Heads bent together as she passed, voices too low to be heard. Lee Vance, Leon’s dog. Who knew what lessons were taught, night after night, closeted together. Their fear of him lingered after his

death. *A man like that can never truly perish*, they whispered, *even the devil would spit him back out of hell*. Lily would have laughed once. But now she could feel the imprint of him against her skin, his breath hot against her nape. As if he haunted her body, her mind, her memories.

Peter expected her to back down. The arrogantly tilted chin, the crossed arms all designed to intimidate. To close the conversation. She set her jaw. This was her place. To be driven out, cast aside; unacceptable.

“I’m not leaving,” she replied coolly. The opal throbbed reassuringly, painful heat subsiding.

“Then be prepared to fight. The gang aren’t on your side anymore. If they ever were.”

“Don’t worry about me.” She gave him a close-lipped smile, picking up the assignment. “All the instructions?”

“Enclosed. I look forward to hearing about the outcome,” he said dismissively, and Lily felt the last drop of her pride fall away at the satisfaction on his face.



The envelope contained a single sheet of paper, crisp and unfolded. A steady, confident cursive moved across the page in unhurried strokes.

*Reported unsavoury activity of domestic #12 of the White Rabbit gang.*

*Domestic #12 has left her position repeatedly over the course of a month*

*without leave. Witnesses report her exiting the house, though this is not required in her role. These exits are always during dining hours or other moments of activity where her absence will remain unnoticed.*

*Description: height approximately 5 and a half feet, weight moderate. Blue eyes, brown hair. Assigned to housework, reporting to Housekeeper Pia. Other domestics refer to her as "Grace".*

*Housekeeper Pia has requested an investigation as a matter of urgency. Domestic #12 has certain sway over the others, and she is concerned that this behaviour will spread. Recommended action; following the domestic to ascertain where she goes. Detailed reporting required, including a recommendation of an appropriate punishment. This matter should be resolved promptly.*

*Peter*

The paper crumpled. Lily clamped an arm around her ribcage, pressing against flesh and bone. If she couldn't breathe, she couldn't scream. He knew. Peter had spent all his years with the gang sliding into places he did not belong; overhearing conversations not intended for his ears. He would have heard Leon encourage that connection. Would have watched, as the two were drawn together again and again. He would have only seen Lee; assumed a dalliance. And now he had exactly the right knife to slip between the cracks in her iron-clad armour. A blow

so carefully aimed. She had been wrong to underestimate him. Underestimate his cruel cunning.

Peter designed this trap well. Disobeying meant expulsion from the gang; an iron law. You followed orders here, hierarchy key. Yet to stomach this, to accept it; intolerable. The next step alluded her. A confrontation with Grace would lead nowhere, yet tailing her seemed underhand.

Lily pressed shaking hands to a face made cold by anguish; she groaned against them, muffling the sound. Her father counted on her. Turning her back on the assignment would not help Grace; someone else would be sent, someone who would suggest a crueller punishment simply because a domestic meant nothing and a spectacle was always welcome. Abandoning the gang would sentence her father to slow death on the streets, pride eroded by begging for scraps.

Peter meant to break her, to illustrate his power. He might succeed.

## Chapter 5

Grace's evening habits were simple. She excused herself from the normal mealtime because she was tasked with lighting the evening fires; dinner meant most rooms were empty, ensuring maximum efficiency. Efficiency was prized, Grace's initiative praised. Until the real reason was uncovered. While the others ate, she rushed through the fires and left the house, hooded cloak covering the dull domestics dress.

*She's a good worker, Pia insisted, a good girl.* All of Grace's goodness hadn't stopped her reporting it to Peter. *An appropriate punishment* would not be a reprimand, a warning to never transgress again. Pia had not risen to housekeeper, in her youth a lowly domestic, without learning the rules. And what happened to rule breakers.

Grace waited until dark. Laughter poured from the dining hall, light hearted and boisterous. Lily tried to ignore her heart's demand; to turn away from Grace, to confront the one who deserved her ire. To call Peter out and demand – what? Justice for a domestic? But Lily would be cast out of the Rabbits. Alone.

She was a coward.

Grace walked with confidence through the evening crowds, accustomed to the bustle of activity. Chin raised, shoulders back, her eyes remained forward despite the press of bodies. It was an easy mistake, to acknowledge the men around you. An acknowledgement was an invitation; for conversation, for more. Instead she avoided bodily contact, pace fast but not with the uncomfortable awareness of the pursued. That too attracted attention, weakness preyed upon. Her assurance was impressive. In her true guise, Lily could not summon the same.

Only without skirts was the fear manageable.

Grace moved upwards, away from the Warren. That night, Lily followed.

Her progress punctuated by pauses, Grace was a natural among the city inhabitants. A laughing aside to a pie vendor, a quick perusal of fabrics offered by another. No true city dweller, not clad in factory blue, moved with absolute purpose. They shopped with empty purses, they meandered whether on the way to tavern or brothel or home. Women flirted, hopeful of gifts, and men slapped backs and bonded. Unknown people slipped through the cracks too easily. No one wanted to be overlooked. Forgotten.

Grace came from this place, after all, childhood enacted on these same dirtied cobblestones. Even as a child, aware of her lack. Different from the others; shorter, rounder, inelegant. Deemed worthless by parents only interested in the bright-eyed and beautiful, the ones that would fetch a high price on the marriage mart. Those years gave her a taste of freedom, Lily knew; absence of care often did. Grace was allowed to do anything and everything, because nothing could ruin already soiled goods. Lily's own father had reluctantly given her the same free rein, although more from an inability to stop her. In Lily's case, she cut the leathers; Grace not so lucky. Rejected, branded, cast out. The value placed on her that of a domestic, a nothing girl. Told no respectable man would want her, as if the heckling bidders around the stage were people to be respected.

Grace's lack of direction was feigned. A tension held her. After each interaction, shoulders rolled, hands white fisted. A zigzag path didn't fool Lily. Another of Peter's lackeys might have lost interest, turned away. Reported that she was just a domestic in love with fripperies, typical female. Lily knew differently.

This was not a game for which Grace would risk her life. No foolishness resided in that brain. No affection for sparkling baubles. Those stone hearted gems held no allure for her. She was playing for something else.

The door she finally stopped at was in an unremarkable neighbourhood. Gently lit, garbage swept into alleys rather than left untouched on pathways, a few houses freshly painted, a neat white at odds with the unadorned grey of most dwellings. Quiet, off the main thoroughfare. A street on the way to nowhere. A place of relative wealth. Shopkeepers, perhaps, or better-paid factory workers. Managers, blue coat sashed with crimson.

Two knocks, evenly spaced, followed by two faster. A code. Grace stepped back, smoothing her hair with a shaking hand. Still unaware of her pursuit. Lily hesitated in the shadows, out of the flickering reach of lamplight. It wasn't too late to warn her. She didn't need to see who was coming in answer to that knock. She could –

The door swung open. Grace disappeared inside.



Night had fallen in earnest by the time Grace re-emerged, cold prickling across Lily's skin. She wasn't alone. A man's heavy hand rested across her waist, spinning her back towards the house. A low laugh reached Lily; an intimate caress of a sound. The girl turned away, a final kiss imprinted on her lips, but Lily couldn't take her eyes off the man. His dazed expression, slick mouth. Adoration writ across every feature, rendering them remarkable where otherwise ordinariness



would reside. Several moments passed before he shook himself back to a semblance of sanity, and went inside, closing out the darkness.

Indignation rose in her at the stupidity of it; the wrongness. Grace was smart – smarter than this. Lily shouldn't be here, shouldn't *have* to be here. She was destroying herself for *this*. Lily would have preferred fripperies to be the cause, not this idiocy. Love. Fleeting, foolish.

Lily pressed herself into the wall as Grace passed; she allowed a heartbeat's head start, before her conscience rebelled. Her conscience and that bit of her that wanted answers – wanted to shake Grace and demand why.

"Stop. Grace!"

The girl's step faltered; she half turned. Even in the dim light, Lily saw the sudden paleness. The horror that overtook her. Life seemed to drain away; the sunshine that the man infused in her, gone. Grace knew immediately what Lily's presence meant. Knew immediately what fate waited unfaithful domestics.

"Lee." A word without hope. "You – you –"

"I saw."

"You followed me." A pause. A bloom of warmth showed in those blue eyes, for once direct. A flush coloured her neck and cheeks. "*You followed me.*"

"Peter –" Lily hesitated. She expected guilt, or despair. Anger caught her unaware.

"But you – you followed me. You took those orders – who sent you doesn't matter; we both know that." Her voice was a knife, heated in flame. Lily felt its stinging cut. "How could you?"

"It was an order." She fumbled for an excuse – why did she need an

excuse? “How could you?”

“How could I not?” Grace laughed, little more than a bitter exhale of breath. “You think you have it all sorted. A perfect world at your fingertips, one free of marriage marts and domestic labour. They tell you something better is coming, you know? A promise of just rewards. Work hard in this life – bullshit. They all gobble it up, crowding around the trough. Livestock, that’s all we are to them. For rutting and working until the grave claims us.”

“Grace –”

“No.” Lily stumbled back as Grace advanced on her. “Wake up! *Lee* – Lee saves no one but himself. You pretend you can’t see us, can’t see what your friends are doing to us. You excuse yourself because you’re not one of them, you aren’t hitting us and hurting us and destroying everything we could ever be. That silence – that silence is *consent*. You have to wake up. There’s no better life. There’s only this one.”

Blue eyes glittered, tears cutting down her face. The disappointment Lily read there was worse than the condemnation of her words. The betrayal. And then a hesitation – a morphing of anger into something else, something empty and hopeless. Here was the despair; hollow eyes and slumped shoulders. A caving in of chest and heart and soul. “Just promise me – promise that you won’t sell him out as well. You don’t know what they’d do – please. Please.”

“Do you love him?”

“Do you even know a thing about love?” Grace whispered.

“How could I? How could I know?” The words came unbidden, undecided upon. A truth Lily rarely told. What love could Lee know? From Leon she received

a friend's touch, but even that light faded over the years. Her father's desperate dependency curdled his pride, turning any affection he once felt into hatred. There was no one else. No one but Grace, and Lily had thrown her away for a gang that felt no loyalty towards her or anyone else, that only cared for coin and their own full bellies.

"Well I do. He loves me. He's always loved me. Our mothers were the same; discarded by husbands more interested in the bottle and cards than them. Left out like trash, the only way forward the workhouse. We were unwanted brats, unwanted reminders. I suppose if they'd cared enough to be disappointed...They didn't." A pause. "Not all of us were born into drudgery, we grow into it – do you even realise that? I knew something before the Warren ... I *experienced* –"

"I do know. I wasn't always this." Lily shoved away the hot burn of shame that rose. She knew. She knew. She wasn't an outsider in this story, wasn't the villain.

"Except you chose. You chose to be Lee, you chose to be this way. I was torn from him. Look at me – I didn't even pass the first auction screening, turned away before it began. Ugly, undesirable. Not good enough to be bid over. But I always good enough for him."

"Why didn't he –"

"What? Buy me as a domestic? A starveling boy, apprenticed? How could he afford that? And he wanted a *wife*. Now it's too late. I'm branded. That can't be taken back."

"I...I...I didn't..." Lily scrambled for something to say, something to douse the bitter anguish burning in Grace's eyes. "What can I do?"

“You can promise not to report him. You can lie to that boy who sent you here. You can pretend to have seen nothing.” Her response was immediate, direct.

“They won’t believe it.”

“I’m not saying you should lie about me. Tell them something – anything. Just not him. Don’t give them the last good thing I have – he has to be okay. I have to know he’s okay.” Her voice broke, and this vulnerability was a sharper knife than the anger, striking at all the soft places Lily had left.

“Grace.” Lily whispered, reaching out. The girl recoiled, turning flinty eyes on her.

“I don’t want your pity. It means nothing. I just want your promise.”

“I promise.” The words spilled out, eager. Frantic for Grace to stop looking at her like that, for the disgust to fade. And be replaced by what? Gratitude? Nails bit into calloused palms; she dug them deeper, savouring the stinging pain. A distraction against the growing realisation. The disgust Grace didn’t need to aim at her, because now she was feeling it herself.

“Then we’ve said everything we need to.”

Head unbowed, Grace led the way back, Lily trailing behind.



The Warren vibrated with noise, rising and falling with eager voices. Lily’s steps faltered as she counted back the days.

“Homage night.” Grace reminded her coolly. “Six extra fires tonight, in the bunk rooms.”

A full house, then. Peter would be pleased. All the smaller crews were required to attend homage night, but requirements rarely bothered pickpockets who delighted in defiance. It would reflect badly on him if the takings were low this month; he needed to prove himself a worthy successor to Leon. It wasn't a coincidence that Lily had been sent out on homage night, her absence undoubtedly already noted. Talked about. Gossiped over. Her stomach contracted. A message – to her, to everyone.

“Even if he takes you back, they won't forget.” No triumph – no emotion at all – marred Grace's tone. She had slipped back into servility, no glimmer of anger or anguish remaining. “You're done here, Lee.”

“I'll never be done.” Lily responded automatically, staring at the main door. It was closed.

“Go report then.” A sneer touched Grace's lips. “Go on.”

A step, two. Her hand hesitated, unwilling.

“*Good dog.*” Grace got in the last word. In the street, her footsteps echoed. Here her retreat was silent, as she slipped back into the well-worn role. Lily didn't turn to look, or respond. She knew Grace was gone.

The hall heaved with energy. Extra tables crowded the space, narrowing walkways and restricting movement for the latecomers who were forced to stand. Lily had never seen the room so bright, every scone lit. Letting the door close with a *snick* behind her, she paused, taking in the jumble of colour each man wore. Flashes of crimson armbands, signalling respect for Leon's death; violet neck ties to celebrate the incoming Peter. Clashing statements of loyalty. Peter surveyed the gathering from the throne; straight backed, hands clasped. A grin tipped the

corners of his mouth. Delighting in the sight of luxury the gang couldn't afford.

The small part of Lily that lay kicked and hurting, rose. Filled limbs with bitterness, reinvigorated her mind with hot fury. This – *this* was her snapping point. She didn't have a single reason to hold back anymore. Everyone had left. Her mother, Leon. She moved into the crowd, snatching a mug off a serving tray. The drink was tart; eyes teared up as the liquid seared her throat. Another gulp sent warmth spreading through her stomach, feeding courage to the rage that coiled around her heart, constricting every beat.

Elbows and hissed threats assisted her towards the dais. Peter's eyes narrowed as she drained her mug and it clattered onto the pavers. They held a warning, one Lily paid no heed as she climbed onto the table, kicking plates and food out of the way. Seated boys grabbed what they could from her path.

"A toast," Lily projected her voice, deepening its usual huskiness. "To the White Rabbits. To Peter." She took a drink from an abandoned cup. "May he lead with honour and strength."

"Get down from there." The words were quietly spoken, but they carried through the now silent hall. She had his attention, at least. "Stop making a fool of yourself, Lee."

"Is toasting your leadership foolish?" Recklessness could only be followed by more. She felt its power and she didn't want to let go. She wanted to scratch and rage and rebel. Make them all bleed with her pain. At every table, boys pushed out of their seats, hands at belts. The good cheer brought by plentiful food and drink fell away, revealing a room full of wolves and sneaks, hackles rising.

"Sit down," Peter ordered harshly, voice full of threat. "Sit DOWN."

Bodies relaxed back into seats, but several placed unsheathed knives before them. Lily swallowed a sour smile. Loyalty was sweeter than the sugar treats the boys hoarded from each banquet. Treasured until the outer layer began to weep in the heat, melting into finger-licking stickiness.

Peter rose and crossed the space between them, offering her a hand. To the watching Rabbits, it was a gesture of goodwill; Lily fought to keep her face even as she climbed down. His grip punished, fingers biting into skin. Instead of releasing her, Peter tugged her closer.

“What are you doing?” He spat, the words now just for her.

“You made me –” Her voice faltered.

“Made you?” he scoffed. “Whatever you did tonight, Lee, you did yourself.”

“I’m part of this gang.”

“Are you?” He smiled, and released her to gesture at the hall. “Do these boys look like your comrades in arms? Men you’d trust to have your back?”

Lily glanced at the sea of unfriendly faces, eyes full of distrust. Not a single ally. They had always sensed something different about her. A smell, a way of holding herself. Her friends in the gang had peeled away, one by one, as she grew into herself. They weren’t imaginative enough to suspect the truth, Leon had always reassured her, but maybe they suspected something. Looking at them now, Lily felt an ache in her gut. She had never been more alone.

“I am part of this family,” she said, but her voice broke. *You’re weak*, she berated herself silently, *and now everyone knows*.

“Enough. Report or leave. It’s that simple.” Peter stepped away from her, voice rising. “Report, Lee.”

She stared at him. Domestics moved from table to table, refilling tankards; their muted movements audible against the silence. Girls who worked shoulder to shoulder with Grace, forced to listen to their sister's crime. Her sentence.

"No. Not here. I won't."

"Is she your friend or something? Your *girl*?" Taunting filled his voice, mirrored in jeering laughter that echoed around the room; the rising whine of pack mates who have caught their prey. Triumph before the kill. Anticipation of bloodletting. Camaraderie corrupted.

"She's a person."

Two bright spots of colour appeared on his cheeks, as the laughter dimmed, murmurs taking its place. A misstep, realised too late. Lily backed up, feet clumsy.

"No. She's a domestic. Your actions disgrace the White Rabbit gang. Such weakness makes us vulnerable."

Weak – as if he had plucked the word straight from Lily's head. A choked laugh forced its way from her. "Not fitting? This is worse than *everything*?"

Her whole world grew still and silent as a savage grin spread across Peter's face. She suddenly, horribly, knew what was coming. As he leaned in, his voice dropped low and silky and vicious. "Leave. Or I'll tell them."

Blood drained from her face, leaving only ice and rising tears. She pulled away, his hand slipping from hers in a rough caress. An ache spread across her chest as the world roared around her. Leon had told him. Leon had told him. Her enemy. He had broken his word. He had betrayed her.

"I don't know what you mean." She forced the words through numb lips. A useless denial.



“Leave, Lee. Don’t make me say it again.”

Lily found herself outside, leaning against the alleyway wall. She couldn’t remember the steps that carried her away from Peter, through the crowd of mocking thieves, out into the night air that forced tremors into her unfeeling limbs. Breath after gasping breath escaped her body. Her hand closed around the scar that bisected her palm. The sting of the cut was easily remembered. Two children cross-legged in a corner, one head dark and the other bright as spilt blood. Swearing an oath overheard but barely understood. Lily felt the press of Leon’s skin against hers, slick with a fresh wound. At odds with the dry, cruel clasp of minutes ago. *Forever, he promised, I’ll never tell.*

Legs crumpling, Lily curled into herself. The scrape of rough stone against exposed skin was a balm for the inner ache; a throb of separation, a cord cut. Not a clean wound, but jagged and cruel. She hugged a body no longer her own but foreign, adrift from all familiar sights. Cast from a warm home into numbing streets. She longed to crawl back, beg forgiveness; she longed to rip apart those who wronged her. A war of regret and rage.

She lied to Grace. She knew love. As a child she believed in the all-consuming, unconditional kind. The love she had for her mother’s soft touch, a perfumed caress. Fleeting but dear. It came unexpectedly, in the witching hours of the night, in the morning before dawn’s break. Her parent’s marriage was a masquerade she never questioned; all the rest of the world she wanted to turn on its head, to know its secrets. That Anthea didn’t sleep in her father’s bed – this she accepted. She loved her anyway, for all her absence. The occasional presents – the brooch, and a matching scarf to hold back her growing curls, both emblazoned

with a word she would only learn later – meant nothing next to the suffocating hugs and whispered endearments. Ralph never acknowledged her absences. *He's a sheep*, Anthea murmured more than once. Broken dreams weighted every word, although Lily wouldn't know until after her death that this kind of marriage wasn't normal. Wasn't permitted. Women couldn't just call their husbands sheep and shake their heads and run away from home, leaving a child and lawful responsibilities behind.

Lily loved her. And one day she didn't come back.

The pin and scarf stayed hidden under her bed. Frequent handling left the material thin and faded, the remembered scent overtaken by musty age. By her seventeenth year, only the word remained: *act*.

Act, how?

For four years, she chose to disobey her mother's final command.

She never asked Ralph about her, knowing even at ten that the answer would be a lie. *Sheep*, she thought when she looked at him with a child's condemning eyes. She didn't know what it meant, what her mother intended with the insult. His accident released her, and Lily became her phantom mother, coming and going at all hours of the night. It brought her power but also the remembered echo of heartbreak.

Heartbreak was a mother's abandonment. A best friend's betrayal, even beyond death. A world that you understood turning its back and becoming the unknown.

Lily screamed into the space between knees and chest.

## Chapter 6

Her street was quiet, every light extinguished. The only reliable gas lamp showed not a single flickering flame. Lily reached out to touch the cool metal as she passed, reassuring herself. Her neck prickled in the preternatural quiet, fingers dropping to a thigh sheath. The weapon provided an ounce of comfort. There should be someone around; it was beyond the bedtime of infants and honest workers, but not late enough for the deceitful or desperate to sleep. Maria's candle should be lit, as she bent over needlework for idle Mercer girls to wear through in a month. Finery her daughters would never wear. Maria struggled to keep the five girls in rags. Lily offered them hogs when she had any to spare. Maria tried to refuse but Lily pressed past her pride, curling her fingers around the precious coins. *They'll keep your daughters alive*, she insisted. Their father died of the wasting disease months before and ever since Maria had to fight to keep clients. No one wanted embroidery from a sick household. Soon Lily would be putting the coins into begging bowls instead, and Maria would have no pride left.

Olly wasn't on his stoop, waiting; the scrawny fourteen-year-old had spent months begging for an introduction to the Rabbits, blue eyes fervent. *Let me prove myself*, he pleaded, *I can do it. I'm made to be a Rabbit*. He thought Lily was his passage to a better life. *When you're older*, she told him, meaning never. His brand of kindness never held out. She refused to do that to him, even if his only other choice was to don the blue. Better a drone than a thug or worse.

The familiar green door required no key; it swung open at her light touch. Lily cursed.

A smoking fire filled the living area with black dust, taste thick against her

tongue. Papers scattered the floor, torn from bindings as if someone personally ripped every page loose from her few books. Several had blackened edges, curling inwards as if to escape destruction. Straw spilled from the mattress in the corner, sheets slashed. Letters were emblazoned across one wall, and in front of it sat her father, head in hands. The script scrawled across the stained paper in plain, unadorned cursive. She swallowed, tamping down the rush of adrenalin, shaking fingers curling into fists.

***I see you***

“Are you hurt?” Lily crossed the room without taking a breath, dropping to her knees beside Ralph. “Were you here when he did this?”

His gaze rose, but didn’t focus on her. Lily wondered what she inherited from her mother. The almond eyes, irises ringed with black and so light they appeared bleached of colour, were his. At once blue and grey and empty as a winter’s day. His too was the stubborn streak and the dark hair that curled if she let it grow past her chin. Lily hated it. Especially in moments like this one. How could she be the child of this man? Her mother’s disappearance, his injury, her own struggle – they washed over him as he stared out at the world but refused to see.

“Father? Ralph?” She shook him, fingers biting into wasted muscle.

“They destroyed it. Everything.” He murmured, voice thin. “Our home.”

“It’s just a house.” Lily rose, assessing the damage. Ignoring the writing. With her income temporarily gone, she couldn’t afford to replace their belongings until she found some other kind of work. Another gang might employ her – Lee Vance’s reputation was well known – but Peter’s knowledge of her secret made

her stomach contract. A risk to go to anyone else. "We'll make do."

"How can we possibly make do?" For the first time in a long while, Lily saw a spark light his eyes, anger contort his face. Anger directed at her.

"Probably the same way I've done it for years," she replied calmly.

"What did you do, Lily? *What did you do?*" He pointed at the words; those damning words. "Don't lie to me. I know where you go at night. You aren't selling yourself – you're doing something worse. You think I don't see your clothes, your \_"

"That's enough," she snapped, rounding on him. "*Enough.*"

Whatever he saw in her expression made him hesitate, the planned tirade cut short.

"If you don't already know what I've done for you, there's no point me explaining now. But if you ever, ever, want me to help again, you won't finish that sentence." Ice filled her mouth, her throat, at the look he gave her. Filled with dread. The leather-wrapped knife handle felt cool, snug in her palm. The rasp of iron blade against sheath made the blood drain from Ralph's face. An instinct, to draw it, honed by years in the gang. "My mother loved you. Pretend that means something."

"My, what a touching scene. Intimidating your own flesh and blood." The voice washed over her, familiar and unfamiliar. Her body recognised the dark allure of it. Every muscle locked but she refused to show any other outward sign of shock. "I see you're not a bastard boy after all."

"What fantastic observation skills you have." Lily braced herself for the impact of those eyes as she turned. Connor leant against the doorframe, arms

crossed. Nonchalance unfeigned. Not many people could creep up on her, but thrice he had caught her off guard. “What tipped you off?”

“Uncanny resemblance between the two of you.” His lips twitched. A shadow of a smile. “Spooky eyes.”

“Did you do this?”

“I don’t do warnings,” he answered.

*I don’t do warnings*, she mouthed, annoyance razor-edged as she moved around Ralph. She pressed a finger to the wall, aware that her back was to the real threat. The writing was still wet. She raised her hand, inhaling the faint garlic scent. Not blood as she suspected, but arsenic paint. Pinpricks darted across her fingertips in instant allergic reaction. The drama of it made her mouth curl in wry amusement.

“Paint?”

“Mmm.” She scrubbed it off against her breeches. Meeting his unwavering gaze again was an effort. “Why are you here?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking how I found you?”

She shrugged. The question stood very low on her list. Her anguish left her careless, path easy to follow. “I don’t care how you found me. I just want to know why you bothered.”

“Why? Protection.”

“I don’t need protection,” she bristled, voice cutting.

He motioned towards the wall. “That would suggest otherwise.”

“I take care of myself and my own.” If only he knew.

“You don’t even know what it means, do you?” He frowned, pushing off the

wall. Lily took a step back as he prowled towards her. "Are you really such a child?"

A glare was the only reply offered.

"The Decadents can sense power and they sure sensed yours. This is a message; play by their rules or don't play at all."

Rules and warnings, what else was there? Everywhere she turned, she broke them.

"Why wouldn't they just take me or kill me? Why this?" Lily pushed his words away, dismissive. Anything to stop them from taking root, sapping her courage.

"They haven't decided yet whether you're a threat or an asset." His eyes slid down her length. The gesture lacked the desire, the heat, of other men. Only calculation lingered. He didn't realise what she was. Acid bit at her, unexpected. She inhaled, brows drawing together. Her sex forced her into hiding, and now it would condemn her. She refused protection but – help. Help was nothing to scoff at. Even if this boy would demand something in return. The truth of it was in the tension of his shoulders, the way he stood with light feet. Prepared for her flight. Prepared to catch her. This was no offer. She had run from cages her entire life and now he sought to trap her.

"You want my answer? You want me to choose a side?" Despair lined Lily's laugh. "You know that's no choice."

"I'm a good person to have on your side, Lee."

"Would you be on my side, though?"

"You can come with me. Find out."

"But who do you work for? Lord Michael? Decadent or Mercer?"

“Have you considered that there might be other players in this game?” He raised his brows, a taunting gesture. “Yes or no, Lee?”

A challenge; one her heart should have risen to, hot and defiant. But it felt frozen, uncaring. It wasn't a challenge if she had nothing else to lose. Leon was gone. No one would miss her. The memory of her would fade quickly. Just another missing boy. Just another forgotten face on a poster, enforcing the dangers of the city. A tool to encourage submission. That is, if Ralph bothered to make signs. What did it matter?

“Yes.” She dipped her chin. “I'll go.”

Lily paused by the door, glancing back to where Ralph sat unmoved. No words fell into the ever-widening space between them, and she felt a hot flush rise. His eyes remained fixed on her knife-belt until she walked out.



She elbowed aside factory workers, returning home after long hours. It earned her several heartfelt curses, in the struggle to keep Connor in sight. His stride was long and possessed the confidence Lily coveted; people shied from his path, opening a way for him and closing ranks behind. As if a force protected him from brushing up against street filth. Lily had lived here long enough to know that the grafters stepped out of no man's way. Heads down, they moved as one creature, mindless. To the factories or back, morning or night, made no difference. But Connor swept through them like a king, needing no weapons, no threats. Battered left and right, Lily's irritation solidified minute by minute. Only a lackey behaved



this way; following without question, without hesitation. Yet still she trailed in his wake as though under some compulsion, even though something inside whispered sweet panicked pleas. For her to slip into the crowd. Run.

He was tall, broad across the shoulder and narrow in the hip. The Rabbits tended to attract the slender and nimble, other than the rushers of course. Brute force served them well. Connor was light-footed, but in a different way. His assurance attracted attention. A purse hung within easy reach on his belt; a feigned collision and nimble fingers would relieve him of it. She could imagine the weight of it, loaded with marigolds, cool and soft after the rough scrape of hogs. Her hands flexed longingly. He was asking for it. Where she slipped through the shadows, cat-silent, he proclaimed his presence.

He paused by a starveling huddled by a corner, bowl held between shaking hands. Two hogs dropped; the girl's eyes widened, and Lily heard the mumbled thanks. But behind his back, her face grew wily and calculating. A single hog might provide a week's food, if rationed; to give away two? Generosity like that was never left unpunished. A low whistle reached Lily's ears; a signal.

"I wouldn't do that," she said, drawing level. "That's a donation that'll save your friends' lives, more than what's in his purse."

"What'd you know," the girl spat back, narrow face hungry. A familiar look. Lily's own face had worn it, before the White Rabbit gang. The feeling, well-remembered. Desperation mixed with greed. Girls too young for the marriage mart, full of fruitless dreams to escape it. A crew like this, working certain corners or singular streets, broke up in a couple of months. The boys were either caught and tried, sent dockside, or moved on to better prospects if gifted. The girls learnt

their place.

Lily crouched, tapping her gang mark to draw the girl's attention. "Six concealed knives. Learn to count. Don't, and you'll be dead before your thirteenth birthday."

