

A CROWN OF SUNLIT ASH

The Constellation Courts · Book One

— Free Reader Sampler —

The Opening Chapters

Edward Crewe

Thank you for stepping into the Sunlit Court.

What follows is the opening of *A Crown of Sunlit Ash*, the first book of **The Constellation Courts** — an eight-book, slow-burn romantasy of dying stars, sworn enemies, and a hand offered and refused.

When these chapters run out, the rest of the story is waiting for you in full.



CHAPTER ONE

**Light what you're given, girl, and want no more of it.*

*The wick that keeps the whole flame is the first to gutter out.**

— a Tallow Ward lamplighter's rhyme

The taper was down to its last finger of flame by the time Liora reached the bottom of Cinder Stair, and she cupped it close the way you would cup any small living thing in the cold, because down here a light you let die was a light you paid twice to wake.

She paid for nothing twice if she could help it. She went along the row with her tin of cheap tallow oil and her stub of taper, and the lamps took the flame she gave them one after another and gave her nothing back but light she would be three streets gone before anyone used. That suited her. She had learned young that the surest way to keep a thing was to want none of it, and she had wanted nothing for so long now that the wanting had gone quiet in her, the way an old bruise goes quiet — not healed, only used to being pressed.

The Tallow Ward woke as the day died, which was the whole shape of being poor, if you wanted it in one picture: the people up the hill had light when they wanted it and the people down the stair had it when they could buy it, and the buying happened at dusk, when the gold above went out of reach. Liora lit the Vintners' two lamps and the cobbler's one and the long sputtering line outside the wash-house where the steam never let a wick sit easy. She lit them fast. She had hands for it; everyone said so, in the grudging way the Ward said anything kind, which was to phrase it as a complaint. *Quick hands, that girl. Too quick to trust.*

Above her, past the tenement roofs and the smoke and the laundry strung between them like the realm's own tired flags, the Sunlit citadel burned.

It always burned. That was the thing the highborn never had to think about and the thing the Ward thought about every hour of every cold day of its life. The Sunspire stood on the shoulder of the hill with the last of the true sun caught in its white stone, and it gave that light back all night, gold and even and free, because the great House up there *kept a star* and the star kept them, and not one soul behind those walls had ever cupped a dying flame against the wind and prayed the oil would stretch. They were warm. They had been warm since before Liora was born. From down here the citadel looked the way heaven was supposed to look in the stories the Ward could not afford to believe — and it looked at the Ward the way heaven looked at everyone, which was to say it did not look at all.

"You're short," Liora said, without turning, to the woman who had crept up at her elbow.

Hessa the fishmonger's wife had three coppers in her fist and the particular stillness of someone who knew she had three coppers and a four-copper lamp. "I'll have the rest by market-day."

"You'll have the rest by market-day," Liora agreed, and lit the lamp, and took the three. It was a lie and they both knew which kind. She did not do it because she was soft. She told herself she did not do it because she was soft as she fitted the chimney back and watched the wick steady into a clean little tongue of yellow, and Hessa's hard face ease in the warmth of it, twenty years falling off her for as long as the flame held. Liora moved on before the thanks could land. Thanks were a weight. She had enough to carry.

That was the trade, down to the bone of it. She gave light to people who would forget her by morning and she kept nothing for herself but the going, and somewhere in the keeping-nothing she had made herself very hard to see — which was its own kind of safety, in a Ward where being seen meant being wanted something from. *No one*, the Ward called her when it called her anything, the way it might say *the weather*. The lamp-girl. She had answered to it so long it had stopped sounding like an insult and started sounding like a description, which was worse, though she would not have said so. She did not say much.

She came up out of the wash-house lane into the long blue cold of Ferrier's Row, and old Pell was on his step with his pipe and his cataracts and his opinions, and he said the thing she had been half-hearing all week from half the old mouths in the Ward.

"Drawing in early again."

"It's dusk, Pell. It draws in every night."

"Early," he said, with the flat certainty of a man who had outlived everyone who might contradict him. "Three weeks running. My knees know. Dark's coming on faster than it's got any business to, and the lamps don't hold it the way they did. You watch. You're young, you don't watch." He drew on the pipe and it had gone out and he didn't notice. "Something's wrong with the nights."

"Something's wrong with your eyes," Liora said, but she said it gently, for her, and she gave his step-lamp an extra moment and a thread more oil than it had paid for, and she did not let herself look back up at the citadel to see whether the gold was doing anything a star ought not to do. There was nothing wrong with the nights. The nights were the nights. The cold was the cold. The dark came when the light ran out, and the light ran out faster for the poor, and that was not an omen, it was just arithmetic, and the day she started reading omens in arithmetic was the day she'd have to start being afraid, and she did not have time to be afraid. She had one stop left.

She had been not-thinking about the last stop since Cinder Stair.



Maren opened the door before Liora's knuckles touched it, which meant she had been standing the wrong side of it listening for feet on the boards, which meant the boy was worse.

"He asked for you," Maren said. Her hands were doing something with her apron that had nothing to do with the apron. "Since noon. I told him you come at dark. I told him —" She stopped. She had a candle in the room behind her and one tallow

lamp and that was the whole light of the place, and in it her face was the colour of the wall.

Liora had been bringing oil to this house for a year and a half, ever since the fever season took the boy's father and left a widow and a child in two rooms that cost more than two rooms in the Tallow Ward had any right to cost. She brought the oil cheap. She told Maren it was spoiled stock she couldn't sell, which was a lie, and Maren let her tell it, which was a kindness, and between the two lies they had built the one thing Liora let herself have that she did not strictly need, and his name was Tobin, and he was nine, and he was dying.

She had known it for a week. The Ward knew the particular smell of it, the way the body went sweet and wrong at the end, and you learned not to flinch from the knowing because flinching helped no one and Liora helped where she could and not one inch further, that was the rule, that had always been the rule. She went in.

"There she is," Tobin said.

He was so small in the bed. He had always been small — a thin quick child, all elbows and questions — but the sickness had gone at him like a tide going out, taking him in pieces, and what was left looked carved, the bones of the man he would not get to be coming up under the skin of the boy he still was. His eyes were too big and too bright and they found her and held on.

"Here I am," she said. "Costing your mother good money to come and look at your ugly face."

"You don't pay to look," he said, the old joke, their joke, his voice a thread. "Looking's free."

"Nothing's free in this Ward. They'd charge you for the dark if they could weigh it." She pulled the stool to the bed and sat and did not take his hand, because if she took his hand she would have to admit the hand was cold, and there was a list of things she was not going to admit tonight and she had decided it back on Cinder Stair. "What's this I hear, you bothering your mother since noon. Have you no consideration. A working woman can't be summoned like a lord's physician."

"I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask, then. I'm dear by the hour."

His eyes went past her to the corner where the lamp didn't reach, and the brightness in them changed, and she saw with a small cold drop in her chest that it was fear, the ordinary enormous fear of a child, and that he had been carrying it since noon and had not wanted to give it to his mother, who would weep, and so he had saved it for the one who wouldn't.