"I –" Hope replaced desperation; Lily could read the plea in her eyes. *Introduce me to the gang*, it said. She pushed away the swell of pity. There was no helping these girls. No escape, not really. She was proof of that.

"Just call them off." She rose; Connor hadn't paused, hadn't looked back for her. She didn't wait to hear the second signal, pushing back into the crowd.

They travelled two miles before his pace eased, allowing her to draw abreast.

"Where are we?" He asked, a sly sideways glance assessing her condition. Lily resisted the urge to snap back at the unspoken; the distance was nothing. Not when she travelled further and harder every day of her life in the gang. If he expected to see a sign of fatigue, he found none.

"East Hunt. Near the Astor's mill." She counted back the turns since leaving home. "Fifth street." Not a part of town she was overly familiar with; neither here nor there, not towards the upper city or the lower. The inhabitants of these burbs were honest folk on the whole.

"Clever lad."

Lily's hackles rose. "You –"

"Why did you warn her?" He interrupted, hands disappearing into pockets as he turned to face her. "You didn't need to."

"Why shouldn't I?"

“Not many grafters I meet would have. She’s competition – not sworn. Not branded. More importantly, a girl. Worthless. And for the boys in the crowd – most enjoy weeding out the unskilled. C’mon, they won’t survive anyway if they tell an armed mark from unarmed. You just prolonged the inevitable.”

“Chalk it up to a moment of weakness.” Lily shrugged, the lie rising readily to her lips. “Or maybe I wanted to protect you.”

A husky laugh burst from him, and Lily felt an answering tug. She frowned.

“You’re the last man I’d ask to watch my back.”

“Suit yourself,” she snapped back.

“Cruel, to play with him.” The words came from behind her. She spun. A boy little older than her raised his brows, taking in her stance; braced, tense. Hands fisted.

“Going to fight him? You don’t stand a chance.” This voice was the tarnished mirror of the other. An undercurrent that tempted her to respond in kind, to draw a weapon, to tear down the world.

“Chance has always found her way to my side,” she hissed, refusing to turn. The first boy laughed, low and scratchy and unamused.

“Connor, where did you find this snarling scrap? How old is he, thirteen?”

“Seventeen.” She cut in.

“A starveling then, stunted.” He still didn’t address her, looking over at her reluctant guide. “Why’d you bring him?”

“Not here, Felix.” Connor glanced around, mouth flattening.

“Uh, I think yes here. You can’t just bring him to our place and not give us any explanation.” Felix crossed his arms. “Will agrees.”

“Will does not.” Connor countered.

“Um, Will does. Although he prefers to occasionally speak for himself.” The boy behind Lily spoke again, rueful. “He bears the White Rabbit mark. Hennessey’s men aren’t to be trusted, you know that.”

“The Rabbit ranks rarely include untrained elementals, either. So maybe we can make an exception.”

Two quick, indrawn breaths. Felix took a step back. “Prove it.”

But his aggression had drained away.

In answer, Connor pulled down the neck of his shirt. A blistered brand flamed across dark olive skin. A hand print. One of the boys whistled. The blood slid from Lily’s face and she stepped back, away, into another warm body. An iron grip closed over her upper arms. Steadying.

“It’s okay. You’re fine.” First tempting her to fight, that same voice now soothed.

“The snarling scrap may be stronger than us all, small or not, Felix.” Connor replied.

“Gods, Connor.” The scorn vanished from Felix’s expression. “Weren’t you shielding?”

But there was no horror in his words. No fear for his friend. Only admiration.

“If I hadn’t been...” He shrugged and Lily, only just following the conversation, felt her knees tremble. The moment replayed in her head; the sparks rising in her blood, the rush of flames. The acrid scent of burning hair. But not hers. She hadn’t even thought to check afterwards, fleeing the only concern. His hair. His skin, roasting.

“How could I?” She choked out. Two pairs of eyes snapped to her; to the white face, the shaking frame. To the boy holding her up. A decision made as one; not the time. Not the place.

“Let’s get inside,” Connor said, ignoring her question. “Will?”

A lethargy crept over her, limbs heavy, vision blurring until one focussed point remained. Summer green eyes held hers until a sudden weightlessness made her head loll onto Will’s shoulder, feet no longer on the ground. The world fell away.

## Chapter 7

“Hold this,” Leon whispered as he passed over the engraved dagger. His father’s last gift to him, before succumbing to the wasting disease. Lily gripped the cool handle, watching his back as he turned back to the door. Crouched, concentrating. His hair curled over the tunic’s collar, bright against the black cotton. She wanted to reach out, brush away the hair that obscured his mark. Run her knuckles against the skin there, a silky contrast to the callouses he wore with pride elsewhere. Slide a hand down, over the rough cloth, counting each rib so sparsely sheathed in muscle. He was speed over power.

But Lily did neither of those things. Instead her fingers tightened over the knife, raised it. Leon ensured she drilled the move, ripping apart dummies until straw insides scattered the training room. Stab and twist. Don’t hit bone. Finish the job. That was the part she stumbled over. The hesitation that preceded the final blow.

Her aim was careful. Precise. She slammed the knife into Leon’s back, the impact reverberating up her arm with jarring force. A practiced twist of the wrist; a withdrawal. The lock-picks clattered to the floor. He fell to the side. Wide, pain-filled eyes met hers. She didn’t waver. The knife rose and fell again. Liquid splattered across her cheek.

The consistency of human flesh was different to straw.



Lily woke to thorny voices, tangling in argument. She lay there and listened,

keeping her breath in the slow and even rhythm of sleep.

“What are you going to tell him?”

“The truth.”

“And you really think he’ll believe you? Side with us? What if –”

“He’s a lord’s man? A spy? No. A thief, yes. But this boy is not a liar.”

“Everyone lies.”

“About some things. But you couldn’t fake the despair in that house. A Decadent wouldn’t even know to try.”

“Even if he’s not playing us – there is no way anyone would choose us over them. The Decadents – you’ve been to the upper city. Doubtless he has too. The women, the parties, the food if nothing else. The luxury is undeniable. Offered that, no grafter would say no.”

“Maybe.”

“Stop. Stop with the idealism. You know where that leads us. It’s lucky me and Will are madmen – you’re lucky we don’t want a better life.”

“That’s not why you stay.”

A hesitation. A heavy exhale.

“No. It’s not. I’m sorry.” Boots shuffled, coming closer. “But this is a risk, Connor. For all of us, not just you. Remember that.”

“Will agrees with me.”

“Will always agrees with you. He’s a fool for –” Felix stopped. “I think he’s waking up.”

Lily opened her eyes to complete silence. The ceiling above glistened with fresh white paint that did nothing to hide the cracks in the plasterwork. Light filled

every corner of the room; she turned her head to see candles lining the walls. A soft mattress cradled her weight, moulding to every dip and curve in a way that straw never did.

A breath. She levered herself up, weight resting on bruised elbows. Her head spun at the movement. A glance down confirmed that every button aligned. Clothes in place. She swallowed, pushing away thoughts of invisible hand-prints, lingering caresses.

“Where am I?” The words cracked, and a cup pressed into her hand. Lily took a long drink of cool, clean liquid. “Where am I?”

“Safe.” This from Connor. He sat beside her, hand close enough to touch. Felix stood behind, arms crossed, face unreadable. No trace of emotion touched his face. No suggestion that the conversation ever happened. In the candle light, he looked younger. It picked up the freckles scattered across the broad cheeks, the pugnacious chin that dominated an otherwise unremarkable face. Only the hazel eyes gave any indication of his thoughts; they blazed. A boy already bursting with a man’s anger.

“Did – did you do this to me?” Everything lagged. Thoughts, body, instincts. Blood flowed sluggishly, heart slow; not the panicked beat expected from a situation like this. Terror a logical first reaction. Not a longing for more rest, to slip back into oblivion. Each word hesitated in her throat; she dragged them free.

“It was –”

“Necessary.” Felix interrupted coldly. “We didn’t want you leading them back here, if you escaped.”

“I’m a prisoner?” Lily wriggled her toes, limbs protesting. *Sleep*, they said.



She refused. Refused to lie in this bed, as these boys stared down at her. Refused to be powerless for a second longer. Sleep was not an option.

“Not a prisoner,” Connor disagreed. But Lily focussed on Felix’s slow nod which held a different message. It said, *watch out*.

“Well, I’ll be leaving then.” A bluff. She swung her legs off the bed, pausing as dizziness threatened to overtake her. What had they done? “I don’t want any part in your side, thanks anyway. I take it back.”

“You can’t. Not yet.” Connor stood and offered a hand, a gesture so contrary to his words that Lily stared at it for a long moment, puzzled. Finally, at Felix’s low laugh, she rose without assistance.

“I’m not a prisoner but can’t leave?” Lily forced her voice to deepen. Felt heat flush the last dregs of strange apathy from her body. Energy spiked, revitalised. In its wake, rage. What had they done? The opal, forgotten, throbbed in her pocket. Warm against her skin. “Do you think you can keep me here?”

The words hit home. Her unwavering eye contact caught Connor’s reaction. The way he leant back, just an inch. A flash of fear, there and gone in a heartbeat. It told her everything she needed to know. Lily let her lips stretch into a cruel smile, an echo of the one she had seen Leon wear countless times. A weapon in itself.

Felix was the first to speak – to move. “You and Will are going to destroy us.”

He left, door slamming with a finality that made Lily flinch.

“I guess I know what he thinks of me,” she said in her normal tone.

“He’s worried. Scared...” Connor broke off, frowning.

“No one needs to be scared of me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” He sat on the bed with a sigh. “We’ve been doing this for a long time, Lee. Practising, growing gifts we shouldn’t have by law, hiding. Bastard boys, all of us. By blows of Decadents, straying from their marriage beds. Our mothers were domestics, smart enough to conceal swelling bellies and to secret us away.”

“I’m not. Not a bastard.”

“No. That’s what we can’t figure out. They are always collected at birth or shortly after, before the gift manifests. No one wants to pollute the populace, to have powers spreading. Have people see it’s not just the Decadent bloodline. They need – need to maintain control. But your parents –”

“Normal. Completely ordinary.” Her father she could be sure of and – and her mother ... Connor wouldn’t believe it. He’d say, *impossible*. The male line carried the gift. The women, irrelevant. That’s what everyone believed.

“And you aren’t.” He shrugged. “Felix thinks it’s a trick. To catch us off guard.”

“A trick,” she said flatly.

“They want to know – know our supporters. Sponsors.” Connor shifted, dropping eye contact. “We’ve been making trouble for them.”

“So my two options – liar or naïve child? Which role do *you* want me to play? What do *you* think?” Lily glanced at the door, dread squeezing her stomach. She expected Felix to burst back in, manacles in hand.

Connor waited until her attention returned to him. There was no softness in his face, only cool curiosity. “I think you’re something different. I intend to find out exactly what.”

If only he knew. Lily held back a bitter laugh. "I don't give up my secrets."

"You will. I just need to ask the right questions."

His presence lingered in the room long after he left, more than the tart mint of his cologne, overlaying the dirt and smoke of the city streets. Her mind replayed the words over and over. None of her secrets were relevant here. The inner workings of the gang were all she knew. All her life had revolved around for years. And that one thing that did make her different - she wouldn't buckle. That secret would likely cost her life. But his confidence chipped away at her own, injecting doubt where strength lay.

The handle clicked when she tried it. Locked. A trap as she'd thought. *Of course.*

Felix's hostility was straightforward. Lily appreciated people who were easily read; at some point, he would threaten her. Connor, with his almost kindness and barely concealed interest and stake in her success, was trouble. His strike would be unexpected and true. The devastation more brutal because of it.

Lily peeked through the gap between frame and door, the slow beginning of a smile unfurling as her hand closed over the hidden lock picks. She never left home without them, tucked into her breast bands. The boys hadn't bothered to search her. Connor missed out on his answers when they were in such easy reach.



Lily was impressed, despite the ease in which she manufactured her own escape.

As a girl experienced in finding hideouts in out of the way places, the boys were doing a good job. A glance out the front windows showed an ordinary street, populated with modest stone homes. A grey life, easy to disguise yourself within. A few children played outside, under tilting awnings and the watchful eyes of their mothers. No men. Daytime, then. Work hours were long for labourers, often spanning the entire allowance of daylight. Dawn until dusk. It stirred resentment for wives not permitted by law to work alongside them. Wives whose unrecognised labour never ceased.

The house was clean-swept, no dust lying over floorboards. Newly painted like the room she woke in. Another mistake, placing her so close to the entrance, out of place in its heavy wood construction and deadbolts. Not a door commonly found in East Hunt. If she wished to leave, nothing prevented flight. But something made her hesitate. Made her leave the front rooms and move further into the house. Into spaces filled with sturdy furniture, heavily insulated with blankets and cardboard and paper. Soundproofed. Rudimentary engineering but effective; the inner rooms of the Warren used similar techniques. To shield murmuring conversations from sly ears; the thieves knew no one was to be trusted. Even friends held close since birth, since a time before amassing coins corrupted the purest intentions, before poverty was a drawn-out misery that longed for an end. Family men were the first culprits, bowed under the weight of expecting wives, or the newly married, coffers emptied by the inevitable bidding wars over unblemished faces, girls whose sweet smiles masked fear as the auctioneers knocked them down in front of a heckling crowd.

Only trickery wrapped in pretend found voice outside of the Warren safe

rooms. Stage-whispers brimming with false confidences, to catch a misstep. Soundproofing muffled screams as effectively as secrets. Secret plans, secret desires. Leon thought the grafters had lived long enough in the shadows, divided by greed and machinations from the outside. The Mercers, sensitive to the close threat, delighted in sowing trouble. *The weakest of them all, if we remain as we are. Grubbing in the dirt for hogs while the Decadents roll in marigolds, and the Mercers use us all.* But Leon's dream was warped by hunger's remembered bite; he never wanted to go back. Poverty had roused not good will but contempt for his fellow grafters. Unity was only a stepping stone for his own aspiration.

Now that dream was dead and here she was, in rooms with boarded windows and too many candles for this part of town, where stubs sold for a week's wages and sunset meant complete, impenetrable darkness in most homes. These boys had a whole house when families of six shared a single room, all in one bed. If a bed was even owned. Trickery bought this kind of luxury. Who were they to call her liar and thief, when they indulged in the same wrongs. Rising anger made her steps heavy, until she stormed along corridors, desperate for one of the inhabitants to find her loose. A confrontation – that's what she wanted.

But no one came. The house remained silent, a shell.

Every space was empty of personal items. No hints to their owners, no intimate touch to read and wield. A whisper of disappointment tugged at Lily. She liked any advantage, even if it meant sifting through belongings with sly fingers.

A table dominated the central room, light flickering over the polished surface. Fully lit despite the boys' absence. Bookshelves tempted from where they stood against the walls. Unfamiliar titles filled them; she stroked the spines with

gentle fingers, pulling one free. The pages fell open to reveal line upon line of foreign text, neatly printed. There was no sense to be found in them. Every book she opened was the same; indecipherable. A language not of the city.

Lily doused her candle. With nothing to explore, nothing to touch, she sank into the soft-cushioned chair at the head of the table. Propping her feet on the wood-top, she settled in to wait for the feckless trio who thought to lock a thief in their fortress.

## Chapter 8

The silence slipped into her heart, slowing each beat until it felt like everything reached a standstill. She became aware of every strange pulse in fingertips and thighs, imagining blood vessels bottlenecked, trapped. Her leg bounced. An itch drove nails into skin. She stood, paced, footsteps loud. Quiet had always been her weakness. She was a being of motion, not designed to linger. To be seated, mute; a torture. The long hours of stakeout were a physical pain, reducing her body to a twitching mess that longed to run, jump, cry out. Alert the world to her presence; assert an existence upon it. *I'm here*, she wanted to scream.

The last day of stillness she remembered but no longer craved. The urgent knock had her rising from a seat by the window, needlework cast aside, thread carelessly dropped. She paid no heed to the voice that whispered *leave it, don't answer*. No one came by during the day. Her father left before dawn-break, heavy tread waking her from fitful sleep. Two years had lapsed into nothing since her mother disappeared, but she hadn't stopped hoping. Waiting. It was a hope that left a mark in heavy black half-circles under red-webbed eyes, in a short temper often punished. She was a ghost of the girl she used to be.

*Knock-knock-knock*. Her father beyond. Stretcher-bound, hefted by men whose frowns implied annoyance at the inconvenience. A man, leg trapped in the machine; inconvenience. Sending so many men; inconvenience. It disrupted the floor. Stations were left unmanned. Productivity lessened. The mercers were not kind masters, even to men like Ralph who had served away their youth with nothing but loyalty and steadfast efficiency. The doctor came by later, pre-paid, and helped Lily move him to a bed. His injury was strapped, the instructions

simple; wait. But she was done waiting. She had waited for years. Stillness was discarded for motion that had yet to fail her.

In the following months she left the house every day, bed-ridden father unable to stop her. Forbidding words disregarded. Streets previously banned were walked, eyes wide. The burn of hot meat against greedy tongue savoured; crumbling pastry licked off fingertips. When the weather turned and winds swept through the city, blowing the stench before them; these days were her favourite. When her lungs filled with possibility. Yet as soles ached from the miles of covered ground, when she finally turned her face for home, she discovered the fear held in the heart of every woman.

The gloss faded from freedoms, and she noticed the raking looks, unsolicited. The fleeting touches in crowds, reserved for those in skirts. The creeping knowledge, infecting skin and lips and confidence, when a man dropped behind, mirroring step for step. She cut her hair. Shortened her stride. She perfected the ability to ignore the world around her while maintaining absolute awareness. Her walks narrowed to the better lit areas, the populated places. She learnt that the world was a cage, and longed for the dull days spent housebound. For stillness. The hogs, carefully hoarded, ran out. No coins remained when she pried back the loose floorboard, only dust-print patterns hinting at their existence. Yet the waiting continued, bones knitting unevenly under mottled skin. Ralph's reprimands became encouragement; to leave the house. To find employment of whatever sort.

If only she could take it back: ignore the knock. Stay seated, head bent to stitches barely seen. If her carelessness transformed instead to diligence. Then



she wouldn't have reached this point, stillness scratching against frayed nerves, trapped in a cycle without pause.

Leon anchored her. No action was left unconsidered; her spontaneity chafed against the deliberation put into every suggestion. He would lean back in his chair, dark eyes fixed on her while she paced. Questions probed out the truth; how many windows? When do the guards change shift? On his orders, surveying the house took days of crouching on rooftops taking notes on every detail. A box in her room filled with scrawling notebooks, overflowing with observations and irritation. Sometimes he came with her, content to sit and watch. A hand occasionally stilled her fidgets, claspng her thigh. She could still summon the feel of it. The warmth through breeches, the light pressure. Those nights remained theirs alone, away from the machinations of the gang. In the neutral space where she could be Lily.

But those nights had stopped long before his death. Those snatched moments, silenced forever.



Their return was heralded by swearing, thick and indecipherable. Doors slammed. Heavy footsteps moved from room to room. Lily's palms grew damp. A sing-song *I told you* so rose above the din. Glass smashed in response; another curse. Regret rose like bile. She should have run when the chance presented itself. Too late. His rage was an encroaching tide, sweeping before him, saturating her to the skin. She was the rock it crashed against, his presence a living creature. A

monster stroking a still cold face; her eyes slid shut. Sparks rose in response; a flickering greeting. Lily took a breath, lids no barrier to the light beyond. She sensed his hesitation; the clumsy half-step, the catch in his throat. Their reek, of sweat and despair, suffocated. A sliver of a picture reached her; a message, ink smeared. A white mansion, approached from the rear; a brisk knock on a plain wood door. The dour faced servant who answered knew them, offered a curt welcome. Accepted the message, eyes darting between it and Connor's face. The long walk home; familiar streets. Felix's hand on Connor's arm; words too low for her to hear. A wall lay between them. Clarity slipped from her grasp; a force pushed her from the memory. She opened her eyes to reality, uncanny presence gone. Stiff fingers flexed against her thigh.

"He's not here, stop." A scuffle. "Connor, he's gone."

"No." A pause. "He's not."

The assurance in his voice sent prickles down Lily's arms. She rose, unwilling to be caught at a disadvantage, moved further from the entrance. A hip propped against table top gave an illusion of confidence; arms crossed, shoulders rolled back.

The boys were wary as they crossed the threshold. A naked blade caught the light, held in Felix's fist. The stench of the city was upon them. Mud and mouldering food caught between boot treads, splashed up breeches. Dust creased in unused laugh lines, across foreheads and in the fragile dip where collarbone met neck. A crest of colour mounted along Will's cheekbones, as she looked at him. His face was a strange contrast to his voice, at once tempting and soothing and devious. It was a nothing face; remarkable neither in its beauty or

ugliness, sitting in the endless plateau between the two. A smooth jawline hinted at youth. Thick brows were set over evenly-spaced brown eyes of the common variety. A face once seen you could forget as easily. Indeed, as soon as she removed her gaze, the intricate details of it slipped away from her.

“There you are,” Felix stormed forward, grabbing an arm. Her casual stance crumbled. He glared down at her. Lily forced herself not to quail; to stand tall, match him glare-for-glare despite his advantages of height and strength. Intimidation was a cheap manoeuvre. “How the hell did you get out?”

His breath touched the side of her neck. Near enough for him to lean forward a little more and sink in elongated canines. Up close his eyes burnt, the molten danger of a predator. Wolves occasionally slipped past the walls, drawn by the rot and remaining for the prey-like poor. Easy for them to pick off the stragglers, phantom beasts in the shadows. Their wailing cries catalysts for barred windows and fights over second storey rooms. Without precaution, children could be dragged from their beds. Never to be seen again.

Lily stepped back, yanking her arm away. “Thief, remember?”

“You had no –” Felix hissed.

“Enough.” Connor cut across him. “What would you do if you were locked in a room, Felix? Stay put? Wait for your captors to return, meek?”

“No. But I wouldn’t wait for them to get back, like a cocky little –”

“I was interested.” Lily shrugged.

“And you don’t have anywhere else to go.” Felix countered.

The painful truth of the statement brushed past her. She contained the instinctive flinch. “I have plenty of places to go.”

Felix laughed, a sound that scraped over her nerves. “Lee Vance, formerly second in command of the White Rabbit gang. Summarily dismissed last night after challenging his new king of thieves for no apparent reason. Sound familiar?”

Lily glanced around the room. The three boys gazed back at her coolly. No sanctuary offered; no pity. They were implacable, waiting for her answer.

“What do you want me to say? I don’t have the gang’s protection anymore. That doesn’t mean I’m homeless. It doesn’t mean you can get away with snatching me off the street like some starveling child. I’m not an Unmissable.” She couldn’t stop the defensive edge to the words. The only comfort; their research was skin deep. Her disgrace was no secret; the slums thrived on gossip. Word would spread quickly; leaking out of the Warren, sewerage gugging onto footpaths.

Connor spoke first. “You’ll find the city a less friendly place without the gang at your back. We can offer you a place to stay. You don’t need to bluff. We know that you’re basically an orphan. There’s nowhere for you now, except with us.”

“That offer would be more convincing if you hadn’t locked me in a room first.” Lily snapped. “Work on your recruitment speech, maybe.”

“We’re not recruiting him.” Felix interrupted, his glare directed at Connor.

“If you’re not recruiting me, I don’t really know what you’re offering. A nice, safe stay in a prison cell? No thanks. I’ll take my risks on the less friendly streets. I dare say I know the risks better than you three anyhow. You didn’t grow up here.”

“We – how do you know that?” Connor scowled.

“Oh come on.” Her laugh was harsh. “You’re dark but not sallow – that can only mean sunlight, lots of it. More than I’ve seen in my entire life. Sometimes farm workers come into the market – you look like them, but better fed. Yet you’re here,

in the slums. That doesn't make any sense. None of you have gang signs, and gang members are the ones who get the most food around here. So you're not grafters, not farmers. Something else. I'm not an idiot."

"You're not." Will finally joined the conversation, moving forward. Positioning himself between Lily and Felix. His voice wasn't quite as she remembered; not tempting, not now. Instead it demanded attention, soft and insistent. Encouraging agreement. "Felix, we need him. We don't know these streets and we can't just trust –"

"Shut up, gods damn it. We can't trust anyone, especially this boy." Felix was unmoved by Will's entreaty. If anything, his face hardened further until he was all cheekbones and angular jaw. His fists clenched. "Don't even try it, Will. You can't influence me."

"Then don't try to bully me. I'm not a child to be swayed by a show of force." Will's lips tipped up slightly. "Felix, you've already accepted this. Stop protesting for the sake of it."

Some unspoken message passed between the two boys. Felix was the one to step back. There was something cowed about the way he ducked his head, snarling aggression draining from his countenance. Lily considered Will with more interest. That ordinary façade – what did it hide, just beneath the surface? She shivered.

"Do whatever you wish. Tell him our secrets; see where it gets us." Felix moved away, slouching in a chair in the corner. A studied disinterest overtook him.

"So, recruitment. What benefits do I get?" Lily took shelter behind mockery. "Equal share of the spoils? Free board and lodging?"

“We don’t rob people.” Will replied evenly. “There aren’t any spoils.”

“Then how do you afford this?” She gestured around her.

“This?”

“*This* house. *This* furniture. *These* candles. *These* books.” Her voice rose, falling into its natural and condemning cadences. “Everything here. Who do you work for? Who pays for this?”

“No one.” His steadiness remained, unaffected by the lie. It had to be a lie.

“Fine. No one pays. So what do I get? Why should I join you?” The words were mired in sarcasm. She couldn’t help the eye roll that accompanied them.

“Sell yourselves, please. Tell me what your operation involves.”

A snort came from Felix’s corner. Amusement or irritation, she couldn’t tell. Connor stepped forward, drawing her attention. She noted the dimpled cheek, evident even in gravity. It was easier to look at than his discerning eyes, welling with intelligence and interest.

“Your own room. Three meals a day.”

“Will the room stay unlocked?”

“Your own *unlocked* room.”

“Okay,” Lily shrugged. “What will you want in return?”

“We’ll send money back to your father, so he can stay in his lodgings.”

Connor continued, ignoring her question. “And ensure your protection when you leave the house.”

A rush of heat blazed through her at these words. She grasped the knife still hidden in her back sheath, drawing it before any of the boys had time to react.

“Protect me?” She slammed it point down into the table; it stood, shaking

slightly, embedded in the wood. "I can protect myself."

All those years of practice, dismissed. Did they think the White Rabbit gang taught her nothing? That light fingers and a knack for squeezing into small spaces got her through? They should be able to read her as she had read them. See the lithe muscles. The balance in her walk. Cultivated through hours of tumbling and wrestling and wielding blades at first too heavy for narrow wrists. The memories of leaden limbs, aching and overused, lingered long after expertise overtook inexperience. Leon made damn sure that she could take a strike like a man. Taught her to contain flinches, to throw herself forward instead of recoiling. *Violence was the key*, he said, *to the disguise*. If she could defend herself – against taunts, against attackers – doubt would never turn its sightless face her way.

Felix's curse cut through the silence. "Rats! Where did you pull that knife from?" Admiration coloured his voice. The surprise of it killed her anger as quickly as it had come.

"My first piece of advice; search prisoners. Especially if you don't trust them," Lily said wryly. "I have three more just like this one."

"That'd explain why you're not bothered by blunting it on the table."

"I figure if you can ensure my safety, you have weapons of your own. Maybe a whetstone or two." She shot back, surprised by the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"You're not used to the threat I'm talking about." Connor interjected. "A piece of serrated metal? That's no defence against it."

"Magic," she said with sudden clarity. She scoffed; waved a hand that encompassed the three of them "How can *you* defend me against them? You're

just boys.”

“Three boys with the lords’ gifts and no rules to bar its use.” Will said from behind her. “We’re more dangerous than you might expect. You’re not made for this – you could be something better than a grafter, Lee.”

The smile that overtook her was a twisted version of her usual expression. She felt the seduction of the words, the idea but ... Her father had bemoaned his place; the back-bending labour demanded of every worker, the long hours and scant pay. Even before the injury he recognized the wrongness of it. Lily listened to his rants, soothed sore muscles with herbal compresses, gave up her meagre luxuries in return for his ale and warmer blankets. She slept on hard floorboards in the final years of his work life. Anything to make him comfortable. Talk of rights and fairer pay and better conditions washed over her. She knew she was not entitled to the same.

The only rights Lily ever won were courtesy of the breast band and breeches and short hair. Of lowered voices and continual lies even to the closest of companions. That’s what these boys were seeing; that’s who they were offering their help to. Lee. Only Lee.

But she didn’t say any of that. She couldn’t. Instead;

“Tell me. Everything.”



## Chapter 9

Connor motioned her to a seat. The chair pressed unforgivingly into her back and thighs. Tension hummed in the air. Will sat next to her, in easy reach. Only Felix didn't move, remaining in his corner. His expected protest didn't rise and she could see the surprise in Connor's swift glance, in the tap-tap of fingers against wooden table top. His anxiety calmed hers slightly.

"Do you want me to start?" She blurted out when the silence stretched, until each lungful of quiet pricked against tender nerves. It was speak or scream. "Convince you of my innocence, or something?"

Three pairs of eyes jerked to hers, as if their thoughts had wiped her presence from memory. Connor cleared his throat, discomfort writ clear. It wasn't an expression that sat easily on his clever, confident face.

"No one is innocent, so you can't convince us of that." This from Felix, mocking.

"You don't need to convince us of anything," Connor spoke at the same time.

"Your hesitation really says otherwise." Annoyance edged her voice.

"We're sorry." Will said, and her nerves calmed, irritation abating. "We're not used to giving away all our secrets, and I think everyone is struggling to find where to begin."

"Where did you meet?" Lily prompted.

"We've been friends since birth. Our first steps were shared stumbles, in the same corridors, breathing in fresh cut grass. Felix was allergic; he sneezed his way through his first and second years. The flowers crept in vines over stone older

than our mothers and their mothers. The buds shut in winter, and we used to pluck them in the callous way children like to kill. But that's starting mid-way: the story begins in this city, with our parents."

He exhaled, a hairsbreadth from a sigh.