"It gets dark," Tobin said. "When I close my eyes. It gets — really dark. Darker than the room. Like the room's nothing." His fingers moved on the blanket. "I don't like it. I keep thinking if there was more light I could — I could find the edge of it. The dark. I could see where it stops." He looked at her. "Does it stop?"

She should have lied. She was good at lying; it was half her trade. She opened her mouth to tell him of course it stops, love, the dark always stops, that's what morning is — and the lie wouldn't come, because he was looking at her the way no one in the Ward looked at her, which was as if her answer were worth something, as if she were someone whose answer could hold a thing back, and the wanting rose in her then, the old buried wanting she had starved so carefully for so long, and what it wanted was the one thing she could not buy or steal or light: she wanted him to be wrong. She wanted the dark to stop. She wanted, just this once, to be able to give a thing that mattered.

"Make it brighter," Tobin whispered. "Just till I'm asleep. So I can see the edge."

The candle at his bedside chose that moment to gutter.

It was nothing. It was the oil, or a draft, or the wick gone long; she had watched ten thousand flames do exactly this and she knew the cure was a trimmed wick and a steady hand and she reached for it the way she had reached for ten thousand others — to coax it, to tend it, to do the one small competent thing that was hers to do in a room where everything else was past her.

And something in her reached with the hand.

She had no word for it then and would spend a long time not having one. It was not in her fingers; it was *behind* her fingers,

down under the breastbone where the wanting lived, a place she had kept shut so long she'd forgotten it had a door — and the door came open, and something poured out of her toward the failing flame the way water finds the one crack in a wall, all at once, with her whole weight behind it before she even knew it had moved.

The candle did not steady.

The candle *roared*.

White light stood up off the wick — not the soft tallow yellow, not lamp-light at all, but a clean hard white with no smoke in it and no flicker, the white of the citadel, the white of the star up the hill that the Ward could see and never touch, blazing now off a four-copper candle in a dying boy's room in the lowest cold rooms of the lower city, in her hands, *from* her, and the little room went bright as noon and then brighter, brighter than anything the Ward had ever been able to afford, and the cold went out of the air all at once and a warmth she had never made in her life rolled out to the corners and found the edge of the dark and showed it plainly, the way Tobin had asked, *there, there is where it stops* —

For one heartbeat it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and the most wrong, and both at the very same time, and she could not have said which was bigger.

"Oh," said Tobin, in the light. Not afraid. Just — *oh*, the way you'd say it at the top of the hill the once in your life you ever got up the hill, seeing the whole world laid out gold.

And then, in that same white light, while it still stood off the wick and warmed the room and showed him the far wall plain as morning, the boy let out a small breath, and did not take another.

She had given a frightened child light against the dark. She watched the light fail to keep him in the same instant she understood it had no power to. The white held a moment more — beautiful, useless, blazing — and then it sank back down into an ordinary guttering candle as if nothing had happened, as if she had imagined it, and the cold came back into the room and the ordinary dark with it, and Tobin lay in the small yellow ring of it not afraid of anything anymore.

Liora did not move.

Behind her, Maren made a sound that was not yet weeping, that was still only the indrawn first half of it, and then the woman's eyes came off her dead son and fixed on Liora's hands, and on the candle, and the indrawn breath changed in her throat into something else, something Liora would not let herself name but knew the shape of the way she knew the smell of the end — awe going over into fear, the awe of the white light curdling as it met the question of where the white light had come *from* and what kind of creature held its hands over a dead boy and made the sun come down into the room and could not, with all of it, with all that stolen impossible glory, buy back one ordinary breath.

If I had been more, something said, very far down, very cold, in a voice that was hers and was new. If I had known what I was. If I had held more of it. Could I have kept him?

It was a lie. She did not know yet how complete a lie it was, or what it would cost her. She only knew that it had the weight of truth, and that she took it, there, on the stool, with her hands still strange to her in her lap — the way you take a coin pressed on you in the dark before you've seen its face.

"Liora," Maren whispered. Not a summons. A warding. The woman had drawn back against the wall and put the bed between them, between her grief and the lamp-girl who was suddenly not a lamp-girl at all. "What — what are you —"

"I don't know," Liora said. It was the truest thing she had said in years and it helped nothing. "Maren. I don't —"

The boy's door, which had no lock worth the name, came off its latch with the flat crack of a boot, and the cold blue evening of the Tallow Ward was full of gold.



They came in like the citadel come down the hill: tall, and clean, and certain, and wrong in that low doorway the way the white light had been wrong, the way anything bright and sure was wrong in the Ward, which ran on dimness and the careful spending of small flames. Gold and white. White cloaks with the gold sun-blazon, and gold light standing off their open hands without any candle to

make it — sunfire, the highborn fire, the thing the great House kept and the thing that had never once in Liora's life come below Cinder Stair, because what would it want down here.

It wanted her.

She understood that before any of them spoke. The first one through the door swept the room with his eyes — the dead boy, the warding mother, the guttering tallow candle, the girl on the stool — and his gaze went over all of it and stopped on her and *stayed*, and behind his certainty she saw, for one bare moment, a thing she had never seen a highborn face wear toward anyone in the Ward: he was looking at her the way you look at a thing you have been taught your whole life to fear and never expected to find in the world.

"That's the light," he said. "That's the source. There — the girl."

"It can't be." A second one, a woman, her hand full of gold fire that lit the squalid little room brighter than the white had, and did not warm it at all. "Look at her. She's a Ward rat. It's been —"

"It's been centuries," the first one said quietly, and that word went through the room and through Liora and lodged somewhere under the breastbone, in the room with the open door she could not shut again. *Centuries*. "I know how long it's been. Look at the candle. Look at her hands." And then, to her, in a voice gone formal and careful and almost — almost — gentle, the way you might gentle a beast you meant to put down: "On your feet. Slowly. Hands where I can see them."

She got up. She did not know what else there was to do and she would be damned before she did it slowly. The stool went over behind her.

"Don't touch me," she said.

They touched her.

It was fast and it was practised and it did not hurt, which was somehow the worst of it — the ease, the lack of effort, two of them taking her arms the way you'd take up a parcel, no malice in it and no person in it either, while the third stood in the doorway and the gold light of all three of them filled the little room where a boy lay dead in the dark and washed every shadow out of it without

making it warm. She twisted once, hard, on instinct, the lower-city instinct that said hands on you mean nothing good — and the grip only closed, certain as a lock, and she made herself go still, because thrashing in a snare only teaches the snare your weight.

"Maren," Liora said. The mother had not moved from the wall. "Maren, tell them — tell them I just light the lamps. Tell them you've known me a year. Tell them —"

But Maren had her dead son in the room and a thing she could not understand standing in gold hands at the center of it, and her one terror had eaten her other grief whole, and she did not tell them anything. She pressed back into the wall and got the bed and the body and the whole width of the room between herself and Liora, and she did not say a word, and that — not the gold hands on her arms, not the white cloaks, not the word *centuries* — that was the thing that closed Liora's throat. A year and a half of cheap oil and a boy they'd both loved without admitting it, and when the moment came no hand in that house reached for her. None reached. She had given light up and down the Ward for half her life and now she stood in a snare of strangers and not one soul she had warmed put out a hand.