"Domestics belong wholly to their masters. Disgraced, they still belong. Turned out without food or board, but without the capacity to find more employment to survive. No one will take on someone else's failed servant, after all. It's not right. More than that, it's not legal. Our mothers were turned out of their working situations for disobedience. Of course –"

"That disobedience was the crime of being assaulted." Felix interrupted.

"Turned out, two choices remain: starving on the street or the poorhouse."

Lily's gaze dropped, unease creeping over her. The poorhouse was a last resort. She snuck inside one, once, out of interest. She left sickened. The inhabitants worked from first light to last. The women ruined their eyesight by mending clothes in dim rooms, each stitch barely seen. Others scrubbed clothes until their hands were raw and chapped, burnt from biting soap. Men wore out already failing bodies with manual labour; hired out on construction lines, never seeing any measure of the profit. Their reward; a bed, if you could call it such, on rotten floors and thin gruel for every meal. It was a half existence. The men and women who ran the poorhouses were raised to power from the dirty ranks; as such, they knew poverty. Knew that they never wanted to return, and were crueller for it.

"Vulnerabilities draw attention in such places, and they were vulnerable indeed. Both..." He stumbled, paused. Shot a glance towards Connor. "*All three*

big-bellied and big-eyed. They banded together – first out of necessity, later from friendship. But they hit a bit of luck, the first of their lives. Their boss was new, and didn't like pregnant women. Considered them distasteful. She didn't realise that the lords wanted to be informed about each and every baby born in the poorhouse, knowing the likelihood of it being a bastard gifted. She hid them away every inspection day, in back rooms thick with disuse."

"Who knows what fumes they breathed in," Felix muttered.

"Who knows," echoed Will. "One day a new man came to the poorhouse. Said he was looking for fertile women, for an 'experiment'. The boss was only too happy to give the three of them away, no questions asked."

Whispers circulated every so often about the Unmissables; where they went, what happened to them. Snatched off street corners, the beggars and the starvelings that no one would look for. Rumours of ghastly experiments, bodies torn apart and sewn back together but not as they once were; transformed into uncanny creatures belonging to nightmare. Dismissed as children's stories, meaningless, designed to scare, adults nevertheless looked over their shoulders on the darkest nights and held their young close while passing alleyways. It was easy to convince yourself that something moved in the corner of your vision, gone when you turned to stare. Hurried steps were the answer. Nervous ticks. Games of pretend that never wavered. That was the reality of life in the undercity.

"It wasn't what you think, though," Connor spoke at last. He noticed her reaction. "He was a kind man, in his way. A farmer, he took them out of the city for us to be born in the countryside. You can't imagine the difference. The air, free of taint. Clean. Green crops – not the withered black things city folk call plants. Life,

everywhere.”

“But it wasn’t so different,” Will added. “He made them work. Farmhands are difficult to come by, most falling for the city’s seduction. Sometimes only the moon would light their way – but he paid for a doctor’s attendance at each birth. He fed them well, and allowed them to raise us in ways they chose. Not many can claim that.”

“No, they can’t.” Connor’s eyes were direct and intent. “By the time our gifts manifested, each around the age of ten, he was happily married to my mother. She chose it, and was content. It meant she could ensure our futures – our safety. If he hadn’t been so enamoured, well ... it’s illegal not to report Adroits.”

“Adroits?” Lily tested the word on her tongue.

“What we are – gifted, wielders. Those with the *oistros*. What you are, we are, and almost every Decadent is, courtesy of selective breeding.”

“Every male Decadent,” Lily interrupted.

“Of course.” The disdainful interjection came from Felix.

“Every male Decadent,” Connor confirmed, shooting Felix a quelling glare. “Leon Hennessey was one too.”

Lily’s mouth gaped open, and a laugh slipped out. “Leon didn’t have any power.”

Felix snorted. “Your boss didn’t tell you? Didn’t let you in on that particular secret? Word around town was that Lee Vance had the ear of Leon Hennessey – I guess that isn’t true at all. Because if it was, Leon would have told you exactly what he was.”

“He hated the Decadents, everything to do with them.” All those

conversations with Leon, as he raged over the higher ups and their blood-won privilege, even while bartering and bargaining with them. *You should see them, Lee*, he would say, voice slurred with drink, *decked out in furs and jewels, dancing all night. While I bring tariffs and grovel and hope it's enough to stop them from grinding us under heeled boots. All that power. They didn't win it. It was given to them and we're made to pay for it. We're going to take it from them.* It hurt him, his own insignificance. Despite all he scraped together, he was still nothing in the eyes of the lords. "If he did – Leon would have done something."

"You didn't know him as well as you thought." A taunt. Felix's smile was barbed.

A laugh bubbled to the surface at the sheer irony of it. No one knew her, knew Lily, not really. Could she be surprised if others hid secrets as well or better? All those long, cold nights huddled in Leon's office, scouring every book for hints to the source of the Decadents' power – all a sham? A joke, when he already knew the source, had the source inside of him also? She couldn't see what that accomplished.

The key he entrusted, to the bottom drawer of his desk; a box full of neat-lettered condemnations. Of men who crossed him. Of women who disobeyed. Red ink slashing through names in neat columns. The endless errands, neck scarfs wrapped high to cover the gang mark. Sitting in dusty rooms, watching houses. Messy notes written under street lamps, detailing the comings and goings of people she couldn't name but recognised by sight. The soft-jawed ladies in rustling satin, hair piled high, jewel-studded. The lords, with hooked noses and distant expressions, breeches clinging to muscles made not from labour but vanity. Her

own disguise rendered her invisible; a white-gloved valet, hair slicked back from a pointed face. Her masks layered, one over the other. No one noticed servants. Leon demanded meticulousness from her. And for what?

Every month the largest portion of the takings were sent to the upper city. Leon would demand his sedan chair be brought around, carried by the four strongest bucks. Tucked inside he sat straight and tall, hands white-knuckled around the ornate metal box. The tariff stirred resentments; Leon against the Decadents, the Warren against him. Peter spread petty poisons, dripped into slumbering ears and soups over dinner. Ensuring his malice was heard but not traced. It infected everyone eventually. Thieves who never considered mutiny, formed the words in badly lit corners, huddled in the back rooms of the Warren. Buck and kit united for once. *Why are we paying them, they said, why do we bow and scrape to overlords who've never done a thing for us?* Unrest bred unrest.

"You can never know anyone," Connor said when it became clear she wasn't going to answer. "Not even your closest friends. That's no fault. But Lee – we aren't wrong. One in four babies are born with the *oistros* – it can skip generations, passing over heirs and settling on lesser male children. The inheritances in Decadent households inevitably fall to the Adroit offspring."

It was impossible to reconcile the images. The boy with a shy smile, who shared almost every adolescent memory. The man who had both drawn her in and shut her out. An adroit, with the same crackling power than threatened to overwhelm her. A dead man still brimming with secrets. A friendship built on shared adventures and rickety half-truths. He had supported her lies but she never knew about his. Her eyes prickled with tears she would never shed.

“One in four.” She repeated, just for the sake of saying something. She studied the arm of her chair with more interest than it deserved. Such a small chance, in the scheme of things. One in four babies died in the slums in their first month of life. Two in four before their first birthday. That was more likely than her having this gift. “Are they all mind-readers?”

Malediction was the most feared gift, a crawling evil that made the grafters cower like kicked dogs, grateful for the stunted lives they led. But she knew there were others. Folk whispered of Decadents who stalked in different skins; a black cat, a snarling hound, a neighbour behaving strangely. Watchdogs, they said, were wolves with men’s faces, capable of shifting. Lily had never seen it. Tried not to give credence to the rumours.

“No.” Connor showed so outward sign of surprise at this small scrap of knowledge, but something flashed in his eyes. Something Lily couldn’t read. “Malediction is one of three. Maledicts are influencers; of thought, of action. Some say they can change an entire personality; bend and shape the mind to whatever they wish.”

Lily shuddered. “And the others?”

Connor carefully catalogued her reaction, brows drawing together. But he continued without commenting. “Hellkites wield elements – fire, electricity, water. It’s considered the brutish side of the gift. Therians speak any tongue and communicate with animals. Most can shapeshift – usually to a specific form.”

“But Maledicts are the strongest.”

“Why would you think that?” Connor asked.

“Decadents, they do nothing to ensure their power. I’ve seen them. There

aren't meetings and plotting and connivances. But mind control would mean they never had to. If you could quell an uprising with just one word –" She trailed off, the unnaturalness of it stealing over her skin. No wonder Leon never fought. Never acted on any of his resentment. Because he knew the fate that waited. She closed her eyes against the image of Leon, slack-jawed like the bedlams wandering the streets. Madmen, emptied of self. As if someone had sucked out their essence. At twelve, venturing out onto the streets, they had scared her. Mouths never quite shut, eyes wide and unblinking, expressions never changing. But she quickly learnt that their threat was nothing compared to other men. They were harmless. She imagined some threat froze their faces forever. Petrified.

Her first friend on the street was a bedlam. He sat near her begging corner. As he inched closer, day by day, Lily overcame fear to find a boy barely older than herself. Smaller details came into focus. The tiny stitching of his tattered jacket; once a fine garment. The ring he wore, setting clogged in dirt. She tried to touch it once, in the same way he curiously fingered her bowl and borrowed crutches. He snatched his hand away.

Muscle memory, because his face stayed blank.

One day he just wasn't there. He never came back.

"Malediction is a curse as well as a gift." Will said softly, as if following her thoughts.

"How? How could power like that be a curse? A burden? To have ultimate control over everything – it sounds idyllic. What everyone craves. If I could talk myself into better quarters, a larger ration – gods." Lily rose, running palms over chilled arms. She avoided their gazes, crossing to a shelf, thumbing a book open



at random. The same foreign language cut across the page. She stared at it, trying to make sense of it, waiting for the press of hot tears to ease.

“Sometimes you can’t think in black and white. It isn’t that simple,” Will rebuked. “The Maledicts can’t help their powers – none of us can. It’s how they’re wielded that matters.”

And listening to the gentle cadences of his voice, Lily was inclined to believe him. But just that thought, that blind compliance, had her turning to him, eyes narrowed. She forced her lips to form the words; a struggle.

“Don’t tell me what to think.” The words came out rough and angry.

Will paled and on her periphery, she saw Felix rise.

“What did you say?” Connor said slowly, as if he couldn’t quite believe the question necessary. Lily’s fingers clutched the book. It suddenly felt like a weapon. The mood in the room had changed. The air taut against her skin. A small smile tipped Felix’s mouth, one hand at his belt. Where his weapon hung, leather sagging under its weight.

“I said *don’t tell me what to think.*” But her confidence had faded. The statement a question now, instead of defiance. She swallowed, mouth dry.

“Connor?” Felix sounded eager. As if all his warnings had come to pass. Lily couldn’t see the great crime of disagreeing with Will; she hadn’t exactly been acquiescent since arriving. Connor hesitated, and Felix took that as an affirmation. He crossed the room quicker than Lily’s eyes could track; she blinked and he was before her. Hands closed like vices over upper-arms, unnecessary strength holding her in place. Hazel eyes burnt into hers, suspicion razor-edged. A muscle ticked in his cheek. This close, the pockmarks of adolescence were visible, mixing

with the freckles. Grease shined over bold nose and broad forehead. She breathed in the faint garlic stench that emanated from him; it mixed with her own heated panic. His faint smile had morphed into something malicious, and gave no warning before he shook her. Once, twice. Teeth clacked together, closing over a pliant tongue. Salty blood flooded her throat. And then her feet left the floor entirely, Felix's face reflecting no strain.

"That's enou –" Connor spoke. The moment he chose to intervene, far too late, a dull clang rang through the room. A doorbell, incongruous. Felix flinched, dropping Lily. She collapsed to the floor, her legs giving way beneath her. Both boys looked towards Connor for guidance, as if every answer lay in the cool arrangement of that narrow face.

And it did. "Will, take Lee back to his room. Felix, make sure no trace of him remains in here – clear up this mess. I don't want..." Here he cut himself off, as if remembering Lily's presence and the necessary mincing of words. "I'll let them in."

As Will led her away, nausea clamped around her stomach, she had to wonder: what visitors warranted such secrecy?

## Chapter 10

The room did not stay unlocked. Instead the white walls became her prison. Food arrived at neatly timed intervals. Days bled together, long blocks of boredom punctuated with carefully supervised exercise. Half an hour, morning and night. It was little different to being trapped in her room, walls steadily closing in, pacing up and down, except the speed of her anxiety was determined by another. They never ventured beyond the darkened outer corridors. Lily counted the footfalls. Ten steps, left turn, another five. Back again. They took away her boots and knives, as if that would stop her flight. Bare feet were quicker, lighter. As a kit, she learnt that the best way to scale a wall was without shoes, toes gripping each available crevice.

Will usually came, grip gentle but insistent. Acting more the gentleman escort than jailer; opening doors, talking politely about the weather. Of course, the weather never changed in Acedia. Always grey. Always overcast. Every attempt to break the silence fell flat. *Where are my manacles?* She forced a laugh from a dust-dry throat. *Prisoners have rights too you know.* Will winced every time. *Someone suggest it, then?* She'd say gently. To this she received no acknowledgement. No doubt Felix had pushed for shackles. The days he walked her were the worst. If she lingered at a window, desperate for a glance outside, a rough yank would get her moving again. He never spoke. His only expression seemed to be a glower, directed solely at her.

"I'm beginning to think you don't like me," Lily said on the second day, as Felix brought her back to her room. "You could at least pretend. It's only common courtesy. Even this cell is preferable to your company."

“You don’t deserve courtesy.”

“You mean; Connor hasn’t decided whether I do or don’t deserve it yet. I doubt you get to make those decisions.” Lily flashed her predatory smile at him. Toothy and too wide. *All the better to eat you with*, she thought bitterly. “It’s easier to take back kindness than cruelty, Felix.”

“You don’t deserve kindness,” was his only response.

“High marks for original and varied dialogue.” Lily kicked her bed-frame after he left, hard enough to elicit a wounded curse. Sinking to the floor to cradle her foot, a single hot tear escaped. Maintaining a faultless façade was taking its toll, frustration and anger brimming just beneath the surface. Another hour, another day, another breath and it would overflow. What happened to that lifeline Connor seemed so eager to offer? She was left drowning. Muddy waters closing over her head, forcing the air from laboured lungs. She scrambled from a handhold but there was nothing within reach. Nothing to grip on to. Someone or something had to pull her free. For a moment, she had thought Connor understood. A foolish hope, one worth berating herself about. In the months since Leon’s death, she had learnt better than to hope. Or so she thought.

Connor didn’t show his face. Lily assumed Will and Felix reported back to him daily. The first few days she assumed it was a test. Of mettle. Of patience. The latter she possessed little of; the former she liked to think she had in spades. Lee Vance never backed down from a challenge, and Connor was assuredly challenging her. But as the long thin scratches on the wall counted four, and then six, she abandoned that theory. A test was rarely designed to break the taker.

“You think you can beat me,” Lily muttered into her pillow, breathing in the

clean cotton scent. "Don't count on it."

Her power remained frozen in her chest no matter how much she concentrated, that dark beast silent and slumbering. With the lock-picks gone, there was no escape from the windowless room. The constant unease was an unfriendly bed fellow. It closed in on her until it was an effort to tamp down the anxiety that infected her blood, vibrated in her bones. Hope, she found, was easy to lose. Lily longed for numbness.

*What I want from you is simple.* Leon had taken to haunting the long hours between company. *What I want from you is perfectly straight-forward.* A lie, of course. What Leon wanted from her was many things but never simple. Never direct and unfaltering and honest. All those virtues that she longed to be but always alluded her grasp. Thanks to men like Leon.

Lily closed her eyes, and an image materialised behind her lids.

The formal, upright chair was empty. Leon leant instead against the front of the redwood desk. Legs crossed at the ankle, a hand braced either side of his body. A black jacket lay discarded and he wore only a shirt, sleeves rolled up to reveal a lean muscled forearm. Pure, undiluted calculation lay plain and unhidden on that vulpine face. Angular in the candlelight, eyes fixed on her. On Lee. He hadn't asked for Lily in months by this point. Their friendship felt stretched thin. Tenuous.

"What I want from you is simple," he purred, not inviting her to sit. She stood, awkward and off-kilter, and suspected that it was exactly how he wanted her to feel. Leon enjoyed advantages. She knew that by then. You didn't spend two years in the Rabbits without learning it. Without seeing it in the throne, set four

steps above the main dining area, and the elaborate, expensive clothes he wore while his men dressed in coarse homespun fabrics.

“Leon?”

“I’ve watched you, Lee. I’m impressed. What I want is to be *more* impressed.” He spoke almost like a stranger, a small, dangerous smile appeared. “I’m going to set you a quest. It’s entirely up to you whether you complete it or not.”

“A quest?” Lily shoved her hands deep into pockets to disguise their trembling.

“A quest.” He confirmed. “Five tasks. To prove yourself.”

“I’ve already proven myself,” she burst out, feeling the dark flush that rose, indignant, to her cheeks.

“Don’t make the mistake of disagreeing with me.” The words were velvet smooth but she quailed inside. Leon hadn’t moved an inch but the sensual ease of the position had fallen away. No longer a housecat sunning itself in its own magnificence. Lily gulped.

“No. Sorry,” she said quickly, looking down at the scuffed boots.

“As I was saying: five tasks.”

“And if I accept this...quest?”

“Your training has been rather lacklustre of late. I’ll take you on – again. Teach you everything you need to know to become more than just a buck.” He cocked his head, considering her. Lily resisted the urge to shrink back, to hide. She barely recognised this man.

“What do you get out of it?” She said, wincing at her own audacity. But Leon laughed, revealing teeth that were not the pointed fangs of a predator but normal,

white, even. The tightness in her chest eased a fraction.

“Exactly that, Lee. Exactly that.” He pressed a fist to his mouth, smothering the laughter, but it did nothing to hid the glittering amusement. The curve of smile that wasn’t anything other than an invitation to share in the moment. A connection arched between them, bright and searing. A raw intimacy that made everything that came before seem dull and meaningless. Clarity slammed through her. She sucked in a breath to speak, and Leon looked away. Extinguished the burgeoning spark.

“Decide. Let me know within the week.” He studied his nails with a false nonchalance. She waited for a beat, expectant. But when nothing else came, she swept a bow. Withdrew from his study. Swallowed her stupid tears. For the first time, she felt like prey to Leon’s cunning fox.

Numbness never was an option with Leon. He demanded strength and vibrancy and never ending wit. Otherwise he trampled straight over you, uncaring. But he had vanished in the ether, along with everyone else. Devoured by the city. And Lily longed for it to stop hurting. To plug the gaping hole in her chest.

A choice. She needed a choice. Connor and Felix and Will offered her nothing. No leniency. Impersonal and distant and uncaring. Surely, they saw she was adrift? She had to claw back some semblance of control over a world that shifted and shook under tentative feet. Otherwise she would cease to exist. Lily Vance, no more.

The next meal that came, she refused. And the next. At first it went unremarked on. Felix collected her trays, and his disdain of this petty defiance was clear.

“We don’t care if you starve,” he said, taking a bite out of the soft bread.

“I would carve out your heart if only you would give me a blade,” she responded, baring her teeth.

“I don’t have a heart.”

Hunger chipped away at her. A pain that grew until it eclipsed the need for action. Lily welcomed it. It, at least, was something she had chosen. A rebellion of her making. Her pacing stopped, and time slowed further. Days were spent spread-eagled on the bed. She imagined herself slowly petrifying. Soon she would be a statue. Eyes, bleached of all colour, would be the last to succumb. She straightened her limbs, folded hands over flattened breasts; a breathing effigy. An imitation marred only by the faint rise of her chest with each shallow breath. The days had gotten colder.

A respectable burial was an unlikely fate in the undercity. Her limp body would be thrown into a mass grave reserved for paupers. The undercity cemetery district was the worst Acedia offered. There were no private graves for the poor. Huge pits were dug and left open to the elements for weeks on end, waiting to be filled with corpses. The stink of rotten flesh overpowering, spreading outwards towards the closer houses. Vermin thrived but little else. Lily ventured there once, on a dare. Her breakfast came back up, barely over the boundary. Blood-drained faces, noses and eyes eaten away by greedy rodents, haunted her afterwards. She dreaded becoming one of them.

With Will, she pretended. That she wanted to walk slower. That she had nothing left to say. It wouldn’t be a strike if she proclaimed her intentions. *Don’t lose*, she told herself nightly. He didn’t remark on the coat she insisted on wearing



inside, arms holding the material around a trembling frame.

“Felix told me you aren’t eating,” Will said on the third day of her strike, breaking his tradition of using only inane pleasantries. Lily couldn’t summon the energy for surprise. The effort of making her feet move in even steps was enough to exhaust her.

“Does it matter?” She asked, languidly. Languor came easily, at least. It had crept in and overtaken her body without invite.

“Universally bad form to let your prisoners die of starvation.”

“Maybe it’s plain bad form to lock up people without cause.” Lily didn’t return his smile.

“Ten days, Lee. It’s only been ten days.”

“Almost a fortnight of strangers controlling my fate. Deciding it.”

“We’re keeping you safe. The Decadents –”

“Would maybe show me the mercy of a quick death,” she said flatly.

“If you think that, you know less about this world than we thought. Less than nothing about the Decadents.”

“I know less than nothing about you.” An ounce of fire entered her voice. A flicker of fight.

Will hesitated, just for a second. “Felix also said we could force you to eat.”

“Try,” she said, dredging up a defiance she barely felt.

There was no more conversation after that. Will escorted her back in silence. He pressed two fingers below her chin, eyes unfocused as he counted the thud-thud of a slowing heart.

The tray didn’t come that night, although she waited for the familiar metallic

sigh of the lock being drawn back. Her weary mind hoarded each day's interactions, even if she was unwilling to admit what they meant to her. She longed for the ease that filled her days in the White Rabbit gang. Even the sullen anger of her father would be welcome now. For the first time, Lily considered that her feet may have led her down a path from which there was no return. Ralph would not survive without her. Doomed to wither away, only discovered when the landlord came to demand rent. No one to remember him, or mourn his passing.

No one would mourn her either. Grace may wonder what became of her one-time, almost-friend, but memories faded quickly in the undercity. She probably didn't want to remember, anyway. Perhaps her recollections would be only of a traitor. Leon's pet. Not of Lily, but of Lee.

When the usual dinner hour ticked passed and then another, she fell into a restless sleep.

## Chapter 11

“Make the cut. Slowly.” His voice registered the irritation he had felt towards her all morning. For week after week she put off the task. The last of five, set to prove her worthiness. Or so he said. She suspected it was simply to test the strength of her stomach. It certainly threatened to overwhelm her concentration now. Sharpened iron slid into the twitching flesh with disturbing ease, sending a prickle of disquiet down her spine. The owner of the limb let out a harsh cry. Tears had already risen to his milky eyes.

A bedlam off the streets, innocent of anything other than the unhinged mind that set him apart. He likely had no knowledge of how he came to be here, strapped down to the rending chair, thick silver shackles holding each arm to the rest. One circled his chest, bright against the dull stain of beggar rags. Manacled, for her play. Arrogance drained from her even as the blood gushed onto the blade. The gash was long and thin and neat, as she had been taught. Along one of the heart-lines, sure to draw death close. Hours spent drilling the move, out of sight. Away from the Warren. Her walls at home lined with the intricate drawings of pulsing organs and blue veins. Reaching out in webs under the skin. She knew precisely how deep to cut. Leon didn't need to prompt her.

She knew the design of blood and bone. The hefted weight of the dagger, familiar. Gifted to her by Leon, on her sixteenth birthday. She told no one the reason for the present, but she caught the sidelong glances. The envy. The rising doubt. Finally, the disgust. She knew the moment the tentative respect, won over hard-fought years, crumpled into dust and nothing. It meant little to her by that point. She thirsted for something else. The weapon fell from numb fingers,

clattering against the thick grey pavers.

“What are you waiting for? Sew him up.” Leon’s fingers were cold, as he pushed the needle and thread into the empty space the dagger just filled. She took them automatically, gaze caught on the river of red. It splashed over the dark wood, impervious to stain, and fell in crimson tears to the floor.

She slowly brought her chin up, refusing to give the satisfaction of seeing any pain in her eyes when she met his gaze.

“Fix him.” Leon said again, softly. A fingertip stroked her cheekbone, nail trailing across her skin. Lily didn’t flinch. Wordlessly, she threaded the needle and sank it into the same flesh she had cut minutes before. A simple pattern; the in-out that she learnt in her youth as a girl. The needle felt like a foreign weapon after her daggers. Yet Lily knew the damage dealt out by a mere pinprick. The slow demise of a poisoned victim. The frothing mouth, vacant stare. The blackened mouth, long after death. The small, festering wound that could be easily passed off as a spider bite. And the scent of it. Sickly sweet and rotten. She spent days in this room or others like it, breathing in that smell. A harsh contrast to the outer world of the Warren, warm with booze and smoke. Alive with laughter, well-meaning or not.

Leon meant to raise her above the bucks. Above the Warren. Mould her into something deadly to move in the dark. Stalk his prey. And so he had trapped her here to become the spider bite and the ravening mouth that tore apart his victims. In return, she received knowledge and the antagonism of her fellow thieves.

Mistrust, once planted, grew wild like a weed. Overtaking any shoot of

green. Smothering it until nothing else remained.

The bedlam whimpered at each stroke of the needle, while Leon's smile grew more satisfied. Flesh knit back together under her ministrations, a puzzle-piece imitation of what it used to be. Lily didn't feel like the surgeon Leon had promised she would become. She didn't even feel like an assassin, in the service of death.

She was just a blunt tool to be wielded at will. Leon's creeping purpose always remained coy, crouching just out of sight. No matter what angle she took – stroking his ego, demanding answers, pleading – he would not give it up. His reply was simple; *I want to help you be better than the others*. It didn't explain the coins he poured into the training, the anatomy books he bought her, the healers he hired to demonstrate different techniques.

Leon pressed a monster beneath her skin and left it there to grow. And now it was restless.



Lily paced the room, back and forth until the floorboards felt unstable and rocking underfoot. When she sat on the edge of the bed, her head spun. Hours passed. The door opened once, a tray shoved through. She ignored the soup, thick and creamy. The bread she picked at, scraping off burnt corners and sucking them off her fingers. Her stomach growled in protest. The water she drank greedily, gulping down glass after glass. It had a faint, unpleasant metallic taste to it. She was too thirsty to care. Too desperate to fill the empty space with a pale substitution for

sustenance.

Afterwards she flipped the cup, snatching it out of mid-air with reflexes honed from years of barely avoided mistakes. She growled out her frustration, hurling the cup at the door. It shattered.

New clothes had appeared in the wardrobe, neat and unassuming. Not dissimilar to those that she wore in appearance but less coarse to the touch. Like everything she had encountered so far, it was masquerading as something other. She shed her outer layer, keeping on the drawers and undershirt as a feeble protection. Someone could barge in at any time. The replacements – thick grey breeches, off-white shirt and brown waistcoat – were smooth against skin used to the itch of heavier cloth. She let a smile inch over her face, as she bent and flexed. It was almost as if her measurements had been in the seamstress's mind when making the garment. They fit Lily well; slim enough to not be easily caught against possible obstacles but not too narrow, to limit movement.

A looking glass stood in the corner and despite the usual dislike that rose, she wanted to see. A stranger stared back. Lily hadn't seen her own face, other than in sideways glances or distorted by bright well-polished metals, for years. Reflected in the glass was neither a boy or a girl but a person that loitered in the between space.

The ghost grey eyes tilted slightly, set under arching black brows. Eyes that would not be out of place on a hungry street-cat, stalking its prey. No emotion showed in the shimmering depths. The mouth was set in a thin line, disguising the generosity Lily remembered from her youth. She had her mother's smiling lips but not the charm that lay behind. The dark hair, cut short, highlighted a square jaw

and a high, broad forehead. Features other women struggled to hide with long curls and feathery fringes. Their weapons. Their disguises. At least she was free of that.

A small part, silent until now, disagreed. It longed for the fripperies, to hide the starkness of her face. It replayed the sensation of Connor's skin against her own. The jolt, the awareness. The disappointment when his fingers slid away, freeing her.

It said, *what if Connor saw you. What then?*

*Then*, she thought, *every lie would have been for naught*. Every freedom snatched away. She would not give that up, just to be called beautiful.

Lily went to turn the mirror face to the wall but her fingers slipped, abruptly weak. The mirror splintered against the floorboards. She could only summon the energy to blink stupidly at the ruined glass. Fumbling her way to bed, every movement felt lethargic. Submerged in some underwater world, limbs heavy. She blinked, lids drooping, weighted. Vision blurring. Her mind scrabbled for reason but that too felt sluggish. Panic, dull-edged, closed around her. The world tilted.

Lily collapsed on the mattress, limbs akimbo, a puppet with its strings cut.



Lily woke to a nightmare. Ropes lashed down her limbs, and her pulse throbbed through every vein. Her hands were numb. They had wrested her unconscious form into a seated position without waking her, testament to the new-found weakness that held her in thrall. Terror swelled, and she struggled blindly against

the bindings, unaware of anything but that mad revolt. Muscles strained, hips bucked; she threw her weight sideways. If she toppled the chair, if it fell...

"Gods, he's awake," Will said, from somewhere behind her. His voice was horrified and Lily felt a pang in the vicinity of her chest. She didn't think Will would be involved with this. *Foolish*, she chided herself, *so gods damn foolish*.

"Don't just stand there, you dolt. Hold him."

Felix. A rush of white hot rage burnt the fear from Lily's blood. Purged it until everything became icily clear. She was in a different room, one she recognized. Not the particulars, but the spirit of it was familiar. Leon's torture chamber matched the specifications. Box-like, dim. Torturers liked the darkness. They could hide in it, from themselves and others. Blind their consciences with tricks and lies, so consequences never had to be faced. Lily knew the technique. It didn't stop the nightmares. The memories of faces, wracked with pain. The reek of loosened bowels, enough to make weaker men retch.

Hands closed over her shoulders, rough and insistent. Pulling her back into the chair, restricting the violent struggle. Cold steel skimmed her cheeks, cupped her jaw, like a lover's caress. Pressing against soft lips, forcing them apart, slipping between teeth. A steel trap, and she had fallen into it headfirst. Lily fought against it with the same futility shown by prey held by a predator. Already dead but unaware of the fact. Her breath came in gasps, fast and desperate. Fast enough that it felt like suffocating. Straps yanked behind her head, tearing at hair, holding the contraption to her face. A gag.

*Force you to eat*, Will had said. She didn't know he meant this. Didn't expect it from them, despite the imprisonment. That had just been a blip, a



misunderstanding. She remembered the metallic taste of the water. The wrongness of it she wilfully ignored in her thirst. Drugged. Tricked. All of Leon's lessons gone to waste. She could almost see the wry shake of that auburn head, as if this only fulfilled all his low expectations. Proved what he always suspected about her.

"Please, please," she panted, forming the words with difficulty. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Not this. She couldn't stand this.

Felix moved into her line of vision, holding a long, thin tube topped by a funnel. He wore a wicked grin and a shiny black apron over his clothes. Protection against the by-products of force feeding. Blood and bile. Lily could already feel the latter rising, muffling the whimpers that wanted to break free.

He leant close to adjust the gag, and Lily smelt the heavy spice of his breath. The gag creaked, dragging against her teeth. Widening, scraping against gums until salt flooded taste-buds, liquid gathering at the back of an already constricted throat. Lily resisted. She tried to keep her teeth together with all her meagre strength. It was nothing against the slow winding power of the steel trap. Nothing against Felix's triumphant smile, the darkness that shifted behind those eyes. He was happy. Happy he was doing this to her.

"Felix..." Will cautioned. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

"Shut up. He's done this to himself."

Her jaw cracked, forced beyond its reach. The gag clicked and caught, leaving Lily wide open and vulnerable. Her mouth dried, tongue retreating away from teeth, swallowing convulsively. Felix peered into that wet cavern, sensing the swell of discomfort. He was eager to benefit from it, to extend the moment.

“I don’t think this is the right decision,” Will echoed her own panic. His words tumbled out, quick and unsure.

Felix ignored him.

A pause. A decision made.

“Stop,” Will said, uncanny command back in his voice. “It doesn’t have to be this way. You don’t have to do this.”

Felix seemed to listen, pulling back slightly, lips slackening. His focus turned away from her, Lily took a full breath, choking back the building scream.

“Lee will eat now. We aren’t doing this.” The seductive voice reached out and wove a tendril around her, too, and she found herself ignoring the pain in her jaw and neck. Nodding in agreement. “Let him go.”

Felix hesitated, cocking his head as if listening to a sound far away. And then he shook it, clearing blocked ears. He sneered at Will, violent intentions on his face. “*Don’t* ever do that, silver-tongue. Or I will kill you, no matter what Connor says, no matter our history.”

“There’s no going back after this, Felix! This is too far. Even for you.” Will said in his normal voice, unhappiness underlining every word.

“It’s not. You’ll thank me for this later. At least, you’ll remember this moment after he’s ripped us apart.” Felix sounded bleak. It was less a prediction than dire prophecy, a tolling truth to it that resonated. Clanged in jarring discord in Lily’s breast.

“Fine.” Lily heard Will’s retreat. The door creaked shut behind him.

“Now it’s just you and me.” Felix said, turning his gaze back on Lily. “He’s run off to find Connor, to cry out his story. Conveniently Connor isn’t here. No one

is coming for you, boy.”

He prowled around her. Content to take his time.

Lily realised her mistake. Of the three, Felix had been the least of her concerns. A flimsy cut-out threat. A caricature of his own intentions. Allocated the title of thug, in the face of Connor and Will's deeper machinations. What did Connor want, what power did Will wield? Her poor mind distracted by cheap tricks, designed to draw the eye and hold attention. But Felix wasn't the brawn. She had met brawn before, flanking Leon at public events. Sent out when brute force won over cunning; a rare occurrence.

She once saw a wolf mother, cornered in an alleyway by a pack of youths. Jeering and shouting, they pelted the creature with rocks but she didn't try and run. She stood firm; hackles up, teeth bared. Protecting the bundles of fur curled in the nest behind. Puppies. Valuable if caught young enough, retrained. The Decadents paid good money for a pet wolf to lounge by the fire and be admired by visitors, gemstones flashing on thick leather collars. Or the crueller denizens of the undercity moulded them into hunters to track down prey. Ripped apart bodies were blamed on wolves, never the men holding the leashes. The elder animals had no value. Already too accustomed to human ways to be fooled by kind hands and scraps of meat.

These boys saw their chance to make a handful of hogs at little cost. Mothers were the weakest, tired from endless weeks of suckling young. The easiest to pick off. The pups were a bonus to boys happy to destroy a creature without comeback or consequence. To murder a mother was no great moral crime, her death cries no sound to prevent sleep or haunt dreams.

Wolves lived at peace with the city inhabitants under other circumstances, happy to forage for discarded food in the rotting heaps lining the walkways. Often you would see a human pass a wolf with a friendly whistle, and receive a casual wag of the tail in reply. Only when threatened did each party turn on the other. Felix saw Lily as threat. Connor and Will laughably cast as helpless puppies in this charade. But it was all too serious to him.

Finally, Felix stopped pacing as Lily's fear grew heavy in her chest. The touch of rubber tube against her lips made blood thrum in helpless panic, throat convulsing. *No, no, no*, she thought. This couldn't be happening. Not really. She willed the power to rise, imagined slamming it into Felix's vulnerable skin. Sending him flying back across the room, away from her. But it didn't come. The rubber slid smoothly against her tongue, and she gagged.

He met her eyes, gloatingly. *Don't do it*, she tried to communicate, *you don't want to do this. This isn't the way*. His triumph drained into uncertainty, a question forming in the hazel depths. The rubber halted just shy of her throat, a tremor running down its length.

Was that her? Did she do that?

*Take a step back*, she tested. Felix stumbled away, mouth dropping open. A dark satisfaction gripped her; a sibilant whisper that said *good*. Then, *do more. Press harder*.

The door burst open.

"Stop," Connor commanded. A second too late for all of them.

## Chapter 12

Connor took a single breath to take in the scene before him; Lily strapped to the chair, mouth levered open, Felix pale-faced and six feet away, feeding apparatus held between limp fingers. Understanding was slow to dawn on his face. The unspeakable had already been prevented. A rescue not reliant on his authority.

“What’s going on?” He asked in a low, even voice. A grasp for command.

“He – he –” Felix stumbled back another step. “Malediction.”

Connor’s gaze cut to Lily. Three strides narrowed the space between them, and fear splintered inside her, shooting through each extremity with electric haste. Her fingers curled in impotent fists. The whispering dark shifted, sinking, evading. Silenced. She jerked away from his hands, pressing back against the headrest. But he was not reaching for her. The gag clicked and released. He leant in, hot skin brushing against hers as deft efficiency loosened straps binding her body. After the first touch, he avoided all contact.

Lily could see the muscles feathering across a rigid jaw and slender neck hairs, standing to attention. As if caught by a chill even though the room was close and still. A cologne, bitter against her tongue, emanated from his pulse point. Sprayed with the diligence of a fop about town. A misplaced puzzle piece, not fitting with the rest.

He pulled back slightly, shuttered eyes locking with her own. They betrayed no concern, no ire. Lily could read nothing at all beyond the sun-skimmed surface. The gag eased, and Connor stepped away, not dropping his hypnotic gaze. More than ever, Lily felt as though she was on display, staked across an examination table like some poor girl selling herself to science. Experiments, they called them,

entirely safe. Safe, that was, for the physician performing the act. Safe in the assumption no one would miss another hungry mouth, another begging bowl. Lily ripped down poster after poster advertising for subjects, to the scorn of her fellows. *They'll sell themselves in a different way, what does it matter?* Connor was looking for where to cut. Searching for a weak point to press the blade against, to draw blood. The tender curve of wrist, the steady pulse of the jugular? Or would he choose the direct path, the honest one, and go for the heart?

In turn, she let herself look. At the delineated muscle easily seen beneath the thin white undershirt, left uncovered by any jacket or respectable covering. All olive skin and the darker, delicate circle of his nipple. The homespun brown breeches, two top buttons undone. Boots haphazardly laced. Signs of distress that left his face unmarked. What state had Will found him in? What panic had drawn him here dressed thus?

A flush spread across her chest and neck; his eyes flickered.

A strangled inhale broke the accord; their attention turned on Felix, who was now standing closer to the door. He blanched further under Lily's regard. Bloodless lips struggled to form speech.

"Why would you let him go?" The accusation snaked out towards Connor, impact lessened by an audible tremor.

"Why did you tie him up?" He countered, shifting slightly so his shoulders blocked Lily from Felix's line of sight. Protectively. She opened her mouth to speak, but a groan came out instead; she rotated her aching jaw. A dull throb started at the base of her skull. Connor tensed infinitesimally.

"You don't understand, he's a —"

“No, you don’t understand.” Connor burst out, raking a hand through his hair. “Gods damn it, I was only gone for a handful of days. I told you – *ordered* you – to watch him. Not torture him. Not strap him to a chair and force a tube down his throat. What were you thinking?”

It was the first time Lily had seen him shaken from the seemingly perpetual state of calm, and by new horror dawning on Felix’s face, the eruption was out of character. His fear no longer centred on her unspoken threat, but the more immediate one before him: Connor. His breath hissed out from between gritted teeth, and hands clenched into bony protuberances of knuckle and rage. A male provoked, rage rising from his skin. The raw power of it twisted Lily’s stomach. She averted her eyes.

“Connor.” Felix said, voice suddenly quiet and smooth. Placating. “You need to...”

“I don’t need to do anything. You need to explain. Now.”

“He’s a Maledict. He influenced me.”

Connor stared at him. Crossed his arms. His nails cut deep into biceps, leaving the surrounding skin white.

“And?” He said, when it was clear Felix had nothing else to say.

“And perhaps we should discuss this later.” Felix replied, still careful.

The ensuing silence crackled with energy that writhed and snapped between the two men. Each seemed unwilling to admit defeat or did Felix simply fear turning his back? Connor was wound as tight and motionless as a predator about to pounce. The rage overpowered the man, seeking an outlet. A release. Lily had seen that look before. It existed in every moment of raised fist threat. It

was the pause before the blow. Connor was fighting back, fighting for control.

“Get out.”

Felix obeyed without a second's hesitation, leaving Lily alone with her protector. Although that protection currently wasn't particularly comforting; she kept her eyes on Connor's fists as she finished the work he started, easing wrists and ankles from constraints. Agonizing sensation shot through the numbed limbs, and she swore quietly, chafing the skin to quicken the process.

“Are you okay?” The words were stilted and formal. He didn't look at her.

“Are *you* okay?” Lily rose, unwilling to remain at a disadvantage, and stepped around the chair, positioning it between them. “Because it should be blatantly clear that I am not.”

“No. I don't think I am, either.” He said quietly, hands loosening from fists. They were shaking. Lily's fingers twitched, as she was caught by the sudden instinct to cross the space between them and feel the press of skin against skin. To steady him. Ease whatever power surged within. But she couldn't. Embracing someone else's vulnerability wasn't in her character. She remained behind the chair. Listened to the calming breaths, watched the rise and fall of his shoulders. Finally, he turned. His face fell in composed lines once again, control returned.

“What was that?” No empathy leaked into her tone; she remained cool, dispassionate. It was better this way, she told herself, even as she caught the fleeting hurt in Connor's expression. He wasn't trustworthy; none of them were. He may claim not to be party to the force-feeding, but for all she knew that was a lie. A complicated plot, to win her confidence and loosen her tongue. He locked her up, she reminded herself. He was responsible for those long days, pacing



between white walls.

“That was Felix taking initiative. It won’t happen again.”

“Great.” She raised her brows slightly. “That’s exactly what I was asking.”

“As for the rest –” He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “I didn’t tell you everything about the gifts, and for that I’m sorry. If what Felix says is true, you’re more important than I thought.”

“I’m sure Felix will be pleased to hear my worth has suddenly increased.”

“I’m entirely sure Felix doesn’t have a say in the matter,” was his calm reply. “Come on. We have a meeting to get to.”

He moved towards the door with the assumption that she would fall in behind him. Obedient. Silent. But she was no longer the person who fell into line. Leon taught her the flaws of that particular approach.

“A meeting with who?”

“Our leader, of course.” He didn’t look back.

“I thought you were the leader. Will and Felix sure do bow and scrape around you.” The same way the Rabbits used to flinch every time Leon raised his voice.

“You’re mistaken.” She received a slow, derisive look over his shoulder. “You seemed desperate to discover our every secret and now you’re stalling. Are you coming or aren’t you? You’re welcome to return to your room.”

He left without saying another word.

Lily admired self-confidence, and spent her early years in the White Rabbit gang trying to emulate the assurance the older boys carried themselves with. Broad shoulders, long swaggering strides. Direct eye contact, deep and controlled

modulation of tone. A set to the mouth, a way of moving the hands. She faked it until it felt like second nature, but needling words and mockery still rose defensively when challenged. Evasions and smokescreens. She had thought Connor immune, possessing that innate knowledge of his worth. Tall, strong, gifted. Any man would consider himself untouchable.

Yet Felix had shaken him, revealing the tenuous construction of that person. Underneath lay someone very different. Lily wanted to see the face of that monster. Measure it against others she had known. See the extent, know the man.

As she hurried to catch up to him, she decided this would be the last time she would follow him. Next time, he'd be following her.



The main room was in disarray. The secrets, so well-hidden the first-time Lily had set foot in it, were now in open view for her observation. Books had been pulled from shelves and lay discarded on table and chair, erratic piles threatening collapse. Dirtied mugs and plates littered every available surface. A musty smell hung in the air that spoke of long nights, of warm bodies in frustrated movement. Only the broad expanse of table was clear of clutter, a map spread across its spotless length. Heavy, creamy paper marked in thick ink lines. Lily would wager that it felt smooth to the touch, like silk against her callouses. The kind you didn't find in the undercity. The literate few had to make do with coarse sheets that made ink bleed into the uneven crevices.

From this distance, she could only read the title, writ across the top of the

paper in graceful arcs. Acedia. She itched to move closer, pour over the lines to make sense of the sprawling expanse of her home. Never before had she seen the full extent of the city. It was impossible to comprehend its size when you were lost in its streets, often confined to the same paths and the same areas day after day. But Connor stopped short, and she followed his lead, eyes moving from the temptation posed by the map to the two women already occupying the space around the table. One sat in quiet propriety, back straight, hands folded in her lap. Dark hair was pulled back from a pointed, inquisitive face. Large brown eyes watched them carefully, revealing nothing. She received Lily's gaze without any outward reaction, focusing on Connor. A small smile curved her mouth as he bowed to her. A sweeping, courtly gesture not belonging to this place with its simple floorboards and cheap paint.

The other stood over the map, in the pose Lily longed to take. She was older than the first, the extra years cutting severe lines around the curve of lip and eye. She didn't look up when they entered, round body held with single-minded concentration as she studied the city layout. Both women wore simple and ill-fitting homespun, figures obscured. There was nothing they could do about their unblemished complexions, Lily supposed, but it was unlikely anyone would have a reason to look closer and mark this difference. Unchipped nails and clean hair were giveaways that would go unremarked upon by any but the most astute.

"Connor, come here." The older woman clicked her fingers. There was no bow for her, and Lily slid a speculative glance towards the girl. Something inspired that extra deference. Was it the symmetrical set of her face, her youth, the gentle swell of breast? She shifted, abruptly aware of the bindings constricting her chest.

They couldn't be far apart in age, but the gap in appearance was insurmountable.

Connor cleared his throat. "Mathilde."

"What?" She snapped, looking away from the map. "Oh. I thought we were still considering what to do about him."

"Felix decided to take matters into his own hands." Connor said.

"What matters?"

"Lee thought to protest his imprisonment with a hunger strike and..." He hesitated, glancing at the girl. Mathilde scowled.

"Spit it out."

"Felix decided to force feed him." Lily hadn't noticed Will's presence until his interjection; she contained her surprise, swivelling to take in his position. Slouched in the corner, arms firmly crossed, there was no apology in the direct look he gave her. Clearly, he thought fetching Connor had been enough.

A gasp greeted his words; the girl's brown eyes lost their cultivated blankness, filling with compassion. Easily shaken, Lily thought with unexpected triumph. "But he's just a boy!"

"Alice, quiet." Mathilde said. "Why would he think something like that would be acceptable to me?"

"I doubt he was thinking at all," Connor said. "You know his way."

"Impetuous." Her tone made it clear what she thought of hot-headed behaviour.

"And cruel." Alice added, earning herself a glare from the older woman and an apologetic look from Connor.

"Perhaps Alice would like to leave the room?" This was directed at Mathilde,

but Alice replied.

“No, Alice would not.” She said, a measure of force entering her voice. Lily’s estimation of her rose. Standing up to Connor was not something a normal girl would attempt. But perhaps her attendance here was proof enough that Alice wasn’t normal.

“Alice –” Connor started. Clearly, he had a conversation in mind not deemed appropriate for delicate female ears.

“Connor –” She replied, in a sing-song mockery of his own strict tone.

“Maybe you could stop squabbling and explain to me what’s going on.” Lily interrupted impatiently. “Or even just apologise for incarcerating me without cause?”

“We had to decide what to do with you.” Mathilde said, resting a hand on her hip as she regarded Lily. Her expression suggested that she was a thoroughly unwanted problem, sparking Lily’s already poorly controlled temper.

“Don’t you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?” Her voice rose. “I’m not a thing that belongs to you. You don’t get to decide what to do with me. I decide.”

Mathilde just looked at her for a second, pity warring with scorn for dominance. “That’s not the way the world works, boy. Let me explain what will happen if you don’t do what I say. I go home to my husband, and tell him I was visiting one of the tea-houses when a boy of your exact description accosted me. That description is then circulated to every single den in the undercity. Lord Spencer will offer a substantial reward, dead or alive. No one will harbour you. All will hunt you. So yes, I do get to decide what to do with you.”

“That’s – that’s –” Lily fumbled for words.

“Sickening? Unfair?” Mathilde cocked her head, a smile forming. “I agree. And that’s why we’re all here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Quite simply, we’re trying to bring down the Decadents. To topple their world and replace it with our own.”

Lily stared at her, trying to detect any traces of insincerity. But Mathilde’s gaze was direct. Lacking in deceit or mockery. The Decadents ruled the city. Not through force but silent threat. Through stories, passed from mother to child, from boy to boy in whispered corners. Of the old days, when they made a spectacle of their power through public executions. A word or two from the strongest would have victims setting their own funeral pyres alight, standing silent as they burnt alive. Control asserted, they retreated to savour their delights, leaving the population in peace as long as tributes continued to flow upwards. Satisfied to let their citizens manage their own affairs while they fed their gluttonous appetites.

Still, people vanished. It didn’t pay to be outspoken.

“You’re going to do *what?*”

### Chapter 13

Lily sat heavily on the first available chair. Her breath escaped in a hissing exhale as she tried to process this new information. The only thing Leon had ever fought for was influence; influence equal to the Decadents. He wanted to supplant them, to sit on their tyrannical thrones. A hazy dream, unfulfilled, unfulfillable. She had understood it – had felt the same longing, peering through gilt windows into gilt lives. Watching the girls spin in satin dresses. Witnessing the unfeigned nonchalance of the men, clad in jackets that had never known a wrinkle, untouched by street muck. Even the mercers lived unattainable lives in their severe grey-stone buildings, mere miles from the festering stink of the undercity. Counting their intake, balancing neat tables. Calculating the appropriate rates of pay for their workers. The same workers who coughed out their lungs, clogged by the smoke and fibres of the factories. The same workers who hid bloody handkerchiefs from supervisors quick to dismiss at any sign of sickness.

Leon wanted to wield the Decadent power. But this woman – she wanted to dismantle it. Lily looked around the room, searching for some hesitation; averted eyes, a shaking hand, a pale countenance. But all four gazes watched her unwaveringly.

“You want to overthrow the Decadents,” Lily said into the quiet, looking down at her scuffed boots. “And how do you plan to do such a thing?”

“By destroying them,” came the cool reply from Mathilde. “You destroy the hive and the colony scatters.”

“Excuse me?”

Mathilde paused, a low laugh breaking free from her rigid control.

“Apologies. A charming agricultural metaphor that the boys have taught me. Bees, the insects that make honey, live in hives ruled over by a queen and powered by thousands of worker-drones. If the queen dies, the drones lose the will to work; destroy the hive and their home is gone. The colony will never be the same. We only need to weaken the Decadents, remove certain key figures, and they won’t remain standing.”

“But they’re all gifted,” Lily objected.

“Gifted but *decadent*. Hedonistic,” Mathilde pushed away from the table and approached her. A smile curved her mouth, an expression devoid of friendly feeling. Hers was a soft, middle-aged face – the elasticity of youth gone, and the sag of age left in its place. Yet, still it managed to be severe. The slant of brows, the fierce glow in otherwise nondescript brown eyes. The gently rounded chin clashed with the firm set of the mouth. Alertness shone from every line. She was a woman awake. “Then you know how lords spend their time. Their thoughts are absorbed in frivolity. Vanity and gluttony are rife. They think of nothing but themselves. Untrained power is not power at all.”

Lily’s brows knit together. There was something off about the words; something that didn’t quite fit with her impression of Lord Michael and his household. She remembered the uncanny caress in her escape, the undeniable touch of a Maledict mind. Yet it hadn’t felt malevolent. It hadn’t stopped her flight. Lord Michael, if it had been he, let her go.

“The majority care nothing for the politics of controlling Acedia. They squander everything on pleasure. If we pick off a few, I’m sure the rest will ...” Mathilde trailed off, making a dismissive gesture.



“We’re sure that there won’t be much resistance,” a soft voice interjected, and Lily flicked a glance at Alice. The girl had risen from her seat, eyes bright with conviction. “Change is needed – they’ll have to see that.”

Lily stared at Alice until a blush rose in porcelain cheeks. And then she laughed; a harsh, mocking caw. The sound went on and on, becoming hard-edged with hysteria. She clung to the chair arms, white-knuckled, as it spasmed through her.

“Cut it out!” Mathilde snapped, and the crack of skin against skin cut the laughter short. For a moment, Lily didn’t realise she had been struck; the sting came in the aftermath, a beat too late. She raised a hand to her cheek. It felt hot and tender. She blinked. Took a breath. Another. And then her gaze slid upwards. She glared at Mathilde from behind dark lashes.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she snarled and the beast rose in her chest, snarling with her. Threads of power infused the words with added weight. Hatred gathered at the back of her throat, black and thick and viscous. She felt venomous. “You have *no right*.”

Mathilde took a step backwards, and Lily heard a gasp. “*Those eyes*,” Alice whispered, and the horror was unmistakable.

“You were hysterical,” Mathilde said, but her confidence fled in the face of Lily’s ice-chip stare; as cold and sharp as a blade held to a trembling throat.

“Never again,” Lily repeated, rising to her feet. A warmth flared at her thigh, growing hotter and hotter. Goaded an anger that flared bright and longed to burn. No one had struck her in a long time. She had promised herself that no one would again. The bright sunburst agony as teeth pierced vulnerable lip, head whipping

back with the force of it; a familiar sensation. *One day, they'll respect you*, Leon told her. He fetched ointment for the swelling black eye but never interfered in gang politics. *You must prove yourself*, he said, before sharing ale and laughter with the same boys that beat her.

“Don’t touch me.”

And the heat became unbearable, a brand through the thick material of her breeches. Lily screamed, dropping to her knees. She clutched at the source, trying to pull the opal free. It felt melded to her; skin becoming waxen, malleable, as stone sank into flesh. Another scream bubbled in her throat and she bit down on her tongue, caught in scrambling panic.

“It’s fine. Hold still,” a small hand pulled hers away; there was a rip, as material gave out. The burning stone torn free; a swift inhale, a clatter as it flew across the room. Lily groaned, falling sideways onto floorboards, clutching at the fire emanating from her leg. A palm smoothed over her hair, a single stroke.

“Alice, gods.” A scuffle; Lily inched her eyelids wide enough to see that Connor had cradled one of Alice’s hands in his, cheeks flushed. “Will, get the medical kit.”

Alice stood perfectly still under his ministrations, chin tilted away. She was staring at the wall over his shoulder. Her voice, when it came, was low and sure. Perfectly enunciated. “Connor, Lee is more hurt than I. Please, see to him first.”

“He can wait,” Connor disagreed.

“No,” she said quietly, sliding her hand out of his grasp. Lily noticed the slight wince as she closed her fingers around the injured palm. It was there only for a moment, but Lily had been watching carefully. “He needs your help.”

“Fine,” Connor turned hot eyes on Lily. “Can you sit up?”

She glared at him helplessly, unable to form the words. After a moment, he snorted and pulled her into a seated position, back resting against the sturdy weight of her abandoned chair. Despite a grimly set mouth, his grip was gentle. He assessed her stability before letting go. Pulling apart the ripped material, he sucked in a breath. Lily spared her wound a glance, and grimaced. A perfectly round patch of thigh already swelled with white-headed blisters, the surrounding skin mottled red. A narrow slash cut through the circle; Alice hadn't been careful with the knife used. Lily swallowed back the lump in her throat.

It looked like a domestic brand.

“Will!” Connor shouted, an edge to his voice.

“Here,” Will rushed back into the room. Connor snatched the proffered box from him, cursing quietly.

“I'm fine,” Lily pulled back, discomfort prickling at the feel of his large hand on her leg. The pressure was light but unquestionable. Connor had a way of making his presence known. But he let her retreat and take the kit.

“You're self-reliant,” he said, in a tone that revealed no hint whether it was a compliment or insult. He watched silently as she spread ointment over the burn, efficiently covering it with a pad and wrapping a bandage twice around it. As she tied the knot, she couldn't contain the flinch.

“It's been necessary,” she replied tersely. “Why don't you see to your lady?”

“Oh, I'm not his lady,” Alice said calmly over Connor's shoulder, coming to sit next to Lily. A light, summery scent clung to her skin. She smelt clean. “Would you do my hand too?”

“Do it yourself,” Lily shoved the box at her.

“Okay,” she said easily, unbothered by Lily’s brusque manner.

“I can help,” Connor offered, voice gruff, but Alice waved him away as she dug through the contents of the kit.

“If Lee can do it himself, so can I,” she insisted.

“Lee is…”

“Lee is what?” The question was lightly said, but her brown eyes flashed.

Connor noticed. “Fine. Do it yourself.”

“Thank you,” Alice accepted victory with a graceful dip of her head, and a small smile. Lily suspected she was the only one who saw the latter. It was devious and didn’t fit with the demure sweep of her downturned lashes.

“Where did you get this?” Mathilde’s voice sounded brittle, poised to break. Her face, bleached of colour, was downturned towards the stone she held between thumb and forefinger. Away from her body, as if it would bite. “This is a blood opal.”

“Is it? I thought it was just a rock.” Lily could almost see the fissures in the woman’s composure. Despite the forced levity of her words, she scrambled to her feet, wound protesting at the weight. Connor stiffened behind her, his agitation changing the air.

“*This is not funny,*” Mathilde hissed, something wild and blind in the look she levelled in Lily’s direction. She crossed the room in three quick strides, pressing the stone into Lily’s hand. Upon contact with her skin, red veins appeared in its surface. The pulse of its energy embraced her. She sighed, a strange sense of relief flooding through muscles.

“It’s bonded to you,” Mathilde shook her head, backing away. “It’s wrapped

itself into your power.”

“Bonded to me?” Lily raised her brows, a smile starting. “It’s a rock. A magical rock, sure. But how could it be bonded with me?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Connor came to her side, looking down at the stone. Lily’s heart leapt uncomfortably at his proximity, closing her fingers over the opal to block his view. Her smile fell away as she considered his question.

“I can,” she admitted, suppressing a shudder.

“We can’t use him now.” Mathilde turned her back on them both. “Send him away.”

Despite the imprisonment, despite Felix’s actions, Lily’s stomach lurched at this pronouncement. She glanced at Connor, and he laid a hand on her arm. To hold her back or to comfort, she wasn’t sure. “Mathilde, I have to tell you —” He started.

“No. He can’t stay.”

Connor hesitated, brows drawn low as he considered the corseted lines of Mathilde’s back. Her shoulders strained the fabric in uncharacteristic collapse.

“Come on,” he muttered finally, his grip on Lily’s arm changing from supportive to controlling. It guided her steps, pulling her along as they both hurried from the room. A final glance back showed Alice hurrying to her mother’s side, pulling her into an embrace.



The swell of Connor's forward momentum carried Lily forward, that force towing her as much as the pressure he asserted on her arm. She succumbed to it, accepting, as her brain struggled to process the last few minutes. Her fingers clutched the opal, a kind of undefined desperation stiffening joints until they felt like stone. *No one will take it from me.* The thought turned over and over, tinged with an unyielding insistence. She couldn't be sure it was born of her own mind, but the alternative was unspeakable.

"What's happening to me?" Lily blurted out, and Connor stopped dead, turning. She collided with his chest, breath expelling with a shocked whoosh. She stepped back immediately, ignoring the undefinable *zing* that shot across her chest.

"Nothing's happening." His eyes were shuttered.

"So, what? You're kicking me out?"

"No." His other hand came up, and he gripped both her shoulders. Lily prepared herself for a shake, shrinking slightly, but all he did was hold her. Stare into her face, standing a fraction too close. Her heart thumped uncomfortably, and she took a breath, lungs filling with his scent. It was an unwanted intimacy. "You're going to have to trust me, Lee."

"You've not given me a reason to, so far."

"No, I haven't," he admitted with a thread of regret. "But you'll have to anyway. You're alone, you need me. And I need you."

*I need you.* Leon said the same once. *I need you to do something for me.*

She didn't contradict Connor's assumption. "Why do you need me?"

"You're a thief with allegiances to the strongest gang in the undercity."

“No,” she breathed, realisation clawing its way from her stomach and up her throat. She felt her face turning to stone.

He ignored her denial. “I need you to go to them. Mend your bridges – do anything, say anything. Grovel. We need them to trust you, because I want to know how closely the White Rabbits are tied to the Decadents.”