She had always known it would be like this. She had built her whole life on knowing it would be like this — want nothing, hold nothing, expect no hand — and being right about it was a cold, cold thing to be.

So she stopped asking.

Something went over in her, quiet and final, the way the white light had sunk back down into an ordinary flame. The pleading went out of her and the measuring came up in its place, the old armor, the only thing she had ever owned outright. If the world that had never wanted her had decided, tonight of all nights, to come down and want her — to come in gold and take her up the hill she'd looked at her whole life from below — then it could have her body. It would get nothing else. She lifted her chin and looked at the first Warden, the careful one, the one who'd said *centuries* like a man laying down a weight, and she fixed his face in her mind

the way you fix the face of a creditor, to know it again, to owe it nothing.

"Where," she said. Not *where are you taking me*. Just the one cold word, all she'd give them.

He had the grace, at least, not to pretend it was anywhere good.

"Up," he said.

They took her out through the broken door, out of the two warm-lit rooms and the small ruined family she had let herself almost have, into the blue cold of the Tallow Ward where the neighbors had come to their steps and their windows to watch the gold go by and drew back from it as it passed — drew back from *her*, in the middle of it, the lamp-girl gone strange, no one's, the weather turned dangerous. No one called out. Pell stood on his step with his dead pipe and watched her go and his blind old face was the only one that looked sorry, and he could do nothing, and they both knew it.

And up. They took her up. Out of Ferrier's Row and the wash-house lane, up Cinder Stair where her own lamps burned the small honest yellow she'd given them an hour ago in another life, up past the line where the Ward ended and the lower city began to climb, up toward the shoulder of the hill where the Sunspire stood and burned and kept its star — the gold growing brighter and nearer with every step, the warmth of it reaching down at last to touch her now that it was too late to mean anything, now that it was a wall closing around her and not a heaven she'd been barred from. The cold was below and the gold was above and her hands were not bound but might as well have been, held in the grip of strangers, and behind her in a dark room at the bottom of the stair a four-copper candle burned down its last white-touched inch over a boy who was not afraid of anything anymore, and not one hand in all that bright procession was held out to her, and she had not, in the whole of her life, learned how to ask for one.

She climbed toward the light that had never been hers, and she did not let them see her shake, and she did not yet know what she was, or what they meant to do to it.



CHAPTER TWO

**A light kept becomes a light hoarded; a light hoarded becomes a hunger.*

*Mercy is the hand that closes over the flame before the flame can learn to want.**

— from the Warden catechism, the First Verse

Aurelian had bound seven lights in his life, and he could still feel every one of them in his hands.

That was not how the order described the craft. The order called containment a setting-down, a quieting, a mercy laid gently over a thing too dangerous to be let burn — and the words were true, in the way the words of old institutions were true, which was that they had been polished by so many careful mouths that the rough grain of the thing underneath no longer showed. Aurelian knew the rough grain. You learned it the first time, and you did not unlearn it. Containment was not a setting-down. It was a pressing. You brought your hands up over the light another person carried in them, and you bore down with your will the way you would bear down on a wound that would not stop, and you held, and held, and the light fought you because light always fought, and then it did not fight, and then it was out, and the person it had belonged to looked up at you with the particular emptiness of someone who has just been made smaller in a way they will never be able to name.

Seven times. He could feel all seven in the small bones of his hands on cold mornings, the way an old soldier feels old weather in a break that healed crooked.

He told himself, each time, that mercy and duty were the same word in the order's mouth, and he had very nearly come to believe it.

The Warden hall was cold, as the citadel was always cold for all its gold. That was the thing outsiders never understood about the Sunlit Court — they saw the white stone holding the day's light, the warmth pouring off the walls all night, and they thought it must be a soft place to live. It was not soft. The warmth of the Sunspire was the warmth of a forge, not a hearth; it was power, banked and given back, and you did not curl up against it, you stood straight in it and were grateful and afraid. Aurelian had stood straight in it his whole life. He stood straight in it now, in the long gallery where the order kept its watch, while the initiates ran their forms down the floor and a master walked the line correcting the angle of a hand here, the set of a shoulder there, and the light of the Lion came in gold through the high windows and lit the whole disciplined room without once making it kind.

"You're watching the doors," said Halvard.

"I'm watching the floor."

"You're watching the doors and pretending it's the floor." Halvard was the nearest thing Aurelian had to a friend inside the order, which was to say they had been raised in the same cold gallery and neither had ever once said an unguarded thing to the other, and that passed for closeness among Wardens. "Word came up from the lower city an hour ago. They've had the protocols out of the deep archive. The dry old ones. The ones nobody alive has read aloud."

Aurelian kept his hands still at his sides. A Warden's hands were the instrument; it was the first thing they taught you and the last thing they let you forget, and he had learned long ago that a man's hands tell the truth his face has been trained to hold. "Which protocols."

"You know which." Halvard's voice had gone very even. "There's only the one kind of thing that gets those off the shelf."

He did know. Everyone in the gallery knew, though no one would say it at conversational volume, because the word belonged to the catechism and the catechism was not for the training floor; it was for the dark of the chapel and the dark of a man's own head at the hour when sleep would not come. Aurelian had learned the

catechism before he had learned his letters. He could have said it now with his eyes shut, the whole long shape of the order's reason for being, the doctrine of the original sin that every child of the Sunlit line drank in with the citadel's borrowed warmth:

That once, an age past memory, there had been a light too bright to be borne — the brightest light, the one all the others leaned on — and that the one who kept it had loved it too well to share it, and that keeping had become hoarding and hoarding had become hunger, until the keeper devoured the very thing he kept, and himself with it, and so was born the appetite at the dead center of the sky that the catechism named only as *the hunger*, and the world named, when it dared name it, the Long Dark. That the wise of that age could not kill what the keeper had become. That they had done instead the one terrible thing left to them, the thing the order existed to remember and to never need again — and what that thing was, the catechism did not say. It said only: *they paid for peace, and the price is still owed, and we are the keeping of the account*. It said: every great light is the old light in miniature, and every keeper who keeps alone walks the dead man's road, and the gift the order called Lanternbound was not a gift but a seed — the same seed, the very same — and the only mercy for such a seed was to close the hand over it before it could grow toward the light and learn to want.

Cage it, or snuff it. There was no third way. A third way was how the world had ended last time. That was the whole of the faith, and Aurelian had built his life on it the way the citadel was built on the hill, which was to say he had never once asked whether the ground would hold, because asking was the first crack and a Warden did not crack.