“The Rabbits hate the Decadents,” she said numbly. She didn’t mention that the Rabbits hated her.

“Trenchers never interfere with the Rabbits; watchdogs rarely pursue them. Decadents never step in when Mercer households are robbed, even if their own investments are damaged. There is a reason for that.” He watched her with a careful, unwavering focus. “I think you know the reason, and you know it’s wrapped up in deals that Leon Hennessey made before his death. I need you to find out exactly what he promised them, what he bargained for.”

“They won’t welcome me back.”

“Make them. We need that information.”

“*You* need that information. What do I get?”

“A home. An income to support your father. A safe place to sleep.” His answer was devastating in its simplicity. “The Rabbits won’t ever trust you. But we will.”

“Mathilde doesn’t want me here. Neither do Felix and Will.”

“They’re a close-knit pair, have been since childhood.” Lily noticed he didn’t include himself in that statement. She frowned. “They’re slow to warm to strangers because of their upbringing, especially Felix. He defends us viciously, usually at a cost to himself. But if you prove yourself – your honour, that you belong – he’ll

protect you too.”

When was the last time she truly belonged? She swallowed down the yearning, rolling her lips against her teeth. “And Mathilde?”

“With two Maledicts on our side, we don’t need her help.” The words were cold and clear and unbending. A smile spread across his face, revealing crooked canines. A cruel expression, but one she trusted more than anything that had come before. It decided her. She understood deceit and the twisted paths a liar walked. The motives of a liar were simple: self-preservation. Self-interest. No unpredictable ideas of honour there.

“What should I do?”



Lily felt Connor’s eyes on her back as she walked away. The risk he’d taken, confiding in her – she shook her head in disgust. A foolish move like that would win you a knife in the back quicker than a staunch ally. At least in Acedia. Maybe whatever world he came from, trust was given freely. Received in return. But she was a Rabbit, raised on lies and fed with trickery. A nasty, cutthroat creature. More like whatever dangerous beast Mathilde saw than whatever Connor did.

He had been wrong. So very, very wrong. The Decadents didn’t know about her existence. They hadn’t ripped apart her home and written that message on the wall. *I see you*. An elaborate, self-indulgent threat. Arrogance curving every word. There was only one person who would write that and expect her to understand. To follow the thread and find him.



As soon as Lily was out of Connor's sight, she turned from her path. The one he expected. There was somewhere else she needed to be.

## Chapter 14

Lily paced the graveyard, boots sinking into the ground. Layers upon layers of bones lay beneath irreverent feet; she could imagine their crunch all too easily. Restless fingers traced tops of headstones, cataloguing rough dips and rises in their surface. Every breath stung at her throat, bringing with it the smell of damp earth and wet leaves. Overgrown greenery waved in a slight wind; enough for Lily to draw her jacket close, shoulders hunching. Light rain splattered against her cheek; she shot a look upwards, at the impenetrable cloud cover, cursing. The last thing she wanted was a dousing this evening.

A stick cracked behind her, and she spun. Nothing moved, and Lily sighed. No one had followed her from East Hunt. She made sure of it, doubling back several times on the way here. Disappointment sat heavy in her gut; disappointment in Connor. The unfurling, tentative hope – crushed. Trust was gained, and she had done nothing to gain his. He just expected her to be honest and liars rarely were. *What can I do*, she asked, and Connor took her at face value. She snorted. No, he hadn't followed her. He hadn't been worthy of that hope. Of the swirling what if situations she conjured. Death's Quarter just made her jumpy, and always had. This place made her skin crawl. Set back from the main road, the cemetery had reached its allocation decades before. No one came here anymore. Not to mourn.

Lily crouched by a headstone, pulling away the creeping moss that obscured the epitaph. *Cecily, beloved wife and mother*, it read, 1709-1726. Below it, a single added line in plain script. *Unnamed boy, 1726*. The girl had been a scant year older than her; old enough to be beloved. A wife. Mother. Buried in

black dirt, never to take another gasping breath. Lily knew how women died in childbirth. Complications were frequent, and physicians chose to cut the mother to get at the babe. A bloodied, gaping abdomen; greedy hands reaching for a squalling thing. The father's prize.

"I'm sorry, Cecily," she whispered into the gloom, standing. That could have been her life. Her death. She was seventeen now, a grown woman in the law's eyes. Old enough to be enrolled in the marriage mart. Employers would dismiss any woman of age, her childhood work now at an end. The only person who could employ her was a husband. Parents were faced with one choice; give their daughter to the mart and receive a pay-packet in return or feed a useless body. Few families had the funds to choose anything other than the mart. Girls would be rated; wife material or domestic. Comely or not. Biddable or not. Lily had seen the stage, the lines of girls. Some wept. All searched the crowd for a saviour. They rarely found one.

Her feet forced her into anxious movement, as she followed the path around the corner of the church. The central point in the snaking pattern of graves, the structure bowed with age. The remaining turret had begun to crumble; the other collapsed long since, stone hidden under untamed grass. Lily knew people used to worship in the building, hands clasped in prayer. The ancient equivalent of her childhood wishes, eyes screwed shut. First longing for her mother's return, and then for a filling meal. The Decadents put an end to formal worship, and these places were forgotten by all but the dead.

"Looking for me?" The languorous voice was a caress, and Lily closed her eyes against its influence. The memory of its power had faded, yet here it was

unchanged. Her naïve hope that she had broken free, splintered beyond repair. She took a breath and turned.

The tawny eyes were the same; clear and direct, shaded by severe brows. The high forehead, the acute angles of cheekbone and jaw. The mouth, full-lipped, ready to sneer or smile. But the sweep of russet hair was longer, brushing his collar, and even in the gloom she could see the greasy shine. The hooked nose, pronounced against hollows where flesh used to reside. The open collared shirt showed clavicles in painful detail, and there was no disguising the way his clothes hung from his shoulders.

“Leon,” she breathed, throwing herself at him. Stale sweat and the undertone of warm male overwhelmed the moist smell of cemetery decay.

He hooked an arm around her back, returning the embrace, face dropping into the crook of her neck and shoulder. Ragged breaths blew against the skin there. The chills that raced down her arms had nothing to do with the cold.

“Missed me?” And this time his voice cracked, revealing the secrets beneath. Lily huffed a laugh against his jacket, pushing away. He tightened his grip slightly before letting go.

“Where have you been?” She said, letting frustration thread into the question. “You disappeared and left me here, completely in the dark. I didn’t know what to think. I still don’t.”

“Lee –”

“It’s been *months*.” His eyes had been haunted, as he led her away from the Warren that night. The garish uniform of his self-proclaimed office, abandoned in favour for black. The boy-king of Acedia, fleeing his throne. Lily found herself

asking to go with him, heart heavy instead of buoyant. *Leon can't leave*, her mind repeated over and over again. Even after he vanished, footfalls fading to nothing.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it, Leon. They turned against me." She dragged herself back to the Warren hours afterwards, a violent cut slashing through her hairline. Self-inflicted. The blood dripped down over her lashes, so each blink was weighted and sticky. *A rival gang, she gasped, I didn't recognise them. Leon, they took Leon.*

"Peter turned against you," he corrected flatly.

"That's as much your fault as his, so don't use that tone." Lily pressed a hand over her eyes, taking a deep breath. "He kicked me out."

"Out?"

"I broke into a Decadent house. He goaded me."

"That's ... bad." But there was none of the condemnation she expected in his voice. "I never liked him."

"Because you liked me so much?" She rolled her eyes. "And I stole a blood opal."

"That's worse." He paused. "I always liked you. It just took me a little while to remember it."

Her laugh was bitter. "You have some way of showing it. Why didn't you tell me you had Decadent power?"

There was a slight hesitation before his reply. The only sign the question shook him. "It wasn't necessary. And I'm not sure it's necessary to discuss now."

"It is necessary. Because I have the same power." At his silence, she

pressed on. "I need answers, Leon. I can't unravel all the lies around me, I can't keep my own straight. There's this group, three boys. And a woman, a Decadent wife. And ... *you never told me.*"

He opened his mouth, and closed it again. Groaned. "Do you still have the opal?"

"Is that all you care about?" She cried. "Is that it? What, could you use it? Will you take it from me like you took the Rabbits?"

"You never had the Rabbits." The coolness in his voice only stoked her fire.

She ripped the opal from her pocket and threw it in the mud at his feet. "There, have it. I'm sorry it took me so long to reply to your damn cryptic message. It's your style, I know, to rip apart everything you find, but you could have avoided vandalising my father's home."

*I see you.* How typical of Leon. How her heart had jumped at the words. She would know his writing anywhere; precise, plain. The rain began to fall harder, soaking already damp hair. She relished the added obscurity, to hide the welling hurt glistening in her eyes.

The opal lay untouched in the mud, as Leon searched Lily's face. She turned away, unwilling to let him find an opening to use against her. His next words were soft. Careful. "How did you find out?"

"How do you *imagine?*"

"Badly, then. It often is for new Adroits." He accepted the information without reservation. It pricked suspicion to life inside her chest. Leon always questioned. Always tried to prove a fact wrong before accepting its truth. "Unusual, though, isn't it?"

“Unusual?” She narrowed her eyes.

“For a girl. It’ll cause quite an uproar if any of those hoity Decadent lords find out.”

She stilled, teeth grinding together until her jaw felt as firm and unbending as a knife blade. The boy king of Acedia’s slums was always plotting, always planning. She could almost see the *tick-tick-tick* of the cogs as his brain turned this new information over and over, trying to find an advantage. Two gifted grafters, one a girl. Leon would be wondering how to twist it to his agenda. Lily stepped back. Grasping at distance.

“I was thoughtless and cruel, I know. But I need you now.” Leon stooped and picked up the opal, holding it out to her. A peace offering. She tamped down the urge to snatch it.

“Yes, and so does everyone else it seems!” Lily cried. “Why now? Is it because you were still following me? Did you know before I came here, did you know about this thing inside me?”

“No!” A pause. “Who else needs you?”

She ignored the question. “This is what you abandoned me to, Leon. It’s been three months. I can’t do this anymore. You said trust me and I tried. I tried so damn hard.”

“Lily.” He reached out beseechingly, and she recoiled, boots slipping in saturated grass. The weather matched her mood, a torrent of rain and regret.

“Just tell me, truthfully, what can you do? Why did strangers have to tell me of your gifts?” The wind snatched at her words, threatening to blow them into nothing.

“What strangers?” He probed, a muscle ticking in his jaw. Slick hair dripped over his forehead, a feeble mimicry of the carefully dignified Leon she knew. Dishevelment didn’t suit him. How did everyone miss it? Always more Decadent than grafter.

“For once, you’ll have to trust me.” She countered with an insincere smile.

“I didn’t tell you because you’d doubt me,” he said simply. “I know your distrustful little mind. Always turning things over, looking for the cracks. In stories, in people.”

“And?”

“And I’ve never told anyone before. Confiding in others isn’t something I’m used to. Even with you, it didn’t occur to me. Not once. I was wrong. I should have told you.” This time when he reached for her, Lily let him. Fingers twined together in casual affection. He squeezed, and a bolt of warmth streaked across her palm. With his free hand, he wiped away a water droplet clinging to her cheek. “It’s not raining anymore, Lily.”

“No,” she agreed curtly. The only other alternative; breathlessness. Leon had derailed her anger and now only the ache of it remained. The dull reminder of hurt.

“What other proof do you want?”

Realisation was slow to come. She broke his gaze and looked out over the cemetery. Water still fell thick and fast, greenery bending under the weight of it. She blinked. Looked up, at the rain cascading from the skies above. About a foot from their heads it simply stopped. Held back by an invisible dome.

What other proof did she need that her world had imploded? The Rabbits



casting her out. Leon, back from the dead. Gifted, like the boys who had imprisoned her. Gifted, with the same pulsing power that roared through her blood, pounded for release.

“I want you to show me,” she said slowly, an idea forming. “I want you to show me everything.”

“What do you mean?”

“What have you been doing these last months? Why did you leave? I need to know.”

“How can I show you?”

“You control the elements, Leon.” A smile spread across Lily’s mouth, slick and wide and greedy. “I control people’s minds.”

He took a beat to process this information, eyes flickering with unreadable emotion. “I don’t have anything to hide. Do it.”

And because she had no idea exactly how to do it, Lily simply pressed her palms against his cheeks, absorbing the warmth. Focussing on that lock-box mind that had been shuttered against her for so long. She could feel her magic – her *oistros* – flicker. Her beast woke with a slow stretch, licking its lips in greedy anticipation.

*Let me in, she whispered, show me.*



The darkness moved like an ink spill, sluggish and impenetrable. Slow to obey her will. Hissing voices emerged from the gloom, echoes of remembered voices,

forgotten people. All telling her to leave. She imagined herself a body; a spectral copy that stood before the darkness, hands upraised. Willing whatever power she had to work. There was no finesse to it. Lily didn't know the nuances of her gift, the fine prick of needlework against a canvas. A gently wrought spell. The sly voice easily mistaken for free will. Leon was prepared. Braced. A wall perhaps partially aimed at her, partially from habit. He knew how Maledicts operated. But she had to know. He had to let her in. The tangled lies wound around her limbs, jerking this way and that. Tying her to one spot. Who to trust, who to tell. She couldn't do it anymore. It had to stop.

Her mind was the hammer; his, the shattering glass. She pictured it; the downwards arch, the reverberating blow.

Leon flinched under the mental assault but Lily held on. Took a step closer until she could feel the warm curl of body heat. He exhaled, and there was no need for a second strike. The gloom cleared. In its place was a memory.



Peter flushed darkly, as he glared across the table. His shirt was open at the collar, breeches stained, kingly airs absent. He was once again just a guttersnipe, a grafter thief grubbing for coin. Light fingered and sly. "No one would dare turn against you. You've made sure of that."

His eyes flicked towards the corner where Leon's chest rested, lid open. Inside lay fleshy incentives not to betray Leon Hennessey. Cut from those gang mates or greedy grafters who thought that the Rabbits' law was unjust. That their

share should be larger. Leon had no mercy for thieves, ironic as it was. The punishment came swiftly. He always wielded the knife himself, eyes dilating to blackness. *The devil walks inside that man*, they whispered. The infamy went straight to Leon's head; he strutted and preened, delighted. Added to his own myth with a salacious rumour dropped here, a bloodied story there. Notoriety was a drug to him.

"I do what I must," Leon said softly. "And I am your king. I don't answer to you."

"I want to be included in your plans. Lee is."

"I can't." But what Leon meant was, *I won't*.

Peter's face twisted. If Leon had been paying more attention to the conversation and less to inspecting his scarred hands, he would have noted the bright calculation in the other boy's eyes. "I swear, there is something different about Lee."

Leon stilled. His tawny gaze rose disbelievingly to Peter's face, as if flummoxed by the threat. The moment stretched between them, and Peter shifted uncomfortably. Leon rose, uncrossing his feet with undue care and thumping them down on bare floorboards. Leaning over the desk, he levelled a glare at Peter that would have made another man flee. "Think very carefully about what you say next. If you threaten Lee again, you can consider your time with the Rabbits over."

The blood drained from Peter's face, shoulders crumpling inwards under the weight of Leon's sudden sharp focus. "I – "

"Get out," Leon spat.

Peter slammed the door after him. The sound reverberated through the

empty office, joining Leon's groan as he sank back into his chair. Peter's presence had begun to fester. An infection in need of treatment; Leon hadn't settled on a diagnosis yet. Lancing or amputation. His respect for Peter's devious nature had stayed his hand, but his knowledge of Lee's – *peculiarities* – was not something Leon could stomach.

He poured himself a generous glass from the hewn crystal decanter. His study was full of expensive items. Antique sideboards and imported rugs woven by hand. Leather bound books in languages he couldn't read. A candelabra of pure gold. Some stolen. Some purchased through honest channels. He could barely remember which was which. Certainly, their former owners wouldn't come searching for them here.

Once he had looked on them all with such pride. A good-for-nothing starveling, owning all this. Surrounding himself with the gaudy fripperies so cherished in Decadent households. A ring on every finger, bright jewels snatching at the light. None fake but together they looked like garish imitations. Just like him. A wardrobe fit for a lord – and for what? He snorted into his brandy. Dragging himself up from the streets had been a bloody effort. *A damn near miracle*, people would say, if they weren't too busy talking about his evil doings. He could handle the world thinking him a monster. But dragging Lee into it as well?

Leon gripped the decanter in his hands, memorizing the heft of it. Then he threw it against the wall. It shattered into a thousand glittering fragments.



Time shifted. Images whirled; a dizzying kaleidoscope. The frame snapped into focus and Lily couldn't pull away. This time she wanted to.



The girlish giggle washed over him, pleasure stirring in its wake. She was no beauty, this Decadent daughter, but her poise and grace spoke of good breeding. Wealth. And that was enough to ignite desire. Her waist was pliant, hand soft in his. She spun in front of him, a marionette under expert guidance. Limpid brown eyes laughed up at him, a carefree delight in every line of that delicate face.

Alice Spencer was a catch. Not just for Leon Hennessey but for any of the men circling the room. They all sought the same thing. Power. Youth and green manners were easy to overlook in a wife. Especially when her father chaired the Decadent council. Effectively ruling Acedia.

Lord Whelan Spencer saw through him. Recognized the single-minded determination behind the rakish exterior. The brightly coloured waistcoat, hands heavy with precious stones; it was a façade that both drew the eye and deflected attention. *The King of Thieves*, the Decadent lords laughed into their drinks, *or just a jumped-up sewer rat*. They thought him here for the novelty, a relief from the monotony of their predictable hedonism. He felt the snide glances even now, as he danced with the most advantageous girl in the room. *Good-for-nothing. Trash*. The words bounced off. Spencer alone saw the vicious tom beneath the lounging house-cat disguise. Saw the dangerous ambition driving every action.

The invite had come by personal messenger. Blue and white livery

announced his master. Leon accepted immediately. He knew political manoeuvring when he saw it. He was growing too powerful in the undercity; the Rabbits had attracted Decadent attention, and now they wanted more than the usual tariffs. Lord Spencer didn't even try to hide his intentions. Alice was presented upon arrival, dangled before him like a lure on a hook. A prize, within his reach. He had yet to learn the cost of such a gift.

The dance ended and Alice sunk into a deep curtsy. A gesture like that from another would have been mocking; he was no lord. But the girl managed sincerity. Her tutors deserved wealthy retirements.

"Thank you for the honour, my lady." He pressed a kiss against trembling knuckles. Her eyes were large and tremulous as she searched his face.

"My next partner is waiting," she murmured. A clear request for release. Leon bowed, smooth and elegant. A much-practised pleasantry. Skirts brushed his boots as she turned away and he inhaled the subtle perfume of her skin. Then the crowded ballroom swallowed her up and Leon was left wondering whether she was a prize he even wanted. The memory of a thin face, dominated by serious grey eyes, overshadowed hers for a second. He shook his head.

"How do you like her?" The drawl came from his shoulder. Lord Spencer gave a close-mouthed smile as he too watched his daughter retreat. "Does she suit?"

"Suit what, my lord?" Leon asked lightly. "She's high-stepping to be sure, but that's no great fit for a man looking for a cart-horse."

"What an unpleasant metaphor." Spencer looked him up and down. Leon had dressed well, if not conservatively, for the ball. No fault could be found in the

white collar, starched to the exact height and angle demanded by current style. The close-cut jacket downplayed the unfashionable strength of his broad-shouldered frame. Manual labour was for the poor. Decadents wanted to look like they were wealthy enough to never lift a finger.

“What else do you expect? I’ve no use for your fine language. Wouldn’t last long if I did.” Leon let his smooth accent coarsen.

“I don’t suppose you would. But that’s exactly why I like you, Hennessey.” Spencer crossed his arms, surveying the crowd of dandies buzzing around the ballroom. “These fools. Full of meaningless intrigues. They think of the grafters as pigs wallowing in the trough of Decadent generosity. Yet here you are, cleverer than all of them.”

“I do like to think of myself as better than a pig, my lord,” Leon said expressionlessly. He knew better than to be goaded by such an obvious barb. Spencer wanted to ruffle him. The entire ball; a test. To see if the infamous Leon Hennessey would behave appropriately in good company. To gauge his worth as a gentleman. If only Spencer knew what prowled beneath the surface, untethered and untamed. The swell of power, the same as Spencer’s own. He would be horrified.

“Good. If you think of yourself as less than them, these young wolves will jump on the weakness.”

“If these are wolves, I’m worried about the beasts that roam the slums. What fell monsters has the undercity bred?” Leon raised a sardonic brow and Spencer laughed. It drew curious eyes in their direction. Leon could imagine the thoughts. What humour could gutter-trash conjure to amuse a refined lord?

“Quite right,” Spencer chortled, straightening the cuffs of his neat grey jacket. It clung unflatteringly to his portly figure. A physique strained more by overeating than exertion. Fleshy lips held a slight sheen of saliva, an unfortunately prominent feature in his round face. The greying cap of hair lacked dandyish styling, cut close to his skull. All in all, an unassuming man, and that alone was enough to make Leon cautious. Dangerous men often didn’t look it. You didn’t need to know how to wield a knife to strike a death blow.

“What exactly do you want?”

“It’s refreshing, your bluntness. Thank you. I like getting straight to business but everyone demands such an exhausting stretch of small talk beforehand. Quite frankly, Hennessey, I’m rather concerned about the amount of control you have over the undercity.”

“Control, my lord?”

“Don’t be dense, dear boy. People fear you, and you like to use that. It’s a weapon in your hands. It makes you a good leader. But –” He paused, shrewd blue eyes assessing.

“But you don’t want me getting idea above my station.” Leon finished.

“Oh no. I’m quite happy for you to have ideas above your station. But only you.”

And just like that, Leon knew the price.

“Alice in return for peace with the grafters? You’d be willing to debase your daughter like that?” He repressed a shiver of self-disgust. What would the girl think of her fine new husband? Not the dashing gallant she likely dreamed of, safely tucked between silken sheets.



“You’d become one of us. An overlord *responsible* for the grafters. Not tied to them. Alice would be provided for in the style she’s accustomed to.” Spencer laid a light, manicured hand on Leon’s sleeve. “I want their loyalty. I don’t want to worry about my city in revolt.”

“Why don’t you just make me? I know you are strong enough.”

Spencer laughed. “Oh, my dear boy. I don’t like to throw my weight around, all the time. It’s also easier to have men who *want* to serve you. That way they aren’t constantly looking to throw off your influence. I like you. I don’t want to break you.”

The end of the sentence he left unspoken. *But I will break you if I must.*

Leon was silent, staring out over the crowd. Possibilities crowded his brain, clamouring for attention, but none of them satisfied him. His instinct told him this was the best offer he would ever receive. It also told him to refuse. Refuse everything he had fought for, when it was laid out on a platter for his taking. He wanted to be a lord. He wanted to lift his boots free of the undercity filth. *But not this way*, his conscience whispered, even though it was the way he had planned. He never intended to take anyone with him.

Spencer read his hesitation. “Drink, eat. Think about it. I’ll give you a week. I would be disappointed if I didn’t receive at least one counteroffer.”



Leon and Lily blinked as one. Took a breath together. The scene wavered and reformed.



“It’s not what you think, my lord,” Alice said, brown eyes wide and beseeching. She presented a pretty picture, clad in a high-necked peach day dress. Her porcelain skin glowed against the light blue wallpaper of the drawing room. Tea, over-steeped and bitter, sat untouched between them.

“I’m not a lord,” Leon refuted automatically. This was not the situation he expected. Blindsided when he was meant to be wooing his gently bred intended.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean offence.”

He snorted at her faultless manners. Polite even now. “No offence given, Lady Spencer.”

“I thought you could help us. I was wrong.” Disappointment laced the words, and Leon felt their sting. Neither of them were getting what they wanted. He was no revolutionary and she wasn’t a delicate wallflower wife. “Please, continue.”

“Continue with what?” His brows rose as she sat, hands folded neatly in her lap.

“Your seduction, of course.”

“That’s it?”

“Why, yes. We’ve determined that you’re just a social climber. As perfect strangers, we may as well fall back on convention. Your seduction. Pretending that you’ll manage to win my affection and that this arranged marriage isn’t entirely against my will.” She delivered the speech with a frankness that didn’t fit with bland expression on her face. A mask, Leon realised. There was a very unusual girl alive

underneath.

“Very well,” he said, surprisingly himself. “I’ll help you, Alice Spencer.”

Her answering smile was wicked and brimming with secrets.



“Leon, wait.” A hand caught at his arm. Halting him. He re-assembled his expression from broken fragments of memory; a grimly set mouth, brows drawn down forbiddingly. It was difficult to behave that way towards her anymore. A struggle for severity. “I don’t understand, where are you going?”

“You don’t need to understand,” he replied coolly, ignoring the glinting tears in those huge grey eyes. She was barely holding herself together. His heart thumped painfully at the sight; full of an emotion entirely foreign and completely unwelcome. “I just need you to do as I say.”

“Lie to everyone? For how long, Leon? Until *when*?” The words swelled with the familiar cadences of her anger. The questions hit like punches, left-right-left. The answering rush of feeling winded him. He didn’t want to leave; to abandon her at the request of another girl from another world. His place was here. Beside her. Even if she didn’t know it.

“I can’t say.”

“It would be quite easy to say! You *love* the sound of your own voice. So maybe just give it a go!” She hesitated. Glanced down. “For me?”

The sudden softness in her voice was unmissable. Leon longed to press his fingers against her cheek. To feel the hot rush of blood there. Instead he chose

a different path. “No. Not this time, Lee.”

He crushed her vulnerability beneath his heel.

“Yes, of course.” She murmured, drawing back. Her hand dropped away.

“What should I tell them happened?”

“Whatever comes to mind.” He said curtly, trying not to picture her downcast face. Mouth trembling, jaw rigid. Forcing herself to be strong. How many times had he seen that expression? How many times had he been the cause of it?

Almost blind in the gloom, he reached out and cupped her chin. Lifted it.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodbye, Leon.” There was such desolation in her voice. Such bleak, unending despair.



Lily pulled away from the memory. It took effort to retract. Hundreds of threads to unravel, connecting her and Leon. She mentally tugged on each one. Willing it to give out. Some snapped and she felt Leon brace under her hands; she softened them, stroked and soothed. Murmured gentle reassurances as she untangled herself from his mind. Inch by inch she withdrew, loneliness growing with each dismantled connection.

She opened her eyes before she was entirely done. A head-spinning mistake. To see his face while still reliving his memories. It was like looking in a mirror but not quite recognising the reflection. A small cry escaped and she stumbled back. Only to be caught; in his arms, in his equally confused gaze.

“Lily?” He questioned. A pang shot through her; he sounded so lost. As if she had sucked something away from him. Inhaled a section of his soul. The beast inside her quivered, sighed. Satisfied.

Then Leon pressed his mouth to hers and all capacity for clear thinking was lost.

## Chapter 15

He was tentative, soft, wondering. For a second, she remained still. Unsure whether this was a waking moment or strange dream. Leon could not be kissing her. His skin could not be burning against hers as if lit from within. She took a breath; his breath. Surrendered to the cascade of unfamiliar feeling. His hands gathered her closer, and Lily stepped into the warmth offered. She tilted her head back, gasping at the rush of heat. Different to the pulse of her power, but just as right. Sureness flooded through her and she lifted her arms, spearing fingers through coarse hair. Holding him to her. Pressing her mouth harder against his, welcoming him in. The first brush of his tongue made her quake; the second made her respond in kind. The sound of their harsh breaths filled the air. He stroked a hand down her spine and heat followed in its wake; she arched, melding her body to his. Closer. She wanted him closer. His grip firmed in answer.

And then Leon tore himself away and Lily gasped her confusion even as her skin hummed with sensation. His face was painted in shadow. Unfathomable and too far away. She exhaled through her nose, trying to get a grip on want and need and confusion that twisted in the pit of her stomach.

“I didn’t mean – I’m sorry.” His voice was ragged, surprise obvious.

“You don’t – sorry isn’t what –” She trailed off, hot humiliation replacing the warmth of his kiss. Her chest contracted. *Sorry*. He was sorry. Her mind supplied the rest of the words; *mistake, mistake, mistake*. She hoped he couldn’t see the dark flush overtaking her cheeks. Her first kiss and he didn’t want it. She shut her eyes; swallowed the groan. Let nails bite into palms, let that pain overtake the aching hurt of an entirely different kind of agony.

Of course, Leon hadn't meant it. But for a second, in his mind and afterwards, she had thought differently. Just for a moment. Through his eyes, she looked different. Edges softened. The Lily that Leon saw was all large eyes and fiery heat. He recognised her strength and what lay beneath. He did not balk but embraced it. *Desired* it.

"Lily, I –" He hesitated, clearly unsure how to voice the rejection.

"It doesn't matter," she said quickly, filling in the gap his silence left. She ignored the galloping pace of her heart. Ignored the throb of hurt spearing her ribcage. *It didn't matter*, she told herself insistently. Considering everything, a short meeting of mouths wasn't important.

This time his answer was swift and sure. "It does. It does matter. But I don't want to talk about it in a damp cemetery surrounded by the bones of the long dead."

"Sure," she frowned, rubbing her forehead distractedly. A headache was forming behind her left eye, making its presence known with a persistent thumping. "We'll forget it."

"For now," he said quietly. This, she couldn't acknowledge.

"So, you know Alice Spencer," Lily said slowly, casting her mind back to before the kiss. To the memories she had seen inside Leon's head. Of the brown-eyed girl, not what she seemed. She ignored the spike of jealousy; Leon's hands on her back. Guiding her around a turn. The brush of skirts against legs. The weight of breath and expectation.

Leon started. Contained his shock before it took hold. His mask dropped into place, the one she remembered from the Rabbits. Eyes, direct and serious.

Brows slightly raised in preparation for mockery. Humour and scorn, blending into a semblance of a smile. It was the face of the king of thieves, the one he had worn before he trusted her. Lily flinched from it.

“The real question is, how do *you* know Alice Spencer?” That careful slinking voice. A snake drawing back to strike.

“No,” Lily said firmly. “You don’t talk to me like that. Not anymore.”