Except that he had bound a girl, two winters past — a baker's daughter from the middle terraces, barely sensitive, a flame so small it would never have warmed a room — and the order had named her a danger because the law could not tell a small seed from a large one, the law only knew *seed*, and he had pressed his hands over the little light she did not even know how to use and put it out, gently, mercifully, by the book, and she had looked up at

him after with that emptiness, and her name had been Anwen, and he had not been able to put her face down since. He had never told anyone. He told himself it was discipline that kept him silent and he knew, in the cold hour, that it was something nearer to shame. A Warden did not crack. But a man could carry a face the way he carried the feel of seven lights in his hands, and tell no one, and call the carrying duty, and almost — almost — get away with it.

"They'll want you," Halvard said. It was not a question. "If it's real. You're the best binder in your year and your father's son besides. They'll want the heir's hands on it. It plays well."

"It plays well," Aurelian agreed, and hated, distantly, that it was true.

That was the other half of him, the half the order did not own. He was a Warden, yes, sworn and bound and gloved in the white-and-gold; but he was also the only living son of the Sunlit line, and that meant his hands belonged to two masters who had never yet asked him for two different things. The court wanted a prince who embodied the proudest House in the sky, the House that had never lost, the bright martial rim of the world where the light was strongest because they were farthest from whatever the catechism would not name. The order wanted a Warden who would close his hands over any light the law condemned, without flinching, by the book. So far the two masters had pointed the same way every day of his life. He had been able to be both because no one had ever made him choose. He did not know, standing in the cold gold gallery, that the choosing had already begun three streets below him in a dead boy's room, and was even now climbing Cinder Stair in the grip of a patrol, with a girl's measuring eyes fixed on the middle distance and her chin up.

The great bell of the inner court rang once.

It was a sound Aurelian had heard perhaps four times in his life — at his mother's death, at his investiture, at the old Lord Warden's passing. It was not a sound the Sunspire used for ordinary alarm. The whole gallery stopped. The initiates' forms hung unfinished; the master's correcting hand froze in the air; and

into the silence the bell's single iron note went on and on, fading, the way a struck thing fades, and did not ring again.

"That's the court convening," Halvard said, very quietly, and for the first time in the years Aurelian had known him there was something in the man's voice that had nothing of the order's discipline in it at all. "In the dark. They don't convene in the dark."

"No," Aurelian said. "They don't."

He flexed his hands once, the small bones aching, seven lights and a face named Anwen, and he went toward the doors he had been watching and pretending not to watch, into the worst night the Sunlit Court would know in five hundred years.



They had her in the center of the Hall of the Lion, where the floor was a great sunburst of gold and white stone and the whole vast room was built so that every eye would fall, in the end, to the middle of it.

She did not look as though she knew she was meant to be the middle of anything. That was the first thing Aurelian saw, coming in at the side of the dais among the gathered order, and it lodged in him before he had time to set his face against it: a girl, lower-city thin, in a lamplighter's drab with the smell of tallow still on her, standing alone on the gold sunburst with two Wardens' hands on her arms and looking around the Hall of the Lion — at the high lords in their hasty finery, at the assembled white-and-gold of the order, at the carved beasts and the cold fire of the sconces and the whole crushing weight of the proudest court in the sky arrayed to look at her — looking around all of it with an expression he could only call *appraisal*, as if she were pricing the room. As if she had been hauled up from the dark to be judged and had decided, on the way, to do some judging of her own.

He had been raised to fear this. He had drunk the fear with the warmth. *The seed of the world's ruin, the old hunger in a new vessel, the thing the order exists to put out.* He had stood in the chapel dark and felt the proper dread of it, the dread that was supposed to come, and he had expected — when the day came, if it

ever came — to feel that dread stand up whole and terrible in him at the sight of the real thing.

He looked at the real thing, and what stood up in him was not dread.

What stood up in him was the unbearable smallness of her. The cold had got into her on the climb and she was holding herself very straight against the shaking, the way you hold yourself when you have decided that whatever happens you will not give them the shaking. There was tallow oil under her nails. She was perhaps his own age and she looked younger and older both, the way the lower city made people, and when the seizing Warden's grip shifted on her arm she did not so much as glance at him, did not waste the look, only kept her eyes moving over the room, taking its measure, learning it — and then her gaze came around the dais and found Aurelian among the order, in his white and gold, the heir, the binder, and it stopped on him.

She looked at him the way the condemned look at the blade. Not pleading; he could have borne pleading, the order trained you to bear pleading. She looked at him the way you look at a thing you mean to learn the face of before you lose the right to. As if she were fixing him in her memory. As if she meant to know him again, wherever they were both going.

Aurelian made his face the order's face and held her gaze and did not let her see that anything in him had moved, because something in him had moved, and a Warden did not crack.

"Lords of the Sunlit Court." Garran's voice filled the hall without his seeming to raise it. "Brothers of the order. You have been called from your beds into the dark, and I will not waste the insult of pretending it is a small thing that did it."

Warden-Lord Garran came down the center of the hall, and the room arranged itself around him the way iron filings arrange around the stone. He was not large; he was not loud; he was, Aurelian had always thought, the calmest man he had ever known, and the calm was the frightening thing, because it was not the calm of a man who did not understand the stakes — it was the calm of a man who understood them better than anyone in the

room and had made his peace with every terrible thing they required. He stopped a few paces from the girl on the sunburst and looked at her, and his face held nothing Aurelian could have called cruelty. It held something worse. It held *pity*.

"This child," Garran said, "lit a dead flame with her own hand tonight, in the lowest rooms of the lower city, before a dozen witnesses. White light. True starlight, out of nothing, out of a tallow stub. There is one word for what does that." He let the silence hold. The high lords leaned into it. "It is a word this court has not had cause to say in five hundred years, and I had hoped to die without saying it. She is **Lanternbound**."

The word went through the hall like cold through stone.

Aurelian watched it land. He watched the high lords — who knew the word the way they knew any old terror of the nursery, half-believed, never expected — go pale and then, worse, go calculating, their fear turning at once toward what it would mean for the House to have harbored such a thing under its roof. He watched the order go still and certain, every Warden's hand drifting to a readiness none of them quite let become a gesture. And he watched the girl, who did not know the word, hear it land on a roomful of powerful people and read in their faces exactly how much it weighed, even though no one had told her what it meant. She did not flinch. But something moved behind her eyes — a fast, lower-city calculation, *whatever this is, it's bad, and there's no door* — and her chin came up another fraction, and Aurelian, who had spent his life learning to read the small truths of hands and faces, understood that she was more afraid than anyone in the room and would die before she showed it, and he hated that he understood it, because the catechism did not have a verse for that.

"There are two mercies for such a light," Garran said, to the hall, but watching the girl now, gently, as a physician watches a patient he is about to hurt for her own good. "It may be caged — bound and kept, its fire smothered slow, the danger held until the end of a natural life. Or, if it has grown too strong to be safely held, it may be snuffed, cleanly, and the seed returned to the dark before

it can root." He paused. "There is no third path. I know the histories. There has always been a fool in every age who dreams of a third path — who looks at a light like this and thinks, *but what if it could be freed, what if it could be used, what if the old fear is only fear* — and I will tell you what the third path is. The third path is how the sky went dark at its heart. The third path is the thing we have spent five hundred years keeping caged so that you and your children could stand in this warm hall and call yourselves safe. There is no third path. There is the cage, or there is the snuff, and either one, for such a soul as this, is mercy."