This whipcord disbelief was harder for him to disguise. Even in the dark. The recoil. The mouth, dangerous smile wiped clean, dropped open. Lily had never spoken to him that way before. Steely determination uncoated by persuasion and guile.

“You’re not my king. You don’t have power over me. You either speak to me as a friend or not at all.” She let her voice grow cold. Distant. Let it wipe away the vestiges of heat remaining in her veins.

“You’re – you’re right.”

“You don’t need to sound so surprised,” she snapped. “I need answers. I get that you want them too. But for this to work –” she waved a hand between their two bodies, still so far apart – “we must be a team. Equal. That means we *both* tell each other *everything*. Not half-truths and white lies. No disappearing, no hiding.”

A pause. His consideration was almost audible. The calculation ticking over in his mind. The wry quirk to his mouth when he decided.

“Okay. Friends.” He bridged the gap and offered a hand. She clasped it, ignoring the way her heart leapt in response.

“So, Alice?” She prompted.

“Alice,” he repeated. His voice shifted, becoming rough and irritable. “Alice



Spencer is the daughter of a Decadent lord, wafted under my nose like a fair-scented trophy. Her father, Whelan, sought to buy me and my Rabbits to strengthen his hold on the undercity.”

He paused and Lily saw his brows pull together. “Alice is also a clever girl. Not quite as clever as her mother, Mathilde, who wants to overthrow the source of her own privilege. She speaks of a revolution.”

“You don’t need to sound so scornful,” Lily said in soft rebuke, flinching away when he reached for her.

He shook his head, a sigh ghosting from his lips. “Was I so cruel? Did you hate me so much?”

Lily blinked. Something raw and hurting shimmered in his voice. “Yes. You were my friend and then a stranger in turn. You rescued me and you damned me, Leon.”

Leon’s head bowed, fingers interlaced behind his neck. Lily itched to soothe the tense line of muscle that ran between his shoulder blades. She resisted the urge to reach for him. She needed to say this.

“You took me from the streets and offered me something I could have never imagined for myself – true freedom. I didn’t know why you withdrew from me. Why you became proud and cold and vicious – but there was a spark. Of something hidden and kind. I always believed in it so hard and desperately that it couldn’t disappear entirely.”

*Cut, make the cut.* The bedlam, limp and sedated on the chair. Manacled. Unmoving. Unnervingly white eyes watched her from under half-mast lids. He was awake but not aware. None of them were. She made the cut. Sewed it back up.

And afterwards Leon held her. Gathered her close as sobs shook narrow shoulders. Held all her pieces together when they felt close to shattering. The pads of his fingers had been gentle as he wiped the tears away. The touch of his gaze; tender. *You did well*, he had murmured.

He fed and soothed the monster he created. Gentled the beast.

“I don’t hate you anymore, Leon. But –” She hesitated, watching the way his fingers relaxed. Dropped from his neck. Clenched and unclenched. “I don’t entirely understand you. I want to. I’m floundering and no one is telling me anything. I can’t untangle all these lies and I need help. Your help.”

“You’ll always have my help, Lily. That I can promise you,” he said, voice low and vibrant. It quivered over her skin, settled like a comforting blanket.

“Then I need you to tell me everything about Alice Spencer, and what the hell you were doing with the Decadents.”

“I will, but not here.”

“Why?”

He laughed. “I don’t know about you, Lily, but I’d prefer to have an ale in hand before I launch into this story.”

Lily looked up at him from beneath lowered lashes. “You want to go to the Raven, don’t you? Someone will recognise you.”

“My dear girl, where do you think I’ve been staying these last months? The staff at the Raven are entirely loyal to Leon Hennessey.”

“You mean, they know the consequences of betraying you.”

“That as well.” He flashed a cocky smile.

“And there’s my Leon. I’ve missed the king of thieves,” she said but there

was no rancour to the words. Only relief.



The Raven was not a place Lily enjoyed, and she was sure Leon insisted on it just for that reason. It felt like a stone prison, grey ceilings pressing down. Trapping her. Rusted copper pipes threaded across the walls, feeding the dull gaslights. The flickering light was enough to hint at the debauchery. Women flitted from table to table, waxen smiles a forced invitation. Lily could barely hear herself think over the drunken roar of the patrons. A grimy, dishonest bunch, the lot of them, several wreathed in the distinctive odour of the grave-pits. Scavengers who spent their days raking through the dead, unearthing the occasional trinket. Their clothes were attained the same way, stolen from those who could voice no protest.

The table was sticky against her skin, and she fidgeted, leaning back in the booth. A glance towards the bar showed Leon leaning an elbow against it. Flashing a bright smile at a serving girl. She preened under his attention and Lily rolled her eyes. Leon's charm was as dangerous as his dagger. More so. But the girl probably deserved some kind attention. A barely drawn distinction separated her from the molls that worked the floor. She risked a lot for her coin, so if she enjoyed Leon's smiles, Lily could not grudge her it. Even if she wanted to keep them all for herself, a cringing part of her admitted.

"There you go," Leon thumped the tankards down, giving her a very different kind of grin. Knowing and affectionate. "You don't need to be jealous."

"Of what?" She said lightly, raising her brows mockingly. He shot her an

unreadable look before taking a long swig of ale. She glanced away and saw the serving girl still eying him. Lily let a glare slide into place. Just enough heat behind it to make the girl become very interested in wiping down the bar. Lily snorted. At least her disturbing new jealousy over Leon had the benefit of making this dump slightly more habitable.

“Nothing, clearly,” Leon said. He was watching her with a cool expression. “She’s pretty, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Lily shrugged. Refused to let his needling bother her. Beat back the instinct to snap. “She certainly is.”

And she was. Nothing was untouched by the Raven’s muck but the girl exuded an unexpected energy. Her long sweep of brown-gold hair shone under the lamps. Pale skin looked luminous, feline eyes sparkling. It was a light that would be snuffed out before long. A miracle that it had lasted this long, in such a place. Lily stopped comparing herself to other girls a long time ago, her woman’s body an encumbrance. But now she stared at the lush swell of breast and waist and hip. Appreciated what a man might see in softness. She had pared hers down, honed it to edges and ire. Softness had a price Lily wasn’t willing to pay.

“You don’t have to be jealous,” Leon repeated, leaning across the table. His charisma was usually a tangible thing, an unrelenting circle of influence around him. But its power was banked, hidden. Something different lay in its place. Leon looked earnest. Serious. And that scared Lily more than his charm. She could resist that. Brush it off. Dismiss it.

She responded the only way she could. “There’s nothing between us, Leon. A kiss doesn’t muddle my head. Bat your eyelashes at whomever you choose, it’s

naught to me. Just make sure you use protection. There are some *nasty* diseases around.”

Lily valiantly tried to sound like she didn't suddenly, desperately want him to catch one. It would serve him right.

Leon's answering laugh scraped across already fraying nerves and Lily could only glare wordlessly back. “Take a drink, relax, for gods' sake.”

“I didn't come here to relax. You were going to tell me about Spencer!” Her rising ire only made Leon's smile grow wider, a single dimple appearing. She exhaled loudly at the sight of it. “Why do I always let you needle me?”

“You try hard to resist my charms but few people succeed,” he replied cheerfully, raising a hand to the serving girl. She came over with a smile that encompassed them both, plunking down a plate of steaming meat and vegetables. Hot gravy sat in a pot to the side.

“Anythin' else, milord?”

“That'll be all, love,” Leon said, sliding a hog towards her. Her grin widened as she pocketed it, sashaying back to the bar. “Now, Lee my boy, let us eat and we can talk later.”

“Lee? Later? Are you seriously stalling again?”

“Firstly, I'm hungry and I've heard your stomach rumble a good three times so I wager you are too.” He speared a potato and shoved it into his mouth. Lily drummed impatient fingers against the tabletop. “Secondly, there's too much company here for much conversation.”

“You brought me here *for* a conversation.”

“No need to be snippy. I have rooms, upstairs. We can talk there. Plan our

next move.”

“Fine.” Lily took a sip of her ale and made a face at the sourness. “You could have at least bought some decent bloody alcohol.”

“Everyone’s going to be suspicious if someone starts throwing around coins on expensive wines now, aren’t they? You really don’t know the first thing about disguises.” Leon frowned as she burst into laughter. “Why is that funny?”

“You. You’re funny.” Lily wheezed, taking another mouthful of ale.

They ate in silence after that.

## Chapter 16

The serving girl brought Leon a key without needing to be asked, appearing wraith-like by their table as soon as the plate emptied of food. This time there was no smile. Just grave silence that sat uncomfortably on her face. He took it without a word. Motioned Lily to rise. A strange mood had settled over him, seeping into the cracks and crevices until the only sign of discontent was the anxious movement of fingers against thigh. Never straying far from the knife sheathed at his waist. He glanced at the group of men who had just entered. The three of them were better dressed than the usual Raven clientele; jackets carefully ragged, boots scuffed in haste. A studied kind of poverty.

“Problem?” Lily murmured.

“Maybe. Follow me,” came the terse reply.

They moved across the floor with feigned confidence. In Lily’s case, anyway. Leon’s swagger was likely genuine. Cockiness came easily to him, sheathing a steely ruthlessness. In the early years, other gang leaders made the mistake of thinking him a gaudy braggart. A boy too comfortable on his throne with nothing to back the claim. They noted the languorous smile and not the devious fox that prowled behind his eyes. To think Leon anything less than he was; a death sentence. And he struck quickly. Mercilessly. He won men to his side by promising even cuts and kept them there with unfailing strength and cunning. He knew everything there was to know about his Rabbits. Their sordid secrets, hidden from all others. Their desires and dreams. A puppet master toying with his marionettes, Leon played them. Against each other and against themselves. The Rabbits followed him fearfully but were paid well for their trouble. *A fair overlord*, Leon said,

*unlike mine. The Decadents are never fair.*

She eyed the broad back in front of her, already halfway up the stairs that led to the second storey. To his rented room. The thought made her hesitate. Pause, for a moment, grip white-knuckled on the bannister. Savouring the bite of rough wood because it was a distraction. From an unrealized dream of bare skin, golden under the flickering caress of candlelight.

Caught up in the image, she missed the danger.

A hand caught at her arm. Yanked her away from the stairs and released, sending her stumbling back. Straight into a ring of men that closed around her. Dirty faces twisted into smiles that revealed teeth too straight and white for the undercity. Lily felt panic lurch through her. Watchdogs.

She opened her mouth to yell out, to warn Leon. Knuckles caught her across the jaw, sunburst pain blooming in its wake. The force spun her and she landed hard. Hands and knees against stone pavers a centimetre thick with grime, joints juddering under the impact, pain splintering. A boot thudded into her stomach and she curled inward against the attack. Unsheathed the blade strapped around her torso. Let out a whimper not entirely feigned; let them believe they had caught a mouse in their trap.

She threw herself sideways into a roll, slashing at unprotected legs. A grunt of surprise above as she made contact. And then she was out of the circle, already rising to a fighting crouch. The men turned on her but they didn't look much like men anymore. Teeth bared; features elongating, narrowing. Humanity vanished, pared away until only the beast remained. Coarse grey fur grew from forehead to neck. A wolf on two legs. Lily adjusted her grip on the dagger. She had never seen



a watchdog shift before, had doubted the stories. But now was not the time to gape, nor indulge in horror.

A whirlwind hit. One died immediately, a blade slamming home in his neck. The handle vibrated with the force of the throw. He stayed standing for a second, blank eyes fixed ahead. Disbelieving his own death. The moment stretched and snapped. As he fell, legs collapsing, landing with a wet thud on the pavers, bloodstain already spreading, the others reacted, but it was too late. It always had been. Soon as the hunt started, they were doomed.

The remaining two watchdogs pounced with a hair-raising growl. Leon was already there, a flashing blade in each hand. He whirled and cut, ducked and slashed. Faster than Lily's eyes could follow. The growls twisted, rose. Changed to yipping whines as knives met flesh. Unrelenting. Leon's face didn't change as cruel tipped claws rent the shirt and flesh on his forearm. A grunt escaped through gritted teeth; the only outward hint of any agony. It was enough to snap Lily out of her shocked stillness. She threw herself forward, latching onto the unsuspecting back of a watchdog. A heavy musk filled her nose, warm fur and human sweat mingling.

The dog swung, trying to throw her off. She slammed her knife into his shoulder, flesh no barrier to the fury that roared in her veins. Demanding that she protect Leon. That she tear apart any who brought him harm. Her senses narrowed. All she could see was the grey head. All she could feel were the muscles that flinched and fought her. She rode the beast. Thighs flexed and gripped, free hand wrapping in that thick fur, dragging the head back. Her second knife was in hand, and she had no memory of drawing it.

*Quiet now*, that sibilant voice surged up inside her and whispered, *quiet*.

The body beneath her stilled.

*Good. Good dog.*

The knife brushed across his throat, a razor caress. Lily felt the blood, hot and wet, flood over her skin. She looked up, straight into Leon's molten eyes. An unfathomable emotion twisted in their depths. The creature beneath her crumpled and she fell with it. Absorbing the twitches of its death throws. Its life exited on an exhale. She felt it then; an energy, passing from the watchdog to her. A river of delight pumped into veins already clogged by adrenalin. Intoxicating. She was dizzy with it.

Lily rose, energy spreading in creeping tendrils from the centre of her chest outward. She sucked in a breath; another. Rolled her neck, rotated strained shoulders. Felt the energy dissipate. And only then did she take in the tableau still taking place in the Raven's main bar.

The remaining watchdog cowered, straining against the will of some invisible force. White-rimmed eyes darted between its fallen packmate and Lily. Quick, panicked bursts of air escaped its snout. Claws scrabbled for grip on unforgiving pavers. Lily shot a look at Leon. He was wholly focussed on the dog; hand upraised, jaw granite. As she watched, fingers balled into a fist, making a sideways jerking motion. The dog stiffened; eyes bulging, mouth gaping as water began to leak from its lips. Leon dropped his hand; released it from the invisible bonds. It didn't try to run. It couldn't. A bubbling scream raised the hairs along Lily's arm. It grasped its throat, talon-tipped hands cutting into flesh, leaving bloody lines in their wake.

“Enough!” She cried.

Leon shifted his attention. To her. An empty void lay behind those familiar irises. No remorse, no compassion existed. They had winked out before the oncoming darkness, overtaken by a ravenous rage.

“*Enough*,” she whispered, taking a step towards him. He blinked; slowly. As if he was rising from some nightmare, struggling to fight free of it.

She heard the thump as the dog hit the ground, life extinguished.

The Raven exploded into noise, reminding Lily of their audience. They crowded into alcoves and along the walls, some too deep in their cups to consider the stagger to the door, others alight with curiosity. There were few tales involving watchdogs that had a happy ending for grafters. *Bring out the bodies*; the usual command of the trenchers who wielded their leashes. *Dead or dead*, the grafters whispered of those hunted. The carnage, obscene. The rumours said that watchdogs were monsters, fed on offal. Red tongues lapping blood. The truth, worse than that.

Watchdogs were just men.

Lily threw up, bile burning the back of her throat. Splashing off the pavers onto crimson-streaked boots. Stomach twisting, she retched again. An arm wrapped around heaving shoulders; she leaned into Leon’s warm weight. Let him take hers, incapable of holding it alone. Her body felt leaden.

“Everything is okay,” Leon murmured, words a breathy caress against her ear. “Come on, we need to leave.”

She let him guide her upstairs. Watched, as he gathered his belongings. Followed, as he led the way out the second storey window, boots slipping on the

ledge, knees buckling under the jarring leap to the ground. He remained wrapped in predatory stillness. Every movement was lithe and smooth, unhampered by human hesitation. As he prowled down the street, towing Lily in his wake, she wondered. Tyrant, ally. Monster, friend. Did he have to be one or the other?



Lily thumped down onto the bed, coughing at the cloud of dust. Leon had brought her to a boxy room in a tall townhouse that stank of mould. The front awning hung crooked, repaired just enough to prevent collapse. Every window, boarded shut, chill wind leaking through gaps where glass used to be. Leon advised her to step wary on the stairs. The wood sank under her weight, too rotten to creak.

“Is this a safe house?” She asked doubtfully, eyeing the peeling wallpaper. Damp crept up one wall, the moisture of it clogging her lungs with every breath. The space was bare except for the thin mattress in the corner, a jug beside it. Dirt floated in a thin film across the water’s surface.

“Safe in the sense that no one other than myself knows about it.” Leon leaned back against the door, arms crossed, face taut. Lines cut into forehead and cheek; stern and implacable. They stared at each other. Waiting to see who would speak first.

“What was that, Leon?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replied, and his voice was ice cracking over a frozen lake.

“Watchdogs are therians, aren’t they? Shapeshifters.”

“Of the basest kind. Don’t judge them all by the dogs.”

“And you – a hellkite. Is it just water you control?” Lily made her voice light and curious, but he still flinched.

“You don’t need to pretend you didn’t just see me drown a man on dry ground.” Leon ground out, running a shaking hand through his hair.

“I used my power to make a man stand still while I slit his throat.” Lily replied slowly. “Do you really think *you* are the one that is frightening me right now?”

Leon’s shoulders slumped, tension deflating. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry,” she said. Letting him hear her sincerity. “You don’t have to apologise for what you are. And besides – they were going to kill us.”

“How can you be so calm about this?”

“Leon. I haven’t survived up to this point by being sensitive. I am fully aware of the world we live in, more now than ever.” She rolled lips against teeth, considering. “I’m calm because we’re safe.”

“For now.”

“*For now* – exactly. We have time to stop and think. Sleep.” She patted the mattress next to her. “Were the dogs there for me or you, Leon?”

“I don’t know.” He sank down onto the bed, wrapping arms around legs. Shoulders collapsing inwards. Forehead dropping to rest against knees. A position of defeat.

“Then we figure it out.” She reached out, tentative. Stroked fingers over tousled auburn strands. He leant into the caress, sighing.

He rolled his head to the side; looked at her. Revealed the glistening eyes; the tear tracks cutting down his cheek. Something bright and vulnerable and

wounded laid bare. She didn't hesitate. Arms wrapped around trembling shoulders, holding the fragments together. Her face nestled into his, tucking into the space under his ear. Mouth grazing skin. She gave in to the temptation and brushed a featherlight kiss there. Once, twice. Wordless comfort – for him and her.

“Why did you agree to lie about my death?” He asked, pulling back.

“I agreed because you asked,” Lily said without hesitation. “I had learnt by then to do as you said.”

“But rarely without a fight,” he pressed.

“I saw that day that you really meant it. Really needed something from me. You hadn't been purposefully cruel for a long time before that, Leon. But that night you were razor-edged. I decided my loyalty to you went beyond anything.”

“You don't know how much that means to me,” he said, low and fervent.

“But that doesn't mean I forgive you,” she added, to stave off the answering rush of emotion. All she would have to do is reach out, take his hand, press a kiss to the palm. Let him see all she felt, letting it shine clear and bright on her face. He would do the rest. He would gather her close, reassure her. Tell her that everything was alright. But it wasn't. Maybe it would never be.

So, she kept talking. Built a new wall between them to replace the crumbling remains of the last. “The things you made me do. Five tasks – for what? What purpose did they serve? You showed me a different side of you but also a different side of myself. One I don't like.”

“There's a monster in all of us, Lily. Some people just have the luxury of not needing it.” Leon said quietly, withdrawing slightly. “You needed yours.”

“Did I? Or did you need it?”

“Why would I need it?” His gaze skittered away. An easily read evasion.

“I don’t know, Leon. Maybe you could tell me. Because something did grow between us in those hours together and that alone should be enough. Enough for you to stop embellishing and cut straight to it.”

“Did it?” He sounded cold and distant now. Frozen amongst relics of lies. Not fighting it but accepting the slow, icy embrace. A steel trap snapping shut. He called her a fortress, forgetting his own impenetrability. Her own flame ignited in response.

“Don’t talk to me like that!” She cried, leaping up from the mattress. “Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid. Blind. I can see what you’re doing. Deflecting. Don’t I deserve better? Don’t I deserve the truth? Am I so vile and untrustworthy?”

Her mother vanished into the night. Left no word. Her father never cared. Leon said *trust me* but it didn’t go both ways. She was sick of it. Sick enough her bones ached. Marrow sucked clean leaving but an empty space where it once resided. She was hollowed out. A shell of a girl. At least Felix had been honest in his blatant suspicion of her character and motives. That suspicion more real than any of the men who said *trust me*. Who insisted on their goodness while not believing hers.

“No, no you aren’t.” Whatever dark twisting emotion Leon saw on her face prompted a swift, unhesitating reply. He too rose but with a deliberate lack of haste. Carefully, as if approaching a wild beast. “You’re not vile at all, Lily.”

“Then why hide? Why did you leave me?” Her voice broke. “You didn’t even think what it would do to me, did you? You didn’t care.”

“Lily –” He reached for her. Ready to soothe tears that didn’t come. Her

eyes were dry. Mouth set in an implacable, thin line.

“I don’t trust you. I believe in you. But not trust. Not anymore. That’s on you. And you’re the one that’s going to have to fix it. Keep your secrets. Keep your own counsel. But don’t forget, this –” She gestured between them, giving him a small, warped smile. “This is necessity. I have nowhere else to go.”

‘I don’t want you to feel like that.’

“Too bad, Leon. You don’t get to control *how I feel*.” She exhaled a bitter laugh. “I’m exhausted. We need to rest and then plan our next move.”

“We do.” He touched her arm as she pushed past to the bed. Lily flinched from the electricity contained in that brief contact. “This conversation isn’t over.”

“So you say,” she said, not looking at him as she settled on her side. Breathed in the dusty perfume of the mattress. She felt rather than saw him hesitate. “Don’t play the knight, Leon. It’s not a role that fits. The floor is hard. The bed little better. Take what little comfort you can.”

The mattress dipped under his weight, her body sliding back into him. Breath hitched in her throat and by his sudden stillness, he heard it. She didn’t protest as he curved a hand around her waist. Pulled her closer. A sigh slipped free as he curled into her warmth, head tucked into the crook between her neck and shoulder. It was cold. The bed was narrow. *Take what little comfort you can.* She had been speaking to herself, too.

Leon’s breathing slowed and evened out as limbs relaxed into unconsciousness. Every exhale ruffled the longer curls tucked behind her ear. She shuddered.

Lily lay awake for a long time.



## Chapter 17

Buildings were black roofed with rain, the day Leon led her away from the gang. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Lily vividly remembered the downfall, water running in freezing rivulets down her spine, leaving clothes sodden. The spider-web wetness of lashes squinting through the torrent. Hair flattened to scalp. She cursed whatever instinct had brought Leon out on a night like this. Longed for the warmth of the Warren or her own bed. A hot meal wouldn't have gone amiss. Her stomach ached, empty since the night before. But she followed him with no questions. Something glittered in his eyes that made her hesitate. She never read such hollow anguish in his face before, running deep and dark just below the surface.

He moved away from the undercity. Out of the familiar twisting paths and up into the leafy suburbs of the Mercer households. Lily understood the significance. Not as many ears to listen here, where streets were kept free of bedlams and beggars. Not as many dark corners for hiding and sneaking. By standing in plain sight they prevented others from watching.

*Trust me, he said. Tell them I'm dead.*

The bunks at the Warren were overflowing. More and more boys deserting outer city gangs. Eager for the Rabbit spoils. Less eager to be surveyed and found lacking by the king of thieves. Lily imagined their expressions; the inward collapse, the feigned sorrow. Eyes turning towards Peter.

*Don't try to find me. Trust me.*

She tried to stop him. Pleaded. But in the end, he left. And she pretended that it was rain on her cheeks, not tears. Pretended that the aching emptiness that

yawned inside had nothing to do with the man disappearing into to darkness. She put back on her stone mask. Made sure her face was bloody and bruised before she dragged herself back to the Warren.

*An attack. She didn't need to feign the desolation. So many of them. Brutal. Leon was taken. Injured, badly. It happened too quickly.*

It was Peter who declared it. The death of the king. The rise of the next. Lily had smiled and smiled and smiled until she felt her face crack into a thousand glistening shards.

She knew why she trusted Leon, utterly and blindly and naively. It was a truth that wound around her heart in vine-like tangles. Constricting every beat. Demanding to be voiced. But Lily couldn't. Not yet. Not now. Not until she knew it was truth not desperation.



*Careful*, the whisper-breath of Leon's last command haunted her steps up to the Warren.

Lily had woken to a cold pillow beside her, the indent from Leon's head the only sign of the warm embrace of the night before. She padded up the stairs, wincing at every squeak. Leon was on the roof, legs dangling off the edge, one elbow propped on the low chimney. For all the nonchalance of the position, Lily could easily read his tension. He didn't turn as she pulled herself out of the small attic window; didn't acknowledge her presence as she settled beside him. His golden eyes were cold and focussed as he looked beyond the undercity. Lily knew

he was prepared to turn his back on his history, his gang, and her. He had already left her once. He would not resist the lure of power and coin a second time.

The questions swarmed her mind – *where had he gone, why was he back, what had happened with Alice Spencer* – but her throat remained closed and tight. Lily suspected the words would be self-flagellation.

“What’s next?” She said instead.

“How do you know Alice Spencer?” Leon countered.

“How do you know Alice Spencer – oh, wait. I already know. She’s your betrothed.”

“Alice is nothing to me,” he said callously, “She’s a tool.”

“I forgot – a tool in your vendetta against the Decadents.” Lily paused. “Or is it your mission to join them? I get awfully muddled sometimes. It’s just that your motivations remain so unclear.”

He raised a single brow in response, face betraying an utter lack of amusement. “You said that you’d met people – people who told you about your gifts. Was Alice one of them?”

Lily sighed. “Eventually, yes. And her mother.”

“Mathilde?”

“Yes, Mathilde,” Lily confirmed. “But there were three boys first. Connor –”

“Felix and Will,” he finished. “Right.”

“You know them.” Lily drew back, curling legs to chest. Her heart began to beat faster. This felt like a conspiracy. A plot to which she wasn’t privy. All the players connected, with her firmly on the outside. Peering through grimy windows, unable to read the quick moving lips. “You *know* them?”

“Of course. They’re all part of the mad scheme the Spencer women have cooked up. The one to overthrow the Decadents altogether.” He smirked, pleased with himself. Pleased with his superior insight, delighting in her ignorance.

“I know,” she said, which wiped the smirk off his face. “They told me.”

“Oh?”

“But they thought you were dead.” Lily refused to take his bait.

“And you didn’t correct them, right? Well, it goes both ways. They didn’t think you knew the truth – they thought you a lowly kit, pushed out of the Warren. Why would they assume I confided in *you*?” His scorn made her flinch. It was a reminder of how everyone saw her, even her greatest friend. As a street rat. A nothing.

“That’s fair,” she said evenly, tamping down the hurt.

“Why did they let you go?” Suspicion underlined the question.

“I wasn’t a prisoner.” It was almost the truth. “Connor sent me on a mission.”

She decided to leave out the part about her *oistros* being irrevocably bonded to a blood opal, and Mathilde throwing her out. If Leon could have secrets, so could she.

“A mission?” He said, bright interest suddenly written across that clever face, wiping away the doubt. “What kind of mission?”

That was how Lily found herself swaggering up to the front door of the Warren, thumbs tucked casually into pockets. *Connor might be right. Maybe this is the only way*, Leon had muttered. But the grim set of his mouth betrayed his unease with the situation. It irked her, the doubt telegraphing from every rigid line of his body. The way he pulled her into an alleyway to relay last minute

instructions. He drew her close enough to feel the press of his heat, hands insistent on her upper arms. Tawny eyes bored into cool grey. *Careful*, he said, exhaled air brushing her cheek. Lily suppressed a shiver. It was obvious he wanted to say more, but she didn't give him a chance. Intense look by intense look, he was disarming her resolve. Undoing strength with lack of faith. Lily Vance could do this. No one would tell her otherwise. She tossed Leon a cocky smile and the reassurance that she was perfectly fine. And then she walked away.

Infiltrate the Rabbits. Stir unrest. Connor had made it sound so simple.

False confidence was better than none at all. Thud, thud, thud. She slammed the lion-head knocker into wood. Ignored the ache of being on the outside; she had never knocked before. Just entered with blithe assurance of the welcome. But now she waited. Watched the flash of movement, barely visible, behind the peep hole. They'd be running to fetch help. The kits who manned the door didn't have the authority to make that kind of decision. Peter would.

She leaned back against a pillar. Crossed ankle over ankle, arm over arm. A defensive nonchalance. Narrowed her eyes at the door, willing it to open. But it didn't – not for several agonizing minutes, allowing her to imagine all the ways she could break in, all the ways she would explain to Leon her failure. Even just the word reverberated through her, leaving nausea in its wake. Failure. Lee Vance didn't fail. He conquered the most perilous of missions and emerged, smile in place, prize in hand.

Yet this was the first one Leon had trusted her with. Not once had he sent her on a mission alone. Always shadowed by a high-ranking buck, rolling their eyes at the babysitting duty, grudgingly assisting in whatever task had been set.

Otherwise, Leon came. It was rare for the king of thieves to descend from his throne and muddy the painstakingly polished boots of his office. Rare enough for whispers to spread through the undercity of his new protégé. Dares were set, betting books formed. Who would kill Lee Vance? How would it happen – strangled in the dark, wire slicing deep as he choked on his own blood? A shiv to the belly, for a slow and agonizing death lying in the mud and stink? Lily knew the bucks were for protection, yet the Rabbits too gambled on her demise. It didn't inspire confidence. In the end, they'd have been better off betting on Leon's death.

Leon's purpose had remained just out of sight. He was five tasks and a hundred steps ahead in his planning. The first had been so simple she laughed herself hoarse, earning a cuff behind the ear, hard enough to smart. Pick five pockets at market without being caught. A skill she mastered years before. But Leon watched from the edges and made her do it over and over. *You knocked into that one*, he chided, *careless*. Her head pulsed with the desire to scream at him, lash out, and maybe that was the point. To test her patience. To stretch her paper thin and see what came of it. Whether Lee Vance would break. Lily stayed silent. Her complaints lacked true defiance. She wanted to pass. Itched for Leon's approval.

*You've been a rakehell for too long*, was all he said at the end.