He believed it. That was the thing Aurelian would carry out of the hall, the thing that frightened him more than the word: Garran believed every syllable of it, believed it with his whole life, and he was not a stupid man or a cruel one, and he might even — the cold thought arrived unbidden, the first crack — he might even be right.

"My lord," Garran said, and turned, and Aurelian knew before the man's eyes found him exactly whose name was coming. "We have the order's finest young hand in the hall, and he is the heir of this House besides — so that the Sunlit line itself may answer the danger born under its roof, as is fitting." Garran's pitying gaze settled on him, and there was even, and that was the unbearable part of it, a kind of gentleness in it, one craftsman to another. "Aurelian. The binding is yours."



He came down off the dais onto the gold sunburst, and the whole Hall of the Lion watched him come, and the girl watched him come, and her appraisal had changed. She knew now what he was for. She had heard *binding* and she had watched the room not argue with it, and she had done the arithmetic, and when he stepped onto the gold within reach of her she looked at his hands — at his hands, first, before his face, his Warden's hands rising already to the work — and then up at him, and her mouth made a thin hard line that he understood was the lower city's version of a scream held behind the teeth.

"So that's you," she said. Her voice was low and dry and it carried, because the hall was built to carry, and because she meant it to. "The one they send. The clean one."

"Don't," he said, very low, only for her. He did not entirely know what he was telling her not to do.

"Don't what. Don't talk?" Her eyes were the only large thing about her. "You're going to put your hands on me and put something out, and I'm not even to talk while you do it? That's a lot to ask of a person, my lord. Where I'm from we let a body curse the man who's robbing them. It's the one thing we let them keep."

"It isn't robbery." The order's word came to his mouth out of long habit and turned to ash on the way. "It's —"

"Mercy. I heard him." She had heard him, and she had filed it, the way she seemed to file everything, fast and cold and for later. "You all keep saying it like the word does the work. Down where I light the lamps, when a man takes a thing and tells you it's a mercy, that's how you know it's the most expensive thing he's ever stolen."

She was not what they had told him. That was the whole of it, the thing the catechism had no verse for and the dread could not survive: he had been promised a monster, the seed of the world's ruin, the old hunger wearing a new face — and what stood on the sunburst trading him bitter true words while the room waited to watch her light go out was a half-starved lamp-girl with tallow under her nails and more spine than the entire court of lords behind him, frightened past speaking of it and speaking anyway, and the gap between the thing he'd been told to fear and the person in front of him opened under his feet like a stair with a missing step. He had bound seven lights. Not one of them had ever made him feel that he was the thing in the room that ought to be afraid.

"Warden." Garran's voice, patient, from the dais. "Begin."

Aurelian raised his hands.

He had done it seven times. The body knew the shape of it; he did not have to think; he brought his hands up to frame the place where her light lived, under the breastbone, and he reached for his

will the way the craft required, the bearing-down, the pressing, the hand closing over the flame before the flame could learn to want — and the girl held his eyes the whole way up, did not look away, gave him her measuring stare to do it under, *learn my face, you clean murdering boy, I'm learning yours* — and he steeled himself against the emptiness that would be in her eyes after, the Anwen emptiness, the eighth face he would carry —

The Lion guttered.

He felt it before he understood it. The gold light that had poured through the high windows and lit the cold hall his whole life — the warmth of the Sunspire, the banked forge-heat of the wall, the borrowed sun the great House had kept since before any soul now living drew breath — it *dimmed*, all at once, the way a candle dims when a door opens somewhere far off in the house, and a cold came into the Hall of the Lion that did not belong in it, a cold no one born under this roof had ever felt, sliding in along the gold sunburst, raising the hair on his arms, putting out the small certainties one by one.

For a moment no one moved. Then the room talked itself out of it, the way certain people always will. "A draft," someone said. "The doors." A high lord laughed, too quickly. A sconce had guttered; that was all; a chill in a long night; nerves, on a strange evening, with an old word said aloud in the dark.

Aurelian stood with his hands raised over the rarest light in five hundred years, and felt the great light over all their heads begin to fail, and knew in the small aching bones of his hands that it was not a draft.

The girl had gone still under his raised hands. She had felt it too — he saw it cross her face, the cold, the wrongness — and her measuring eyes had stopped measuring him and gone up, past him, toward the high windows where the gold was thinning, and when she looked back at him there was no triumph in it and no fear for herself, only a strange flat dread that matched the thing climbing his own spine, two enemies on a gold floor recognizing the same cold at the same instant.

"That's not a draft," she said quietly. "Is it."

"No," Aurelian heard himself say.

His hands were raised to put out the only light in all the sky that could have answered the one that was going out above them, and somewhere far below the dais a Warden cried out a word that the Hall of the Lion had not heard in five hundred years and was about to learn again in full, and the cold came on.



CHAPTER THREE

**We do not ask what we caged. We ask only that the cage hold.*

*On the day it does not, there will be no asking left to do.**

— from the Warden catechism, the Last Verse

The cold came up through the gold floor like water through a hull, and Aurelian lowered his hands without meaning to.

He had never broken a binding's opening before. The craft did not allow it; you began, and you finished, because a light half-pressed was more dangerous than a light untouched, and the order drilled that into the hands until the hands obeyed without the man. But his hands had stopped, all the same, of their own accord, because the part of him older than the order — the part that had grown up in this hall and knew the warmth of the Lion the way a child knows its mother's heartbeat — that part had felt the heartbeat stop, and the body does not keep working a binding while the world ends.

"Brother." Garran's voice, still level, but there was a thread in it now that Aurelian had never heard, and it frightened him more than a shout would have. "Finish the work."

"My lord, the light —"

"Finish the work."

And then there was no more time for finishing anything, because the Lion went out.

Not dimmed. Out. The gold that had poured through the high windows of the hall since before the hall had a name simply ceased, the way a held note ceases when the singer is struck, and the Hall of the Lion — built to gather light, walled and floored and vaulted to throw the star's warmth into every corner — became in one breath the inside of a tomb. The sconces along the walls, sunfire every one, fed from the same source, guttered down to

nothing in a ragged falling line, near to far, the room going dark in pieces like a row of Liora's tallow lamps in a wind. Someone screamed. Several someones. The proud and the powerful of the Sunlit Court, who had never in their lives been in a dark they had not chosen, found out what their voices did when the choice was taken from them.

Aurelian stood on the black sunburst he could no longer see and did the thing the order had built him to do: he reached for sunfire.

It was the first craft any Warden learned, before containment, before anything — to call the court's light into your own two hands, a Warden's lamp, the gift the Sunlit line had borne for a thousand years. He had done it ten thousand times. He reached for it now the way you reach for the rail of a stair in the dark, certain it will be there, and it was not there. The well he had drawn from his whole life was dry. He reached deeper, into the cold place where the light should have been, and felt nothing answer — worse than nothing, a kind of hunger looking back, an emptiness with a grain to it, as if the dark itself were now drinking from the well that had been his.