She snapped back; *and what are you?*

A month would pass, two. No word. Not acknowledgement if they passed in passageways, or during mealtimes. Leon would look through her. As if she were finally a ghost. Then he would send for her again.

The second task, a burglary. Joints ached for days afterwards from scaling

a four-storey mercer mansion, all to steal a frippery. A hat Leon had seen and favoured, atop the undeserving head of a factory-owner. No guards watched the house and other than the climb, it was an easy enough job. In and out in less than ten minutes. Maybe a heavier buck couldn't have managed, weighted down with full-grown manhood, but it wasn't difficult. A kit's job. No explanations were offered, nor reward.

Faces started turning away as she carried her dinner tray down the walkway in the main hall. Eye contact dropped. Some harboured jealousies, thinking themselves more deserving of Leon's attention. Most listened to Peter's mutterings. Knew the direction the wind was turning.

The third task was different. Leon burst into the gaming hall one night, eyes wild, top hat in hand, waistcoat buttons unaligned. The picture he presented was strange enough to silence the entire Warren, and that was a difficult thing indeed when half of them were deep in their cups, absorbed in their card games. Entrances, however wild, did little to distract them. Forty sets of eyes swung to him, to Lily, and back again.

"Come," he commanded, and Lily did. The first show of unquestioning obedience. Two tasks out of five were already completed and she knew that this was the call to another.

"Did you have to do it in front of everyone?" she muttered, trailing on his heels. She felt petulant as a child, neck burning from a fierce scolding.

"What? Embarrassed?" He shot back. They'd fallen into a game of barbed words and snarky rejoinders. It was dance of back and forth, flashing blades and quick parries.

“It just made it all so obvious.”

“Don’t fool yourself. They’ve already noticed. There’s no secrets in the Warren.”

Leon’s dishevelment threw Lily off. As they marched into the darker part of the undercity, she watched him from the corner of her eye. Dark stubble sprouted on a usually clean-shaven cheek, and the whites of his eye were strangely large. Like the look of a terrified horse. Dark mud splashed up their boots and breeches, carrying with it the scent of the street’s putrid underbelly, but for once he made no comment. His care for appearance was infamous. Once, a kit spilt wine on his favourite grey jacket and he punished the boy with a week’s banishment. For the less skilful, a week without the gang’s protection likely meant death whether they were picked up by the trenchers or beaten by rival crews, simply for the crime of being a Rabbit without a Warren.

“Okay, so they’ve already noticed. Where are we going, Leon?”

The answer to that question never came, because a hand hooked around her throat and dragged her backwards, limbs flailing, into the thick blackness of an alleyway.

The front door of the Warren creaked wide, snapping Lily back to the present. She jerked upright.



“Why are you here?” Peter sat straight backed in Leon’s chair. He had let her in without the expected fight, hurrying her to his office. Lily shifted in her own seat,



uncomfortable under his regard. This wasn't the reception she had anticipated – Peter seemed the type to demand grovelling, apologies, self-flagellation. Not a mere explanation.

“For the gang.” She controlled the urge to look away. It was an easy tell. “For my home. For a second chance.”

“Why do you deserve one?” His face betrayed no emotion. No hint to the thoughts beneath.

“Doesn't everyone?” Lily shrugged, trying to hide the churning nerves were beginning to overwhelm her confidence. “I made a mistake. I've come to apologise.”

“Then, apologise.” He stretched his hands, joints popping, and Lily wondered whether it was a purposeful intimidation. She glanced at the walls, empty bookshelves stark. They had been full the last time she was here. Now they were bereft of Leon's ledgers and books and neatly dusted. Every trace of him, wiped clean. Her heart sank. He said the proof Connor wanted was in those files. Tucked away, documented deal by deal. Their plan was unravelling, thread by thread, the tapestry of their lives barely holding together.

“I –” She hadn't planned for this. This pretend unmasking. She hadn't thought to summon the appropriate subservience for the role. Stupidly, she had intended on effortlessly seducing Peter's trust – *how*, she wondered now –, stealing whatever she needed and swanning back out. “But you don't want an apology, do you? You want to punish me. What would be the point of prostrating myself before you, pleading for a forgiveness that won't be granted? That's ridiculous. An affront to my dignity and yours.”

Peter sat back in his chair, raising his brows slightly. “What do you think I want then?”

“Just stop pretending. You wondered, once, what I had become, what Leon made me. Look to yourself before you judge me.”

“I’m not sure what you want this to achieve, Lee,” he said coolly, glancing at the clock on the wall. Lily felt unease prickle across her scalp. “Is this some kind of cathartic confrontation for you? Tell me why you’re really here.”

“No. I won’t. I’ll just go. This was pointless, I’m sorry.” She said firmly, rising to her feet. Hang Connor’s wishes, hang Leon’s idea of revenge. There was something off here and she didn’t intend to stick around to find out what. Peter would never have allowed her to step foot inside the Warren, without wanting something in return. He certainly wasn’t after small talk.

“I was surprised to see you at the door,” he said, mirroring her action. “I was glad.”

His tone implied the exact opposite, and panic spiked in Lily’s chest. He was stalling. Moving with slow but deliberate steps to cut off any escape. To place himself between her and the door. She shoved a hand into her pocket, through the ready-made hole there, to grip the handle of the dagger strapped to her thigh. Withdrew it an inch from its sheath. The oiled steel slid noiselessly free. Ready for – what? The weight of it in her palm was small comfort. In a small room like this, her speed would be no great advantage. Peter was almost as fast as her and twice as large. She felt her breath come quicker.

“I’m glad you came to see me,” he repeated.

“What are you doing?”

“What was the plan?” he countered, a sneer twisting his lips, the mask falling away. Lily flinched from the unadulterated anger underneath. His sparse frame trembled with emotion; muscles bunched. Hands curved in hooks, flexing, and Lily could picture them around her throat. Squeezing until there was nothing left. Dropping her limp body to the floor, kicking it aside.

“There was no plan!” But the lie sounded weak even to her own ears. Peter laughed humourlessly.

“Of course there wasn’t. There never is with you. You thought you could stroll in here and – what? What then, Lee? Take the Rabbits back by force? Steal my fortune? Or just irritate me until I gave in to whatever ridiculous scheme you have?”

“No! I wanted to – I needed - forgiveness.” The ground felt unstable under her feet and, in the distance, she could hear the low whine of a pack catching a scent. Her head spun.

“Unfortunately, you wanted to see Leon more.” The words were low and cruel. She flinched from them, and the knowledge contained within. He knew. “Oh, don’t try to deny it. The Raven? How much more stupid could that preening bastard get? Rabbits go to the Raven. Rabbits especially go to the Raven when there’s whispers of watchdogs being ripped apart. They never miss a spectacle. Or the scramble to rid the remains of treasures.”

“I can explain.” Could she? What explanation to offer?

“You told us he was dead. Our leader. Our king.”

“You were glad of it!” *Good riddance*, Peter said, and meant it.

He paused, a shark’s grin breaking over his face. “You’re right. I was. And

my guests are here right on time.”

The door burst open, slamming into the wall. The whine rose to a hungry howl. Lily stared over Peter’s shoulder at the two watchdogs standing in the corridor. They were fully shifted, teeth bared in snarling mouths. She killed their brothers. That’s what Lily Vance was now. Hunted by those with paws and fangs. Turned back by the only family she had ever known. Friendless in the never-ending dark. Nothing to lose. Everything to gain.

A small dark smile twisted her lips at the thought, and Peter’s smirk faded. *Not quite his desired effect*, she thought. It made her smile wider, baring her own fangs at the watchdogs. They growled in reply, and all her neck hairs stood on end. Their hair-covered legs swelled and stretched as they crouched, ready to leap. Waiting for the word. Since when did the watchdogs answer to the Rabbits’ commands? This stank of corruption. Underhand dealing. Exactly what Connor wanted her to investigate but this was by Peter’s hand, not Leon’s. This black stain was his creation.

“Why did you come back, Lee? What did you expect?”

“You’re a disgrace to the Rabbits. You’re a disgrace to the all goddamn grafters and the entire undercity,” she spat, fighting to keep her voice steady. There was no point falling apart. It solved nothing and guaranteed she would not walk out alive. Then the vipers won.

“I could say the same.” A step to the side left the path clear for the watchdogs. The snarls rose and elongated into whining excitement. He waved a hand in careless command. “Have at him, then.”

The dogs leapt forward.

## Chapter 18

Adrenalin pulsed through Lily's body, sharp and insistent. She was outnumbered. Outmanned. These watchdogs were much larger than their tavern counterparts. Muscles bulged from the almost human biceps, ragged grey-brown hair shifting with every movement. Monsters, torn straight from nightmares. Their twisted bodies were not deformed but improved; imbued with the lithe violence of wolves while controlled by the wit of men. Weapons made flesh, dagger-like claws tipping each finger. Peter moved back as the dogs circled her, content to snap and snarl, spit flying from yellowed fangs.

"Shhhh now, puppies," she murmured, easing her knife free. It felt like a puny defiance. Wielding a single blade against these creatures. They'd rip her apart. Sundered until none could identify the corpse. She imagined the wet thump of the bag, as they tossed her into the pauper pit. Her fingers closed convulsively around the handle, raising the weapon. "Come on, then."

There she was, coaxing forward death. Leon would laugh. *Where's the plan*, he'd say, *what's your angle?* No angle. No plan. A fight was won by staying on your feet. So, Lily Vance would stay standing.

Teeth caught at her sleeve, ripping fabric. She spun as the watchdog lurched back, and the other grabbed at her from behind. Another tear in her jacket, the rake of claws against skin. Pain flared. It was a taunting play. Her knife slashed the air as one jumped at her face; it fell back, growling. A spark of satisfaction lit amber eyes. It enjoyed the game. Of course; these dogs were the spoiled second sons of Decadent lords, turned out to fare for themselves. They must have discovered a dreary and unwelcoming world beyond the confines of their manor

houses. One peopled with creatures rather than men.

“What are you waiting for?” Lily spat, drawing a second dagger. She dodged another lunge, parrying the claws reaching for her flesh. The dog howled as the blade made contact, sunk deep into its forearm. She was too slow to tug it back: the creature’s retreat tore it from her grasp. Thick crimson blood splashed onto the ground. But she had no time to mourn the loss of a weapon; the second hound leapt, and this time it was her hoarse cry echoing around the room. Claws dug into her back, tearing cloth and skin as they dragged downwards. She felt its hot breath on her neck, and flung herself sideways, shoulders slamming into the pavers. Teeth snapped around nothing but air. And then she was back on her feet, facing two enraged watchdogs. Tongues lolled from slathering mouths as they circled.

“You can’t win,” Peter said from the doorway. A brief glance confirmed his smirk.

The leather handle felt slick and sweaty in her hand. The jacket clung to her back, damp with blood. She felt only half-aware of the pounding agony of the wound. *Compartmentalise*, she thought. Depending on the depth and number of cuts, she wouldn’t bleed out. It could be dealt with later. But it was hard to push away the dizziness. It made her stagger instead of step. The dogs bayed delightedly. Waited for her to pull herself together. The game was more fun that way. Over, if their prey fell. She shut her eyes, willing the world to stop spinning. And a tiny tendril of forgotten power uncurled. Woke up from where it lay dormant. The beast grumbled inside her. Lily’s hair prickled as energy surged. It was like picking up a weapon and finding it perfectly weighted. Made for her grip. Her

fingers loosened, stretched. The dagger clattered against the pavers, and she heard an indrawn breath behind her.

Eyes slid open as she rolled her neck from side to side. Loosening rigid muscles. The pain was still there but it had ceased to matter. She felt frozen and aflame at once. The energy wrapped around her. A pleasant weight. Whatever the dogs saw in her expression made them step back, growls waning. One whined, and Lily heard human fear in the sound. *Good*, the beast whispered. Or was it her? Its strength flooded her veins. It flexed and roared, and she felt a splintering rage peak inside. They were one and the same. She was the beast.

“What are you waiting for?” Peter shouted at the dogs. Unaware of the shift in atmosphere. The way the dogs cowered instead of crouched, eyes white-rimmed. “Get him!”

Lily glanced over her shoulder. It was a movement of inhuman grace. Predatory.

“You’ve made a mistake,” she purred in a soft sing-song voice. And the boy in the doorway recoiled from her. From whatever mask she now wore. A face that belonged not to Lily or Lee but another. “You’ll regret it.”

“Get him!” Peter cried, confidence gone and, in its place, the shrill edge of fear. The dogs whimpered, claws scrambling on the pavers. Terror made them inelegant. No longer monsters but puppies. Boys, uncertain. How old were they, under than fur, behind the shift? What weakened human bodies would appear upon their deaths, to lie broken and still?

“Last chance,” Lily said. The dogs stepped forward as one, lips drawing back to reveal their fangs once more, hackles rising. A foolish decision. She stared

them down. Felt, rather than saw, the change in tension, the winding of muscles preparing to jump. Her power guttered, a momentary emptiness, a trickling doubt. And then the room exploded into blue flame, hot and ravenous against her face. A burning caress. The watchdogs screamed with their human voices, agonised cries rising above the hungry crackle of the fire. Lily could smell singed hair and roasting flesh. But neither noise nor stench turned her stomach. She channelled more of herself into the inferno. The beast knew what to do even if she didn't.

Faintly, she heard retreating footsteps. Running, judging by their speed. She walked to the doorway, the flames parting. Stepped over the bodies of the watchdogs. One twitched in its death throes. The other lay still, skin crisping and blackened. She felt nothing but a bubbling delight.

"Lee, stop." A boy stood before her, brown eyes wide and terrified. Untouched by her flames; she raised a hand to remedy that oversight. "LEE."

She blinked. Considered him more closely. *Peter*, some quiet memory supplied. The beast roared. It didn't care for Peter at all. Peter would have killed them both, Lily and the beast as one. Now it would tear down the Warren. Burn it to ash.

"Lee, you don't want to do this," he pleaded. She cocked her head.

"I rather do," she said.

"You don't."

"Run, if you want to live," she advised dispassionately.

"Lee!"

But she had stopped listening. Stopped being the Lee that he appealed to. She pushed past him, and he fell back with a cry, clutching his shoulder. As if her



touch burned. *Good*, she thought. The flames followed in her wake. She didn't look back.



The domestic dorm was locked. Lily heard the panicked screams, the sound of hands and nails scrambling against the wood. The thuds of frantic, futile bodies. Smoke was fast filling the corridor, fire spreading greedily through the Warren. Soon everything Leon had worked for would be gone. No one had come to release the girls. Likely no one thought of it. Not a single buck or kit. Happy to let the domestics suffocate in their prison.

She pressed a finger to the keyhole. Focussed for a second, directing the vibrating energy. A rush; a swirl of light-headedness. The mechanism clicked, and she steadied herself, a hand planted to the wall. She felt saturated with exhaustion. Every movement, an effort. The surety was fading from limbs, leaving them limp and trembling. Weak once more. In the back of her mind, where she was connected to the flames, she felt them flare. Strong and unstoppable. Out of her control.

Grace was the first domestic out of the door, brown smock clutched up around thin ankles. They gaped at each other. Lily paled. Grace was completely bald, a cruel wound cutting across her cheek. It curled up the left side of her mouth into a grimace. Ragged stitches held half-healed edges together. Flesh had melted away, leaving a painful skinniness in its wake. Every bone in her forearm was visible. The Rabbits hadn't been sparing in their punishment. An example to

the other domestics to obey the rules, her face a constant reminder what transgression would bring. Lily's stomach twisted. She had caused this. Judging by the derision that quickly replaced surprise on Grace's face, she hadn't forgotten either.

"What have they –"

"Lee what –"

They spoke at the same time, voices muddled. Lily shook her head. "There's no time. The Warren is burning. You and the rest of the girls need to get out."

Grace glanced over her shoulder, spine straightening. Girls pressed to her back, bottle-necked in the doorway. Unsure whether to retreat or push forward. Wild eyes glanced from Grace to Lily, trying to read the delay. Coughs punctuated the pause in conversation. Smoke curled into the corridor, and it helped Grace come to a decision.

"Which way?" She said calmly.

"The front." Lily pointed. "The fire started in the back rooms."

Understanding lit Grace's blue gaze. A flicker of warmth and approval that momentarily overshadowed the disgust. "You did this."

"You're free now. Go. The Rabbits won't survive this," she replied. "Get them out of here."

Grace turned her back to her, speaking to the domestics. "Run to the front entrance, as quick as you can. Don't let anyone detain you. Don't wait in front of the Warren: likely the Rabbits will be doing that also. Scatter, and we'll meet later at the place."

The girls accepted her command of the situation without a single hesitation. As Grace stepped aside, they moved with orderly haste out of the dorm. No hysterics, although a few faces were wet with tears. Lily felt shock penetrate the numb exhaustion. Grace was leading them. And this was clearly a pre-planned manoeuvre.

“The place?” She asked, curious. Grace shot her a look. The wordless message, clear. Lily had chosen her side. Even if that side had not chosen her. She watched Grace’s retreating back, straight and proud and unbent by suffering. A jolt of envy took her by surprise. Grace had taken what the Rabbits threw at her, and refused to break. Perhaps she pretended to; perhaps she cried, and wailed, and raged against her lot. But she took it. Protected those who couldn’t do the same. What was Lily, in comparison? A girl who turned her back on girlhood. A traitor. Complicit.

Shoulders sagging, Lily leant on the doorframe and stared into the domestic dorm. Straw mattresses marched in neat rows across the floor, each covered by a worn brown sheet. A small, blacked out window was set high in one wall. The only light came from a handful of flickering candles, melted down to stubs. Probably lifted from discard bins in the kitchens. It was easy to imagine domestic life; easy to picture herself as one of them. Lily had supervised the domestics for years. Watched them toil and bleed for an uncaring Warren. Her hair, cropped to her skull; little different to how it was now. A thin dress instead of patched breeches. No jacket to stave off bone-numbing cold. Thin slippers to replace boots, no barrier from icy pavers. She would not have been a success on the marriage mart.

This would have been Lily Vance's fate.

She inhaled and smoke flooded her lungs. A hacking cough bent her double, and she retched, stomach rebelling. Glass shattered to her right; a window exploding, she thought impassively. The flames were coming. She made them and now they would devour her. The wall she leant against shook; the Warren was collapsing in on itself. By now Grace and the girls would be out of the building. Anyone left deserved their fate. Penance for all the lives they destroyed. The homes plundered, valuables torn from hiding places. Leaving people without savings or hope. It wasn't sensible to steal from the rich all the time. Mercers hired watchdogs to protect their stashes. Their workers had no such luxury. Kits broke into homes for a handful of hogs. Barely loose change to the gang, but Lily knew sometimes that meant the difference between making rent and being evicted. She knew the gnawing ache of hunger when the coin ran out. It was why she joined the gang, after all.

Her desperation fuelled the misery of others. She had always known it. Recognised the evil of stealing from the fellow poor but did it anyway. *Survival*, she told herself at the time. Anything that put food in her mouth, and her father's. But it was only cowardice. The same weakness prevented her from truly protecting the domestics from her gang mates. Always wary to show her hand, stand her ground. Now it was too late. Her father, abandoned. Fellow thieves, disbanded. She looked at her hands. No mark marred the skin. Nothing to reveal her sins.

Lily sank to the floor, wrapping arms around knees, head bowed. A wave of heat rolled over her as the fire spread into the corridor. Every breath was smoke instead of air, thick and drugging. The frantic beat of her heart eased. There was

a comfort to it. A relief to finally give up the white-knuckled grip on the reins. Let them slide through loosened fingers. The flames rushed over her like a runaway horse.

The world flared red behind closed lids, before she slipped into the beckoning dark.

## Chapter 19

Her body rocked from side to side, as if tossed by waves. Lily saw the ocean once. Creeping up to the top of the seaward facing walls, she leant out over the parapet to watch the water crashing into the rocks below. The endless blue stole her breath. The roar of it echoed in her ears for days afterwards, a siren's song calling her back. Boats bobbed in the harbour and from a distance, they barely looked bigger than toys. She reached out, pretending to scoop them into her palm. A memento of the sea. Men unloaded cargo from their depths. Box after box hauled to the pier, precariously stacked in wagons hitched to gigantic mules. Hooves stomped the wooden planks impatiently. Boxes full of wares not produced in Acedia.

*Beyond*, Lily had thought, and it wasn't an idea that had occurred to her before. A land beyond the stinking sewer of the undercity. The air smelt so clean, ruffling close-shorn curls. She curled into the embrasure and stared out to sea for hours. It didn't matter that the breeze cut through her thin clothes, until her body was wracked with shivers. It didn't matter that it earned her a beating from the city guard that found her; a blackened eye that served as a reminder never to stray from her borough again. She didn't remember the lesson. Only the wonders that existed beyond the wall. But she never returned. Because mixed with the delight was sorrow, bleak and unending. Lily Vance knew even at thirteen that she would not escape the city of her birth.

"Lily, Lily *wake up*." A hoarse voice gasped, familiar and close. In the darkness that enfolded her, Lily fumbled for context. Where was she? Slowly, she became aware of the powerful arms cradling her. One looped around her back

and the other under her thigh. She groaned through gritted teeth, head lolling to one side against a warm body.

“Thank the gods.” The arms tightened in a brief embrace. “You’re safe. Don’t worry.”

Leon, her brain provided. Leon was carrying her. It was his heat permeating her clothes, his strength holding her together. She took a breath, and it felt like the first time in days that her lungs weren’t laboured. Her chest filled to capacity. The air smelt of bitter smoke and ash. And then she felt the burn at the back of her throat. Her head throbbed.

“Leon?” Lily whispered, and salty blood ran into her mouth as her lips cracked. “Leon, where am I?”

But of course she knew. It trickled back to her, pulling her away from the sea and into reality. The fire. The Warren. She had freed the domestics and stayed behind.

“Leon,” she croaked. She felt all his muscles lock up around her, becoming a cage rather than safe harbour. “Oh gods. I burnt the Warren.”

“It’s fine,” came the inflexible reply. “The Rabbits take care of their own. But not you. What were you thinking? I thought – I couldn’t –”

Lily opened her eyes, startled by the sudden crack in his voice. The jaw above her was rigid. Invulnerable. But a muscle ticked in his cheek, and he still hadn’t finished the sentence.

“I had to save the domestics,” she said, offering him the truth. Unwanted, judging by the way he shook his head, shifting her weight impatiently in his grip. “Leon, I had to. They were locked in the dorms! They would have all died.”

“So instead you almost did! For slave girls!” He burst out, and she flinched from the heat of the words.

“As I would have been,” she rasped out. “I would have stood on that auction stage and been marked down as a slave girl no matter whether I was sold as a wife or labourer. It’s scarcely different!”

Lily remembered Kel’s thin, dirty face in the marketplace, bruised and afraid. Afraid of a man purporting to be her husband, fists raised above her, face twisted with blind rage. The Rabbits treated the domestics much the same, and she never tried to help them. Shame turned her stomach. Connor stopped Matthias while she watched. She had only ever cared for herself. Singularly focussed on becoming something that now lay in ashes behind her.

“Let me down,” she gasped, and struggled when Leon didn’t immediately comply, body writhing against his hold. A grunt escaped him as an elbow caught his side, and Lily fell to her hands and knees. Shame turned to bile and she retched helplessly, dry heaves wracking her entire body. Leon stood like a statue above her for a moment; scanning the area or simply unsure what to do, she didn’t care. But then he swore, crouching beside her, a careful hand pulling the damp shirt away from her skin.

“Lily,” he said urgently, “you’re hurt.

He tugged the material up, baring her back to the cold night air. But rough caress of his palm brought no pain. The flesh was whole and uninjured.

“No,” she gasped, “I don’t think I am.”

“You’re covered in blood,” he said, hands roaming, searching for the wound. She jerked away, face flaming, and tugged the shredded shirt back into



place.

“It must be from the watchdogs,” she lied. The memory of the stinging claws was fresh in her mind. The tearing agony. But that had vanished, as soon as she called on her power. Another bout of retching prevented her examining the thought too closely.

“Come on,” Leon said, when her stomach contractions finally subsided. “We need to get out of here. It’s going to be dark soon and then this place will be swarming with looters. I don’t want them to see me – or you.”

The ground beneath Lily was blackened, and she closed her fingers over a charred hunk of wood. Featherlight ash landed on skin and hair, leaving marks in its wake. She sat up, mouth falling open as she noted the devastation surrounding them. The stone buildings that had housed the Warren were smoking, thick plumes rising to join the clouds above Acedia. Walls crumpled inward, leaving the shops on either side entirely untouched. As if a contained explosion had simply blown through, instead of a ravenous blaze. She gaped at the impossibility of it. Her home, in cinders. Leon’s, too. A hand squeezed her shoulder, as if he guessed at her bleak thoughts.

“I don’t know how you survived,” he said quietly, his words an echo of his anguish.

“They were my flames,” she replied simply. “They couldn’t consume their maker.”

“But –” He hesitated, and Lily glanced up. His face was draining of colour.

“What?” She asked, impatient. In her experience, a hesitation was a perfect time to think up the appropriate falsehood.

“You can’t call fire.”

Lily raised her brows meaningfully. “What do you call the burnt-out husk of a building around us, then?”

“Cleverly timed arson? Gods, Lily, I don’t know.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Maledicts can’t wield the elements, just as I can’t delve through your thoughts. It’s a rule.”

“You know what a daring rebel I am,” she shot back with a weakly mustered flippancy. “According to the Decadent’s rules, I can’t exist. Haven’t we already determined that?”

He looked blank, so she gestured at her body. “Female, remember? Does it matter if I add ‘wields two gifts’ to that confusing package?”

“One anomaly is strange, but two? That seems like they aren’t really rules at all.” Leon scowled, turning his gaze away from Lily. She recognised the look immediately. He thought he was being played.

“You led the Rabbits. You know as well as I that rules are often just arbitrary decisions. The underlings don’t know the ins and outs of plans. Aren’t privy to the reasons behind rules, just expected to take them as fact, without question.” She shook her head disdainfully. “Maybe the Decadents just settled on those rules and weeded out anyone who didn’t fit with them.”

“If that’s true...”

“What? It changes everything?” Lily snorted. “We already knew Decadents were hedonistic, *narcissistic* bastards. Is it so difficult to add ‘liar’ to that list, as if it were a trait only owned by grafters?”

“I’m not arguing with you, Lily. I’m just trying to get it straight in my head. I

don't know – we have to get out of here. We can figure everything else out later.” Leon rose from his crouch, glancing around before he offered Lily a hand. She ignored it, scrambling to her feet unaided. It wasn't a gesture that made her feel any better. They stood side by side for a moment, taking in the wreckage. The burned remains of their home.

“I'm sorry,” she said finally. “I'm sorry I destroyed it. I know what the Rabbits meant to you. What the Warren meant.”

He slung an arm around her shoulders; warm, heavy, comforting. She leaned into him. “Lil, they meant nothing compared – you don't know how I felt, when I smelled the smoke. Saw the Warren in flames, you still inside. The grief I feel for this is nothing to what I would feel if you were gone. Nothing.”

The words swept over her, settling into the dips and curves of her body like they belonged. She recognised them as the truth. Not even the outward Lily, jaded by years surrounded by subterfuge, could disbelieve it. She wet her lips, went to speak, and thought better of it.

“Where can we go?” She said instead. “Who can we turn to, with watchdogs on our tail?”

But even as she asked, Lily realised that there was only one place. Only three boys, foolish and brave and vicious by turn, who would welcome them with open arms and devious minds. Of course, she thought. They were going back to East Hunt, and Connor.

“This is exactly what Mathilde needs.” A grin cut across his face, wily and fox-like in its cunning. “You – you can prove that there are exceptions to the Decadent bloodline, to their rules. And I? I can reveal every last drop of their

meddling in the undercity. Every deal they've cut, every cruelty I let slide on their command."

Lily shrugged. It wasn't as though she had a better plan.

Leon led the way through the zig-zag streets of the undercity, stride sure and unfaltering. She followed behind, ignoring the pleading cries of the bedlams and beggars, the feeble rattle of their bowls. A glance back showed the vultures already descending on the Warren, scampering rag-clad starvelings sifting through the rubble, heedless of the hot cinders beneath. The end of a chapter. Yet there was no wound. No gaping hole. Any hurt had healed without her knowledge. Her home was now travelling ahead, shoulders broad, the languorous façade thrown off in favour of vitality and decisiveness.



East Hunt was dark, houses boarded up. No children played on the streets, and several windows had boards nailed across the frames. An eerie quiet had fallen as they walked, as if all inhabitants had been drawn to the fire, moths to a flame. To witness the fall of a great house. The other gangs would be scrambling for control, desperate to establish themselves as the new power. It might mean war in the undercity. A clash not seen for years under Leon's brutal grip.

He led the way unerringly to the boys' nondescript headquarters. Nothing had changed – but, why would it? Lily had only been gone for a short few days. She simply imagined everyone's world changed, the way hers had. Shaken to its foundations. Leon gestured for her to stand behind him, and she shot him a glare.

He moved slightly to block her from view anyway, earning him a swift jab in the back.

“Give me a break,” he muttered.

“Is your welcome going to be any better than mine?” She hissed back.

Leon didn’t get the chance to reply, because the door swung open, revealing the warmly lit corridor beyond. Felix stood, grim-faced, in the entrance.

“What do you want?” He grunted, crossing his arms. Lily jabbed Leon again in a smug *I told you so*. Although, to be fair, she had never seen Felix in a different mood to his current one. A scowl seemed to be a permanent fixture.

“A meeting with Connor or Mathilde would be pleasant,” Leon drawled, unperturbed by the greeting. Lily didn’t need to see his face to know his mask was in place, cool cunning overtaking any warmer feeling.

Felix’s eyes flicked to Lily, narrowing. “Mathilde doesn’t want him here.”

Lily jolted slightly to hear the masculine pronoun. Him. She quelled the hot rush of resentment that rose; *stupid*, she thought, *don’t be stupid. It’s better this way*. It was, truly. Her disguise gave her freedom. It gave her strength and a voice and respect. But doubt had wrapped itself around her heart, its embrace crushing. The way Grace led the domestics. Despite her skirts, she stood unbowed. Her accusing eyes haunted Lily. Made unwanted questions clog her throat.