"It's gone," a Warden said somewhere in the black, and his voice cracked clean down the middle. "The fire — I can't — it's *gone* —"

That was when the doors gave.

Aurelian heard them go before he understood what was coming through — the great bronze doors of the Hall of the Lion, that took four men to bar, bowing inward with a groan and then bursting, and a cold that was not the cold of an open door pouring in around the wreck of them. And then the things that came with the cold. He could not see them. He met the faded for the first time blind — by sound and cold and the wrongness of them — and the wrongness was bad enough without the seeing.

They did not roar. That was the first horror. A beast roars; a man shouts; these came in silence except for the dry scrape of them over the floor and a sound underneath that took him a moment to place and then he could not un-place it — a sound like

breathing, many breathings, but with nothing of breath's warmth in it, an exhalation that gave no fog in the cold, the body's motion without the body's life. And one of them, near the door, in a voice that had once belonged to a person, said: "*Let us in. We're so cold. Let us in.*" And it was a child's voice, and it was perfectly, ordinarily pleading, and there was not one grain of a child left in it.

The hall came apart.

In the dark, with their fire gone, the proudest court in the sky did what any cornered animal does, which is run the wrong way and trample its own. Aurelian heard the courtiers break for the doors that were no longer there to break for; heard the wet sounds start; heard a Warden begin the battle-litany in a high, fast, failing voice and then stop in the middle of a word. He heard Garran, somewhere, still level, still — impossibly — in command of himself, calling the order to him, *to me, brothers, form, FORM*, trying to make a wall of men in a dark where their one weapon had been taken away. And Aurelian stood where he was, useless, his trade two crafts and both of them dead — no fire to call, no binding worth a thing against a thing already hollow — and understood, with a clarity that would shame him for years, that he had spent his whole life learning to be powerful in exactly the one situation that would never come, and that the situation had come, and he was a boy in the dark with cold hands.

A hand closed on his wrist.

Small. Hard. Warm — and the warmth was so shocking in that cold that he nearly struck at it before he understood that warmth, here, now, meant *living*, meant the one kind of thing in this hall that was still entirely itself.

"The lamp," the girl said. Her voice was very low and very fast and absolutely steady, the steadiness of someone who has been afraid her whole life and has therefore learned to keep working straight through it. "On the pillar. Behind you. There's oil in it, I can smell it, it's a real lamp, a tallow lamp, not your fire. Is there a lamp."

"What —"

"*Is there a lamp*, my lord, or shall I find it myself with you standing on my foot."

There was. He had seen it a thousand times and never once seen it: a votive lamp on the near pillar, an old plain tallow thing the court kept burning at the foot of the Lion's image out of a piety no one believed anymore, the kind of small cheap honest light the lower city ran on and the citadel kept only for show. It had gone out with everything else. It had gone out because no one had tended it, not because the source had failed it — because it had no source but its own oil and its own wick, and that, Aurelian understood in a lurch, was the whole point she was making with her hand on his wrist in the dark.

"I can't reach it bound," she said. "Whatever your friend started. It's sitting on me like a wet blanket. Take it off."

"If I take it off —"

"Then I'll do the thing you were all so frightened of, yes." A breath. "Which would you rather, just now."

It was not a choice. The breaking of his oath should have been an agony, the great hinge of his life — and someday it would weigh as all of that — but in the moment there was no agony in it at all, there was only a roomful of people dying in the dark and a warm hand on his wrist and the simplest arithmetic he had ever done. He had been ordered to put out the only light in the hall that could not be put out by the thing that had put out all the others. He was a Warden. He was supposed to be able to tell the difference between mercy and madness. He found that he could.

He took the binding off her.

It was a thing he had never done — uncaged a light he had begun to cage — and the craft had no shape for it, so he made one, reaching down with his will to where he had begun to press and simply *lifting*, the way you lift a hand from a struggling thing you have decided not to drown after all, and he felt her come free under his hands like a held breath let go, felt the light in her that he had been taught his whole life to fear flood back up into her unhindered, and for one instant, blind in the dark, his hands framing the place where her power lived, he felt the size of it.

It was not small. The baker's daughter had been a candle. This was the thing the candle was a rumor of. This was a furnace behind a door, and he had been about to put his shoulder to the door and lean.

"Oh," he said, before he could stop himself. He had said it the way you say it at a great height.

"Move your hands," she said, "or lose them," and he moved his hands, and she lit the world.



The votive lamp did not roar the way the candle in the tenement had roared; she had learned something in the hours since, or the lamp's honest wick gave her something cleaner to work with, and what came up off it was not the wild white blaze of the first time but a steady risen column of true light, white-gold, standing two feet off the pillar and throwing the Hall of the Lion into stark relief — and Aurelian saw, all at once, everything he had been hearing.

He saw the faded.

There were perhaps thirty of them in the hall already and more coming through the ruined doors, and the bible of the order was right, and every Warden who had ever tried to describe them was right, and none of it had prepared him, because the horror of the faded was not that they were monstrous. It was that they were not. They wore the shapes of people and beasts — a hall servant in Sunlit livery, a hound, a market-woman, a child, two of the court's own guard still in their gold — and the shapes were whole and ordinary and almost right, and the *almost* was the thing that turned the stomach: a stillness in the face where expression should live, a give to the flesh like fruit a day past ripe, eyes open and aimed and empty, the person scooped clean out and the shell left walking. They flinched from her light. The whole front rank of them recoiled from the risen column of it the way a hand recoils from a stove, and the hall, which had been dying, stopped for one heartbeat dying.

"They don't like it," Liora said. She had gone the color of the dead. She was staring at the market-woman nearest her, and

Aurelian understood without being told that she knew the face. "They don't — that's Sera Voss. She has a stall. She sells *fish*. That's — what is that, what did they do to her, what is that —"

"Don't look at the faces." He had it out of the catechism and his own dry mouth before he knew he meant to comfort her. "They aren't the faces. The faces are just what's left. Look at the hands."

She looked at the hands. The market-woman's hands had come up wrong, fingers spread, reaching, with nothing behind the reaching but the cold need to make everything as empty as itself, and the wrongness of the hands was easier than the wrongness of the face, and Aurelian watched the girl take that small mercy and put her grief away somewhere to deal with later, the way she seemed to put everything away, and lift her chin.

"All right," she said. "The hands. Fine." And then, to him, with a flick of those measuring eyes that took in his uselessness and priced it exactly: "Can you do anything, or are you just decorative now your fire's out?"

He had a sword. Every Warden carried steel for the day the fire failed, though no Warden in five hundred years had truly believed the day would come. He drew it, and the plain weight of it in his hand was the first thing in long minutes that behaved the way it was supposed to.

"I can do something," he said.

"Good. Because they're between us and every door, and your friends are losing."