“She might not now,” Leon said quietly, not sparing a single curious glance at Lily. He just absorbed the information and moved on without question – without demanding to know *why* she wasn’t welcome. “But she will after she hears me out. Don’t be the one that screws this up.”

Felix looked between them, mouth growing thin. Lily could almost see the

cogs turning as he weighed up the situation. The hazel eyes remained stormy and aggressive, scowl in place, but he stepped aside. Waved them through. "Don't make me regret it."

Lily swallowed her laughter at the hollow threat. After feeling the rush of battle, fighting shoulder to shoulder with Leon, she sensed that theirs was a strength difficult to vanquish. Following Felix down the corridor, their footsteps fell in synchronisation. Bodies in tune.

"We'll tell them," Leon leaned in and murmured, hot breath falling against the shell of her ear. She slid him a back-off look. His face was full of understanding. "It doesn't have to be a secret anymore."

Fear and gratitude warred, and she dropped her eyes from his. She didn't know how to respond. A grand reveal? A terrifying thought. But Felix's barely contained ire rendered her half-formed reply unnecessary. He slammed into the meeting room, calling out a brusque greeting. "Connor, people here to see you."

Bright green eyes rose at their entrance, tracking Felix in his stomping path across the room and petulant descent into a chair, before snapping back to the doorway. Their aching familiarity was a punch to the gut. Lily hesitated on the threshold, letting Leon go ahead. She had forgotten what Connor's presence felt like. An electric current arched between them, and she let her face settle into a glower. Connor was a loss of control: Leon comfort, and homecoming. Yet when he flicked his gaze to Leon, Lily felt its loss.

"Leon Hennessey," he drawled, pushing to his feet with effortless grace. The air became still and hostile, and Lily swallowed. *I've met Connor*, Leon had said, but from the swelling tension Lily surmised he may have left out a few details

about the encounter. They were both in the business of half-truths, it seemed. “What blasted reason do you have for dragging your carcass here? Aren’t you supposed to be rotting in a shallow grave? We all hoped it was true.”

“Cut the bluster,” Leon replied, tugging his jacket sleeves straight meticulously. He might have been wearing a silk jacket instead of homespun, judging by the scorn in his bearing. *King indeed*, Lily thought. He gathered his composure around him like armour. “What we have to offer is important in your little revolution.”

“Lee can stay. Not you.” Connor snapped, and the belligerent tone had Lily stepping forward, reaching for her blade. This was the part she played with Leon, but she wasn’t bitter. Snarling scrap, needle toothed protector. Sidekick. She enjoyed it, the same way he loved the limelight. He had cutting words and she backed him up with violence.

“He goes, I go,” she bit out. Leon wrapped a warm, forbidding hand around her upper arm. Pulling her back, into his side.

“You heard the kid, we’re a package deal,” Leon purred. “But you’re missing a few key facts. I can already see that you’ve recognised potential here – you want to keep it. He’s something different, you’re thinking, and that’s not wrong.”

“I don’t need the glossy packaging and wheedling, thief, because I’m no Decadent lord to woo. Give it to me without the embellishments.”

Leon smirked, but Lily could read him. He liked that Connor had called him out. Respected it. “My lad here has always been a rulebreaker. Doesn’t like doing things by the book. You could tell he’s different, but putting your finger on it is difficult unless you can see the whole picture. Maledict, hellkite. He’s also a she.”

A pause. Connor blinked, eyes darting between the two of them. "What?"

"Connor, meet Lily Vance," Leon announced, pushing her forward with a flourish. Lily's vision narrowed until all she could see was the aggression draining from Connor's face, leaving horror in its place.



## Chapter 20

The silence in the wake of Leon's announcement was crushing. The room had frozen; Connor, leaning one hip against the desk, mouth slightly ajar. Felix caught surging forward out of his chair, a furious colour rising along cheekbones. Leon in the centre of it all, a sardonic brow raised, waiting for the barrage of questions that didn't come. Lily felt as though she was the only animate part in the tableau. Each breath was sharp and painful. This, the exact response she dreaded. The rejection already formed on their faces: the refusal to accept what and who she was.

She took a step back, and the creak of an errant floorboard snapped life back into the space. Felix lunged forward, and Leon slid in front of her, blocking his path. Connor came fully upright, brows severe.

"Felix, stop," he said.

"You heard him!"

"As clearly as you. Which means violence of any sort is not called for," he replied coolly. Felix just grunted, retreating.

"You wouldn't get through me, anyway," Leon mocked, undaunted. But Lily knew where to look and could read the tension. His fists were clenched, shoulder stiff as though he fought some impulse. To draw a weapon, to step into a fighting stance. To attack before they did. His laid-back façade did not fool her, and his worry stoked hers.

Neither boy responded to Leon's taunt, Connor's steady gaze passing over him as if he too saw through the bluster. It settled on Lily's face, and she felt a prickle of unease. His face was devoid of feeling, emptiness where bright curiosity had once lived.

“Lily Vance,” he said slowly, drawing out the vowels in careful consideration. “Not quite who you say.”

“It’s just a name,” she replied. “Everything else is the same.”

“I didn’t take you for a fool.”

Leon’s knuckles whitened, but Lily didn’t flinch from the insult. It barely counted as one, the way he said it. Cool and even, anger extinguished. There were no sharp edges to cut at her pride. “I didn’t take you for one. It only makes a difference if you let it.”

“It makes all the difference,” Felix growled, taking over the conversation. “You’re...you’re a woman. How could you possibly help us?”

The disgust in his voice was like a slap, and heat mounted in its wake, a flush overtaking Lily’s cheeks. She struggled to control her expression. *It doesn’t hurt*, she told herself, *it’s just Felix*. But Connor’s silence was telling. He agreed. The reviled word was a fourth, unwanted presence in the room. Woman. It stripped away the years of work, pared down the skill and muscle that Lily had fought for every step. The determination and triumphs washed away in the face of it. Woman. They did not have to see the differences in her body to revile them. Their suggested existence was enough to condemn. Lily raised her chin, stepping out from behind Leon’s protective back. His hand brushed hers as she passed. He knew this was her fight. She would not be cowed. “I can help more as I am.”

Felix snorted, raking his eyes over her. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“Why? Why do you doubt?” She turned on Connor, who was watching the exchange dispassionately. “You asked me to steal the Warren’s secrets. You wanted my help – you thought Mathilde was wrong to cast me out. That can’t just

change, my worth doesn't just vanish because of one lie. How many lies have you told, Connor? How many half-truths to protect yourself? Don't blame me for something everyone does."

"There's a difference between a half-truth and this. This does change everything. You're a woman." He didn't use the word as a weapon to hurt, not like Felix. But it still fell from his lips, heavy with regret. "How can you help now?"

"You're not making sense. I can help in exactly the same way. I'm exactly the same person I was an hour ago!" Frustration made her voice high and brittle. "I don't understand what is wrong with the pair of you!"

But she did know. Of course she did. Even men sympathetic to domestics and wives did not see them as equal, only victims. Broken dolls to rescue, with staring eyes and bruised limbs. Not people in their own right. Connor stopped Matthias in the marketplace, had saved Kel, but that wasn't about her. It was about him. The way it made him feel, broad and vengeful and full of righteous rage. It left a sick taste in her mouth. Had he thought about Kel since? Considered the violence doubled, tripled, because of his intervention? He humiliated Matthias in front of a crowd. That wound would not heal quickly or cleanly.

Lee to Lily. It was a demotion, from human to less. A pang of hurt shot through her chest, and Lily raised a hand to rub it away.

"You're already overwrought," Felix said scornfully. "*Emotional.*"

"*I am not emotional.*" The words tore from her, rage exploding in her gut, molten and hungry. Connor and Felix exchanged a speaking glance, stoking the fury. She started forward, and Leon's hand on her arm became an iron restraint.

"Now, Lily, we aren't here to scrap," he said sternly, and Lily heard the

warning underneath. *Don't start something we will have to finish.* But that was exactly what she wanted to do. The beast twisted and turned, desperate for release. She could tear them apart. She could rip and rend and devour. The Warren was gone, and nothing stopped her from doing the same here. Their scorn would not survive her flames. "Calm down."

Lily took a calming breath. And another. Shut her eyes against the dark desires that threatened to overwhelm her.

"Now, gentlemen." Leon turned on Connor and Felix. "Shall we discuss this sensibly? The way I see it, you need us."

"Why?" Connor asked.

"You sent Lily to the Warren to uncover secrets, to reveal corruption that would have the undercity up in arms. Unfortunately, an unforeseen series of events means that the Warren isn't exactly ... intact ... and whatever documents you wanted for proof are gone. But since I was the one who brokered those deals, I could be of assistance." He smiled unpleasantly. "But there are terms."

"Of course," Felix spat, but Connor held up a hand.

"What terms?"

"Lily needs training, and you have a Maledict here. He will help her." Leon said, voice firm. "I will train her other gifts. But she will be treated as one of the group. Like anyone else."

"I – other gifts?" A flicker of life showed behind Connor's mask, interest rearing its head. "What do you mean?"

But Leon didn't need to answer. Felix interrupted them both, horror colouring the words. "Your chest. When you first brought her, she had burned your

chest.”

That charred handprint, skin crisped, raw with blisters. Lily pushed back the memory.

“You put it together a long time ago, Connor.” Leon said knowingly. He took in Felix’s expression. “What? You were all so blindsided by a bit of mind control that you forgot she had also used the elements?”

“I –”

“Don’t hurt your feeble brain.”

The brewing altercation was cut short by Will’s entrance. He was dishevelled, hair standing on end and breeches splashed with mud. A black smudge cut across his cheek, drawing attention to his wide, wild eyes. He barely flinched at Leon and Lily’s unexpected presence. pushing past them to address Connor in a garbled rush. “Alice, Mathilde, Lord Spencer ... The scheduled meeting, they were waiting, the gods damned watchdogs were there, I don’t know what happened.”

“Slow down, what’s happened?” Connor gripped Will by the shoulders, giving him a small shake. Will twisted away with a groan, cradling his arm defensively. Blood stained his shirt sleeves, the bright crimson of a fresh injury. “You’re hurt.”

Will sank to the floor as if imparting the warning had taken the last of his strength. A sickly pallor underlay his tan, face contorting. “You have to help them.”

Leon swore, moving forward with easy grace. The two other boys stood still and startled, blank with incomprehension, as Leon wrangled Will out of his shirt. He hissed at the sight of the deep claw marks, cutting through muscle and sinew.

Lily snatched up a jug of water before he asked, bringing it in silent assistance. Once again, she felt the harmony between them. One acted and the other responded in a perfect choreography. Will groaned as the water splashed over the wound.

“Hold still,” Leon grunted. And then Connor was beside him, shaken from his surprise, offering bandages. He held Will’s arm as Leon wrapped the fabric in a quick, neat dressing. A faint bloom of red still showed even after his ministrations. “That’ll have to do for now.”

“Thank you,” Will panted, and Connor lay a grateful hand on Leon’s shoulder. Lily swallowed back resentment; how easy it was for him, collecting respect and admiration everywhere he went. A few charming words, quick reflexes, an even head under pressure. *It’s to my benefit*, she reminded herself harshly, *he’s helping me too*. But the bitterness didn’t ease.

“Why is he here?” Will looked directly at her, confusion mixing with the pain. “Connor?”

“Never mind that now, what’s happened to Mathilde and Alice? Who did this to you?” Connor crouched to look into his clouded eyes. “You need to tell me.”

Another suspicious glance was cast at Lily, and Connor frowned. “You can speak freely in front of them. Now.”

Will flinched from the note of command. “You know I was meant to meet the ladies at the tearooms. A simple information drop off, no direct interaction. But when I got there, three watchdogs jumped me. Took me by surprise, knocked me out.”

“And Alice?” There was no mistaking the urgent panic in Connor’s voice.

“Mathilde?”

“I don’t know if they were there or not.” He hesitated. “I don’t even know why they left me alive at all.”

“A warning.” Leon cut in. “Decadents like to play games: they thrive off it. This is just a warning. A taunt.”

“For what purpose?” Connor asked.

“Simply to say: you aren’t a threat.” Leon said quietly. “We aren’t afraid: you should be.” This silenced the room. Lily looked at each face. Catalogued the emotions she saw there. Felix was furious; Will, anguished. Connor’s sunlit eyes were dimmed, thoughtful. Shadows lurked there. She didn’t have to look at Leon to know what he was thinking. His face would reveal nothing of the calculation beneath. Nothing of the cunning, too-clever fox. What did she look like, she wondered? But no one looked to her.

“Where will they keep Alice and Mathilde?” Connor finally said, and Leon’s lips curved. A question he had predicted, Lily surmised.

“Does it matter?” Leon asked, a disgusted edge to his voice. “They’re only women.”

“Of –” Connor had the good grace to shoot Lily a look, revealing a flicker of shame. “Of course they matter.”

“Lord Spencer is a dangerous man, but he doesn’t see women as threats. I doubt he’ll damage the bargaining power Alice represents. Her mother may not be so lucky.” Darkness flitted across Leon’s face. “There are places, for women like her.”

“Where? We’ll rescue them.”

“Heroic words, but do you think you could go up against Decadent might? Whelan Spencer is perhaps the most powerful Maledict ever born. There is a reason he rules the Decadent council. He would destroy us all with half a thought.”

“So says his lackey,” Connor growled, venom dripping from every word. “Don’t deny it – Mathilde told me how you were schmoozing up to him. Attending Decadent parties, willing to be won over.”

Leon shrugged, unperturbed by the accusations. “I like to get ahead. But I changed my mind – Alice changed my mind. Mathilde knows that, so your hearing must have been selective, if that’s what you got out of the conversation.”

Lily suppressed a spurt of jealousy – Alice changed his mind. Alice had turned him from a narcissistic path. She wanted to be thankful for that. But deep down, she wished it had been her hand, her influence, that swayed him. A good influence – that’s what she longed to be. Something to counter the darkness that thrashed in her belly, roaring for a release.

“Connor,” she interjected, feeling the need to say something, *anything*, to escape the confines of her own head, “we’re all full to the brim with mistrust. We’re all liars, me more than any, but we need to lay all that aside. Work together. You said that with two Maledicts, you wouldn’t need Mathilde – well, here I am. Leon’s a hellkite. We’re willing to help – accept it, and us, at face value. Take a risk.”

A mistake. She knew it before she finished speaking. Connor’s face hardened to stone, and Will struggled to his feet, backing away from her and Leon. Felix’s glower seared the side of her face, but her eyes didn’t waver from Connor’s.

“We’ve taken more risks that you can imagine, *Lily*,” he said slowly. Anger saturated his voice, making it clipped and cruel. “I don’t think we need to take



lessons from you in sacrifice. Abandoning your kin, turning your back on your sisters. Lying to everyone and anyone. Why'd we ever believe anything that you say? You're trash. *Nothing.*"

"That's enough!" Leon snapped, stepping forward, but it was too late. Connor's scorn felt like a bucket of freezing water, dumped over her head. Agonising pinpricks, followed by spreading numbness, as ice overtook blood in her veins. *How did you expect him to react*, that slithering, knowing voice purred in the deep stretches of her mind, *he was never going to welcome it. Always going to loathe things he does not and cannot understand.*

"Of course, you're right. Why would you trust me?" She said in unfamiliar tones. Power leaked into her voice, threading around the words. All she could hear was *nothing, nothing, nothing*, repeating over and over. As if Connor had screamed it into the open chasm of her mind, and now it would echo for eternity. It had the finality of a death knell. The word to puncture her hopes. Faintly, as if from a distance, Lily saw shock register on Connor's face; felt the warm hand circle her wrist. She shrugged off Leon's restraint. No one would restrain her now.

"You don't need me, I don't need you," she intoned hollowly. "I'll go."

"Lily," Leon started, and she held up a hand. Sparks rose, and her power lashed out. She did not need to know how. A stupid assumption. It was like using a limb that had lain long dormant.

"Stop," she said, and his mouth gaped, unable to form words. No remorse came, even at the accusation on his face. It did not sway the heart that lay stone like in her chest. "I'll go."

"Go?" Connor said with a hint of disbelief. As if he hadn't expected his

insults to maim and hurt, only goad some petty reaction. “Where would you go?”

“No one is using me.” Lily said. “I’m leaving.”

“I know she’s useful,” Connor spoke to Will, as if she didn’t exist at all. Didn’t have a say in her own future. Will’s answer was mental rather than verbal: Lily felt his twisting ropes of power settle around her, closing like a metal trap. He wasn’t gentle. No permission asked. He bound her to his will. Urged her forward, claws digging into her mind.

A smile unfurled, bright and dangerous and warped. She stared him down, watched as his face fell, skin blanching whiter than bone. She felt nothing as the ropes disintegrated, as if they never existed at all. The beast snarled inside, talons raking down the prison that held it back. Lily wondered, *what was the point?*

“No,” she said. And thrust her own power back, pinning them all in place. Exerted enough pressure for it to hurt; just a bit, just enough for them to know what she could *really* do if she chose. A threat, spelled out.

“I can’t,” she said to Leon, “I can’t help. They don’t want it.”

She made sure he couldn’t reply. The anger and anguish darkening his eyes was enough.

Lily turned and left. Out of that house, air stale and weighted with mistrust. The dark undercity streets, ankle deep in filth and despair, smelled clean after that heavy loathing. She sucked in lungful after lungful, but the smothered feeling didn’t fade. Out of breath and out of time. Numb and cold, she walked and walked. East Hunt lay far behind when her influence stretched and snapped, releasing its hold.

Directionless, blind, Lily trudged on.

## Chapter 21

Lily stood at the window of the house, and watched her father make breakfast. His movements were slow and laboured but had a surety she didn't recognise. The glass she lurked behind was clean and without smudges; the space inside neatly dusted. Spotless, in a way it had never been. Improved, by her departure. Pain jabbed already tender ribs. At least she knew Connor was true to his word. The promise to pay Ralph's upkeep had been no lie. Doubtless the payments would end now he had discovered her flaws. But maybe Ralph would cope. Maybe he was back on his feet. Lily raised a hand to knock on the glass, but hesitated. Dropped it back to her side, uncurled hopeful fingers. Remembered the blank expression he wore, the last time she saw him. Worse than any disgust or disappointment. She shut her eyes for a second; inhaled. Turned, and saw the man across the street.

Even at a distance, his presence struck a discordant note. He was all wrong. The angle of his chin; the care he took not to lean on the wall behind. As if muddying his clothes was a concern. His gaze was too direct and confident and focussed directly on her. Lily found herself bowing under the weight of it, hands working their way deep into pockets. His interest felt like a catalyst for her collapse inwards.

"Don't go," he called, as if he knew her intention to flee. His voice was a warm, soothing baritone, and it flowed over her. Seeped through pores. Her feet stopped moving. Lily wasn't sure it was by her command. Something slick and alien brushed across the barriers of her mind. Gorge rose in her throat. "I want to talk to you, Lily Vance."

She parted her lips. Closed them. Pushed down the surging unease. “How do you know my name?”

“Really? That’s what you ask?” He tutted good-naturedly and sauntered towards her. As light from a gas-lamp fell across his face, Lily realised she had seen him before, in Leon’s memories. The rotund figure, fleshy red lips, balding hair. But the toadying air had vanished. Lily knew the reason with sudden, startling clarity. Whelan Spencer had wanted something from Leon. He wouldn’t require anything from her that he couldn’t just take. “Why, I expected better from Leon Hennessey’s protégé.”

“I’m not,” she said. “Leon’s dead. I can’t be the protégé of a dead man.”

Whelan laughed, long and loud. It echoed eerily in the still street; a sound more suited to a crowded Decadent parlour than the undercity. It was the laugh of a man used to making his presence known, and having others take note. “Your steadfast loyalty is touching, it truly is. But not necessary in the slightest. Where do you think Leon has been for the past months, if not with me?”

Lily couldn’t force out the denial. It stuck in her throat. Where had Leon been? He never mentioned it. She just assumed – what? She hadn’t assumed anything, because she hadn’t thought about it, not once. Details always escaped her, as she charged around half-cocked. But this was worse than usual. Had the touch of his lips, the glimpse of his smile, addled her brain? A worse thought occurred to her. Had it been purposeful? Felix’s accusations suddenly seemed a lot less cruel and a lot more correct. She was emotional.

“Of course you didn’t know.” A slithering smile crossed Whelan’s face, out of place with his friendly tone. “He’s always held his cards close to his chest, that

one. I'm sorry if you were misled at all, in regard to his intentions."

"His intentions?"

"For you, naturally. A half-formed Maledict doesn't fall into his conniving lap every day."

She blinked. "H-he didn't know about my abilities when he came back."

"Didn't he?" He raised a brow, smile broadening. His teeth were unnaturally white. "Leon has always known exactly what you are, even when you didn't. He shows a tremendous gift for finding adroits. Sniffs them out better than a bloodhound."

"No. No, he wouldn't do that. You're lying." Her voice rose, and the show of defiance just seemed to amuse Whelan further.

"My dear. Didn't you ever wonder about the five tasks he set you? So simple. So easy for a girl of your skills. But all risky. All supervised. He wanted to shock a reaction out of you. Put you in a rough place where the *oistros* would force its way free. It usually reveals itself under adversity. A threat, fear of death, intense emotional turmoil."

And she remembered. The hand hooked around her throat, the force which it slammed her back against the solid brick of the alleyway. The sour breath of her assailant; the jagged press of a rusted blade against her throat. Old panic gripped her. The quick, whimpering breaths; the furious gallop of a terrified heart. Beating out of her chest. The eyes that had stared into her own were red-ringed with madness. A desperation that pushed their owner off the edge, into that abyss. His body pressed into her own; heavy, and powerful. A free hand fumbled down, delving inside her clothing. Trying to find a purse that wasn't there. She never

carried one on assignment.

Lily had never been more scared. More overpowered. She forgot all her training. Leon had to step in. Pull the man away. The disappointment in his face stung, afterwards. To know that he had wanted her to feel that fear – gods. She felt something vital gutter inside. The fragile remains of her trust flickered and died, leaving darkness in its wake.

“Gods damned bastard,” she said, but the words didn’t come out with the intended anger. She just sounded broken. Empty.

“Never trust men, darling. We’re all scoundrels,” he replied consolingly.

“Why? Why would he do that?”

“Why do we do anything? For more power. More influence. More money, even.” He shrugged. “Leon wanted to get ahead, and you can’t blame him. Born in the gutter like that, with such a brilliant, clear mind. He saw you as a means to an end. Nothing more.”

*Why else, a little voice taunted. Why else would that man take an interest in little Lee Vance? He wasn’t ever really impressed with nimble fingers and fast burglaries. You suspected. You wondered why.*

“But now we have to forget about the past and focus on your future.”

“My future?”

“Yes,” he paused with exaggerated concern. “Unfortunately it really isn’t looking very bright. I really can’t let a Maledict roam around freely, especially not a woman. You go against everything the Decadents have told our loving public are the unbreakable rules of the bloodline. The power must be kept in the family, strictly, and the appropriate gender.”

“I’ll leave. I’ll disappear.” It came out as a plea, and a flush rose.

“I can’t let that happen.” He shrugged apologetically. “Luckily, we have places for women like you, and my wife.”

Leon’s words, in an unfamiliar mouth. Or maybe that was the wrong way around. The world had ceased to make sense. Leon, parroting a lord. Leon, betraying her.

“What did you do to Mathilde?” Lily asked, trying to take a step back. That alien presence pressed down: her legs remained locked in place. She reached for her power, but the call went unanswered. The beast was silent. As if Whelan’s strength immobilised it as well as her.

“You’ll find out soon.” He clicked his fingers, and two men moved out of the shadows. “These are your escorts.”

“To where?”

“To the asylum. Your new home.”

Lily could only watch as the men approached. Her body refused to come to her defence; she was trapped in her own flesh. A cloth came down over her mouth, and she was almost grateful for the chemical taste of it. Oblivion yawned within reach; closed over her head.

She collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut.



Lily’s return to consciousness was ushered in by wails. She gradually became aware of the stone floor where she lay, discarded. The cold seeped through thin

clothes. Someone had stripped her of breeches and shirt. The looseness in her chest attested to the lack of breast bands. She now wore a thin, brown chemise. No protection from the frost in the air. Her head throbbed insistently, scrambled by Whelan's influence. She raised a hand to massage the ache, but stopped, arrested by the thin gold band that circled her wrist. The other held a matching one. They shimmered with a preternatural light, and Lily knew instantly that they were objects of power. Imbued with *oistros*.

"They block your abilities," a reedy voice said from beside her. Lily started in shock. A girl huddled against a wall, tangled brown hair a halo around a pointed face. Blue eyes burned fervently through the shadows, seemingly delighted with her new cellmate. For it was undoubtedly a cell. A glance around revealed to Lily the meagre confines of the space. A single straw mattress; the source of the reeking mould that suffocated the atmosphere. A bucket in the corner. She could guess its use. No window and scant light. A neat square of bars, set at head height in the metal door, was the sole source of illumination. There was no inward handle.

"The bracelets?"

"You won't be able to touch it," the girl continued, as if Lily hadn't spoken. "It's gone. There's only darkness where it once was. It hurts, it hurts."

She clutched at her belly, a keening moan rising to a scream. It stretched on and on. Lily had half-risen to slap away the hysteria, when her teeth snapped shut, cutting the sound off cleanly. "It comes for us all, eventually."

"You're not making sense." Lily whispered. "Where am I?"

"The last home. The asylum."

Whelan had used almost exactly the same words. But asylums were for the



rich and insane. The undercity's high bedlam population was testament to the Decadent's dismissal of the madness of the poor. Yet the cell was squalid. The girl opposite stank like she hadn't washed for weeks. These weren't the conditions she'd expect of a Decadent asylum.

"Do you have the wasting sickness?" If she did, it was too late for Lily. The sickness was contagious, passed by touch; she would have been all over this space. Every inch contaminated.

"Sickness? No, no." The girl giggled. "I have what you have. *Oistros*. That's the only disease we have here: the curse of being born with something not for us."

Lily's mouth dropped open, mind scrambling to understand. "You're an adroit? But – but that isn't possible."

Another tinkling giggle. "You didn't think you were alone? Chosen? *Unique?*"

"No – I –" But it was a lie. Lily had thought she was alone. An anomaly. An exception. A word she barely could admit to herself; *special*.

"We're all here. All the chosen ones. All the broken dolls with cracked faces and staring eyes." A curious smile unfurled. "He puts us here, and visits. Hands out sweets, you'll see. Oh you will. I bet you'll be a favourite."

Lily choked. "Favourite?"

"He picks them sometimes. Fiery spirits to douse." She made a hissing sound like an extinguished candle. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not," Lily breathed. The emotion that beat in her chest was far, far beyond simply afraid. It was crushing and endless. "How long have you been here?"

“Forever and a minute,” came the dreamy, sing-song reply.

Lily lapsed into silence after that. The wails and screams from beyond the cell created an eerie symphony, an apt background to her desolate thoughts. The damp seeped through the chemise, leaving skin clammy and uncomfortable, but she couldn't bear to test the mattress. She suspected that the straw would be wet through. At regular intervals, shadowy figures moved past the door, rattling a rod against the bars. The cacophony rose to fever pitch at each pass, a cackling laugh cresting above the rest. Goosebumps broke out down Lily's arms and legs.

“To stop us sleeping,” the girl offered helpfully. “Every fifteen minutes. It drives you mad.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Completely bonkers.” She seemed far too pleased to impart this snippet of information. “We all are, I think. It's hard not to give in to it, here.”

Was that the fate awaiting Lily, lurking in the darkness, eager to pounce? Was that the path her beast had led her on, drawing nearer and nearer to this doom? She reached for the opal, longing for its familiar weight and warmth, but it was gone. Her nails scrambled in helpless panic against her thigh where it should have lain. Of course, her breeches gone, the opal taken with them. Whelan would know what it was. A lightning bolt of pain seared across her chest at the thought: her opal, returned to its false master. Her opal, in another's hands. The now-familiar power didn't explode with the agony of loss. There was emptiness where she expected rage and flame.

Lily curled into herself, pressing her face into her knees. If she closed her eyes, and ignored the sounds and smells assailing her, she could pretend. That

she wasn't here. That she never left the warmth of home. Her mother, still alive, still present. Ralph, whole, uncaring about his wife's absences. She never saw Matthias beat his wife; never met Connor. Leon had not died nor come back to life. The Rabbits remained, to her, bogey men warned about by fearful parents, desperate to keep their children close.

A rustle came from the doorway. Lily raised her head to see a flash of magenta rush past and back. Halt in front of the cell. Delicate, pale fingers curled around the bars. Incongruous.

"Lily? Lily Vance?" A soft whisper. A woman's voice, a girl's. One Lily recognised.

"Alice?"

"I don't have much time. My mother – he's put my mother in here."

Lily rose, went to the door. Touched those unsullied hands, to check whether some apparition already plagued her. Why was Alice Spencer here?

She must have spoken aloud, because Alice replied directly to her thoughts. "Leon sent me."

Lily recoiled. "No. No, Whelan said..."

"That snake would say anything," Alice hissed. The sound of hurried footsteps entered the corridor. "They're coming. I'm sorry, Lily. Just remember – remember Leon. Remember your mother."

Gruff masculine voices called out an angry warning. The magenta silk crushed under rough handling, pale fingers torn from the door. Alice didn't protest. Didn't put up a fight. But as the guards dragged her down the hallway, she shouted the words again, urgent and raw.

“Remember your mother.”

Lily staggered back as a third guard slammed a baton into the bars. She pressed a hand against the wall to steady herself. Fingertips encountered grooves; followed the sweeping lines in absent-minded curiosity. Not grooves: words. Words carved into uneven stone. Lily looked away from the door, cocked her head as she inspected the engraving. She expected gibberish, drawn from the clouded thoughts of her cellmate. But it wasn't. It was a message that Lily had carried with her for years, dormant. A thread that wound its way around her heart, tugging her back into the memories of the past.

Anthea Vance. *Act.*

She could almost hear her mother speak the words.

The beast stirred in Lily's belly, ghost grey eyes sliding open.