They were. The light had bought the hall a breath, but a breath was all, and now the faded were learning the edges of it, sliding around the column of her light the way water finds the way around a stone, closing again on the knots of struggling Wardens and screaming courtiers in the dimmer reaches of the hall. Garran had his wall of men half-formed near the dais, steel out, holding; but holding was all they could do, and there were more faded at the doors every moment, and the cold was deepening, and the great dark space where the Lion's light had lived all their lives pressed down on the little risen lamp like a held thumb on a flame.

Aurelian put the girl at his back, against the pillar, where the light was, and set himself between her and the room with his sword up, and only when he had done it — only when he stood guarding with his life the very thing he had been ordered an hour ago to destroy — did the size of what he had done arrive in him at last. He pushed it away. There would be time to be ruined later. There was always time, afterward, to be ruined.

"Warden!" Garran's voice carried over the hall, and Aurelian found him in the press, a still point in the gold-and-steel chaos near the dais, and even now, even here, the Lord Warden's eyes went past the faded and the dying and fixed on the one thing in the room he counted as the true danger: the lamp-girl with her risen light, unbound, blazing, exactly the thing the order existed to prevent. "What have you DONE?"

"She's holding them back!" Aurelian shouted. "Look — her light, they won't come near it — she can —"

"She can free the thing at the heart of the sky, you fool boy, which is what all of this *is* — do you not understand yet what you are looking at?" Garran cut down a faded that came at him without breaking the line of his stare. "This is the cage failing! This — this dark, at our walls, in our hall — this is the thing we have kept five hundred years, reaching for the one hand in the world that could let it out, and you have just struck the binding off that hand!" His voice did not rise. It got quieter, and more terrible, the certainty in it total. "Put it back on her. Bind her, finish it, and the light at the door goes out the way it should, and we die as men with our discipline whole, which is better — *better*, Aurelian — than living one more hour with that thing loose under this roof."

And the horror of it, the thing that froze Aurelian for one whole second with his sword up and his oath in pieces around his feet, was that Garran was not raving. Garran was being consistent. Garran had told them all, an hour ago, in a calm and pitying voice, that there was no third path and that the cage was the only mercy — and now the dark had come exactly as the catechism promised it would come, reaching for exactly the hand the catechism said it would reach for, and the only man in the hall whose

understanding of the night had not been overturned in the last ten minutes was the one telling Aurelian to let them all die rather than be saved by the forbidden thing. He was wrong. Aurelian knew, with everything in him that was still his own and not the order's, that he was wrong. But he could not have said *how* he was wrong, not in words, not yet, and that not-knowing was the crack the whole rest of his life would pour through.

Behind him, the girl had gone very still.

"He wants you to put it back," she said. Not a question. She had heard all of it; the hall carried everything. "The blanket. He wants you to drop me in the dark with those — those things wearing people I know, so you can all die *correctly*." A small, awful laugh, with no humor anywhere in it. "And you're thinking about it."

"I'm not —"

"You are. I can feel you thinking about it. Your hands have gone stiff." She was right; they had. "I've been watched by men deciding whether to put me out my whole life, my lord. I know the look from the back of a person's head." Her voice dropped, and under the contempt there was something he would only recognize much later as fear so old it had stopped sounding like fear. "So decide. There's the door he wants for you, and there's the door behind those things, and I'm going through the second one with you or without you, because that's the way to the Lion, and I think — I think the Lion is the lamp that lights all the others, isn't it. I think if I can get to it, I can do to the whole sky what I just did to that pillar." She drew a breath. "Tell me I'm wrong."

He thought of the well gone dry. He thought of the cold with a grain to it, drinking. He thought of every dead and dying star the order's deep archive whispered about, the long inward fall of the sky that the catechism turned its face from, and the single bright certainty at the center of all the order's fear, which was that one light fed all the others and that one light had gone out.

"You're not wrong," he said.

"Then take your hand off your sword long enough to choose, Warden." She had come up beside him, into the front of her own

light, lamp lifted, blazing, small and terrible, and the faded shrank from her and the court screamed in the dark behind them and Warden-Lord Garran called his name once more across the hall in a voice gone finally, fractionally, ragged — and Aurelian Sunlit, heir of the bright rim, sworn hand of the cage, looked at the door the order wanted for him and looked at the dark door behind the dead, and chose.

"Stay in the light," he said, and turned his back on Garran, and on everything he had been, and lifted his sword toward the way out that led further in. "And stay behind me. If I tell you to burn something, burn it, and don't ask what it used to be."

"Now you're talking like the lower city," she said, and they went forward together into the dark, the lamp-girl and the Warden, the first step of the long road in.



CHAPTER FOUR

**In the Ward we have a prayer for when the oil runs low. It is one word long.*

*Not-yet. You say it until the night it stops being true.**

— a Tallow Ward saying

Liora had wanted, her whole life, to see the inside of the citadel.

She had never once said so, because wanting was a luxury and that particular want was a joke besides — a lamp-girl wanting to see the gold rooms was a mouse wanting to see the cat's parlor — but it had been there, small and shameful, every time she'd looked up Cinder Stair at the warmth she'd never get to stand in. And now here she was, inside at last, running for her life down a corridor wider than the whole of Ferrier's Row, under a ceiling painted with stars by some long-dead hand who'd had gold to waste on a roof, and the great want of her childhood had come true in the worst possible way, which was, she was learning, how wants generally came true.

It was beautiful, the citadel. Even dying it was beautiful, and that was nearly the worst of it. She held her risen lamp high and its white-gold light slid over carved lintels and tall cold mirrors and a hanging of woven gold the size of a sail, and showed her, in the same sweep, the bodies. The court had run this way before them. The court had not all made it.

"Don't stop," the Warden said. He was three steps ahead with his sword and the set of a man who had decided not to feel anything until later, which she respected, having decided the same about a dozen things tonight. "If you stop to look at them you'll stop for good."

"I'm not stopping." She wasn't. She'd lit lamps over enough deathbeds to know the trick of moving your eyes past a thing

without letting it in. "I'm keeping the light up so *you* can see, since you're the one with the sword and the famous reflexes and no eyes apparently. You're welcome."

"Thank you," he said, and she hated that he meant it, because it was harder to be properly furious at a man who said thank you in the middle of the end of the world.

She was furious at him. She wanted that on the record, with herself if no one else. An hour ago — less — this golden boy had stood over her with his hands raised to snuff her out like a wick, and the only reason she was running beside him instead of lying cold on a gold floor was that the dark had come for his masters before he could finish her, and now they were partners, apparently, because the alternative for both of them was dying, and she had never in her life trusted a thing that only stayed on your side as long as the dying was an option. She kept the lamp up. She kept him in the corner of her eye. She'd learned young: you can run beside a man and still count his blade.

The light was already costing her.

She hadn't told him that. She wasn't sure she had words for it that wouldn't sound like weakness, and weakness was a thing you didn't hand to people who'd been about to kill you. But the first time, with Tobin's candle, the light had poured out of her like a thing breaking loose, all at once, and afterward she'd just felt hollowed and strange. This was different. This she was *holding*, the way you hold a heavy door open for someone slow, and the longer she held it the more it pulled, a steady draw out of the place under her breastbone, the well of her, and she could feel — distantly, the way you feel a coin spent that you'll miss at the end of the week — that some small part of what was going out was not coming back. The lamp drank from her. She fed it. It kept the dead at bay and it ate her by inches and that, she was beginning to understand, was the trade of the thing she was: light, on credit, against a debt nobody had explained the terms of.

Not yet, she told the part of her that was being spent. *Not yet*.

"There," the Warden said. "The cross-gallery. We turn —"

The cross-gallery was full of them.

The faded came around the corner in a slow flood, a dozen, more, and at the front of them, in Sunlit gold with the blazon still bright on the breast, came a thing that had been one of the court's own guard — a big man, a soldier, his sword still in his hand and his hand still knowing how to hold it, the body's old skill running on without the body's old self, and he came at the Warden with a cut that was fast and trained and would have opened him from hip to shoulder if the Warden had been a half-step slower. He was not slower. Their blades met with a sound that rang the whole gallery and the Warden gave ground, and gave more ground, because the dead guardsman did not tire and did not fear and did not feel the cuts the Warden landed, and a living man fighting a thing that feels nothing is a man losing slowly, and they both knew it.

And the rest of the faded were coming around behind, toward the soft unguarded thing the guardsman was keeping the Warden busy enough to leave open, which was her.

She did not have a sword. She had a lamp and the thing under her breastbone and a lifetime of being the one nobody protected, which had taught her, if nothing else, to protect herself.

"Down!" she shouted, and the Warden, to his credit, did not ask why; he dropped, the trained drop of a man who has learned to trust a shout in a fight, and Liora took everything she had been carefully holding back in the steady-burning lamp and stopped holding it back.

She did not pour it into the lamp this time. She poured it *out*, the way she had over Tobin, all at once, no wick to shape it, just the raw white blaze straight off the well of her — and the cross-gallery went incandescent, noon at midnight, a sun in a stone room, and the faded, who flinched from a steady light, came apart at a sudden one. They did not burn. It was worse than burning and she would dream about it: the white light hit the hollow things and the hollowness could not hold against it, and they simply *unmade*, the borrowed shapes failing all at once, the dead guardsman and the market faces and the small reaching child-shape collapsing inward into a fall of grey ash and a cold that gusted out and was

gone, leaving the gallery empty and ordinary and ringing with the absence of them.

And leaving her on her knees, though she didn't remember kneeling.

The blaze had taken a fistful of her. She felt it go this time — not a coin, a fistful, a whole bright handful of the well poured out and the bottom of her scraping cold where it had been — and her sight went to grey at the edges and her ears filled with sea-sound and she put one hand flat on the cold gold floor to keep the floor where it belonged, and breathed, and did not fall over, because falling over in front of a Warden was on the long list of things she was not going to do tonight.

The cold came after. Not the floor's cold — her own. It started in the back of her left hand and crept, a thin bright line of it laid into the skin from the knuckle of her smallest finger toward the wrist, as if someone had drawn there once with the edge of a winter and the drawing had stayed. She turned the hand over without meaning to. There was a mark on it. A pale line, fine as a thread, the white of frost on a black window, and where it ran the skin had gone numb and faintly hard, like the rind of a scar she had no memory of earning. She pressed it with her thumb. She felt the pressure dully, from a long way off, the way you feel a tooth gone dead. It did not hurt. That was the part she would carry away from the cross-gallery and not be able to put down: that the cost had a place now, and a shape, and it did not even have the decency to hurt.

The light takes its rent in coin you can see, she thought, and closed the hand, and did not look at it again.



His hand came into her grey-edged sight. Open. Offered. The same hand that had been raised to kill her an hour ago, held out now to help her up.

She looked at it. Her own hands were shaking, the marked one worst of all. She looked at his offered hand and the oldest thing in her, older than the fury, older than the fear, the thing the Ward

had pressed into her before she could talk — *no one reaches for you, and if they do, it costs* — that thing curled her own hands closer to her body and got her up off the floor on her own, knees and will, the way she'd got up off every floor of her life.

"I don't need it," she said.

He took the hand back. Something crossed his face — she was too grey-eyed to read it and too proud to try — and then it was gone behind the Warden's blankness again. "You're hurt."

"I'm tired. There's a difference. You'd know it if you'd ever done a day's work." She got her feet under her properly and her sight came back from grey and the gallery was empty and the way ahead was open because she'd opened it, and she let that be the thing she stood on. "How many more of those do I have in me, do you think? Since you're the expert on what I am."

"I don't know what you are." He said it quietly, and it didn't sound like the catechism and it didn't sound like contempt. It sounded like a man telling the truth in the dark because the dark was the only place he could. "Whatever the order told me you'd be, you aren't it. I had a — I was certain, my whole life, about what your kind was. I'm not certain of anything since they brought you into that hall."

"That makes two of us, my lord, I've been certain about you for the whole hour I've known you and you keep ruining it." She picked the lamp back up off the floor — it had gone out, of course, the blaze had eaten it too — and she reached down into the scraped-cold bottom of herself for just enough to wake it again, gently this time, a small honest flame, because a small honest flame she could carry a long way and a blaze she could carry about twice more before there was nothing left to carry it with. The wick took. The little light steadied. She felt the cost of even that, now, where an hour ago lighting a wick had cost her nothing, and she filed it: *it's getting dearer. Every time. Note that.* "Where's your Lion. The big lamp. You said up. How far up."

He told her. It was very far up. The Lion's shrine sat at the crown of the Sunspire, at the top of the whole proud hill, and between it and the cross-gallery where she stood scraped-out and

shaking lay the entire failing citadel — its dark stairs, its hollow halls, its dead now walking, and somewhere in it, between them and the only thing that could light the sky back up, the Wardens who wanted her caged would be regrouping under a man who had looked at the end of the world and decided she was still the most dangerous thing in it.

"So," she said, when he'd finished. "Up through all of that. Bleeding light the whole way, with you keeping the sword end. And at the top I do the thing your whole order exists to stop me doing, and we find out together whether it saves the sky or ends it." She huffed something that was nearly a laugh. "When I was a girl I wanted to see the inside of this place so badly I'd have given a finger for it."

"And now?"

"Now I've seen it." She lifted the lamp and turned toward the long dark stair that led up and in, and did not let him see how much the small light pulled at her, or how cold the new pale line on her hand had gone, or that under all of it, faint and far and horribly patient, she had begun — somewhere up there in the dark at the center of everything — to feel something turn its attention toward her, the way you feel a draft from a door you didn't know was open. "Turns out the view's better from the bottom. Come on, Warden. Keep up, and keep that blade between me and the people who used to be people. We've a sky to light."

She went up. He came after her, into the dark, and neither of them said the thing they were both thinking, which was that she had refused his hand twice now without once noticing she'd done it, and that the night was very far from over, and that the worst of the climb was still above them in the cold.

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