

Chapter Twelve

“Well, that’s new.”

The fire wasn’t her fault.

This was the first coherent thought Manon was aware of in the moments after the crowned figure appeared over the Verdienne gate and demanded the attention of those gathered below.

Relief followed quickly on the heels of that thought—relief that the destruction and death was not of her doing.

That relief, however, was shattered a moment later when the figure in the gold skull mask leaned one hip against the parapet in a casual manner directly at odds with his commanding words and voice. Manon recognized it at once as Perrin’s movement—as, apparently, did the thing that was not her brother. The figure readjusted his stance in an instant and spread his arms wide. As the fabric of his cloak drew back, Manon saw that the silver crown was not the only item he had acquired in the days since she had last laid eyes on him. Dark armor covered his torso and arms, intricate even from that distance, blackened steel etched with delicate patterns. There was beauty there, but the cruel sort.

And there, suspended over the chest piece from a chain, a bronze disc, the larger cousin of the one in Manon’s pocket, a confirmation of Alexandre de Minos’s suspicion. The bronze was plain and dull, unremarkable next to the gleaming gold mask and far less eye-catching than the sharp shards of silver that formed the crown. But Manon’s throat tightened at the sight of it and she had to force herself to breathe again.

“Kneel before your king.” The voice once more hit Manon like a gust of wind and seemed to reverberate off Vincenzo and the others, echoing around Manon until she longed to clap her hands over her ears. “Kneel, and your loved ones will be returned to you.” Softer now, a caress that sent Manon’s skin crawling. She saw Vincenzo, his face slack, falter, saw his knees start to bend, but Telemon shored him up with a hand to his shoulder. Manon would have sworn she saw the gold skull grin a little wider. Surely not. Surely a trick of the light.

“Defy me,” the figure said, the voice a roaring whisper, smooth and sweet and deadly, “defy me and the fires return.” One of his outstretched hands flared with flames. They spread slowly up his arm, bright tongues licking the black steel with agonizing tenderness. When at last they reached his neck, the figure tilted his head back, like a cat enjoying a ray of sunshine, and then in an instant the fire was snuffed out and he was staring down at Manon and the others once more.

“Who are you?” Captain Lumero shouted. Her voice shook but she stood with her feet planted wide, one hand on the hilt of the sword at her belt.

Manon expected the figure to shrug this question off. In truth, she expected a ball of fire to engulf them. But the man with the golden skull seemed to consider this, as though he had not considered it before, as though the very thought was unfamiliar.

Perrin. Manon wanted to tell him his name was Perrin Barca, that he was not this thing of gold and silver and blackened armor. That he was her brother and his veins ran free from Carrier blood.

At last the thing that was not her brother spoke. “I am the One Who Came Before, he said, “and I am all that is yet to come.” He seemed to look them each in the eye, the dark sockets of the golden skull boring into Manon first, then falling on the pregnant woman last and lingering there. “You.” Manon could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. “You will have a child.” The golden skull tilted slightly. “Do you wish your child to have a father? Kneel, and he lives.”

The woman sank like a stone, her head bowed as tears began to course silently down her cheeks.

Again the skull seemed to smile. Manon wanted to look away, forced herself to hold that empty, grinning gaze.

“See how easy,” the crowned figure said. “See how painless. Yield, all of you, and know my love.”

It ought to have been Vincenzo who spoke, he whose father had once held a place on Verdienne’s council, he whose fine clothes and unweathered face suggested the illusion of strength. But it was Telemon who dared to defy. Manon could see what the grey-haired man meant to do in the way his hand shook as he

removed it from Vincenzo's shoulder, could see it in the step he took—a single step, but unmistakable in its intent. He lifted his head, turned his face to the golden skull, and called out in a clear, ringing voice.

“Verdienne has no king. Bellara has no king.”

After, Manon heard it said, first from the mouth of Vincenzo and later repeated by Captain Lumero, that it happened instantly—that one moment Telemon was alive and the next he was dead, sprawled face down in the sand. But Manon saw something else—felt something else—in the short silence that followed Telemon's brave, foolish declaration.

It was the sand, just there, around the old man's feet. Manon saw it move, shifting as though inhaling, saw grains of sand rise into the air and hover level with the laces of Telemon's boots. And then Telemon fell and the sand fell with him and Manon felt the bronze disc next to her heart grow warm.

The sensation faded before the pregnant woman's sob rent the air, but Manon knew it to be real, knew as surely as she knew Telemon to be beyond help that the disc concealed in her pocket was speaking to the disc around the neck of the man who was not her brother. She wondered how much time she had before the One Who Came Before knew it, too.

“Kneel,” the crowned man said once again, his voice harsher than before.

And they did. Vincenzo first, his hands shaking as he pressed his palms against the sand and bowed his head. Lumero second, back straight but the defiance gone from her eyes.

Kneeling was not a thing a Barca did. Subjugation was unthinkable. Not to be tolerated. Reputations were built on triumph not fealty. For a moment, as Manon gazed up at the figure in steel and silver, his crown blinding in a sudden burst of sunlight, she felt her father's presence beside her. And there, just next to him, her dead brother Victor, as dark and brooding as he ever was in life. Both of them would have flirted with death in her place, she knew. And both of them would have believed they could conquer it, her father with his golden voice, her brother with brute force.

Manon knelt.

But in the instant she dropped her gaze from the man who called himself a king, she knew one thing more.

She saw his shoulders sag, saw one hand jerk up to his chest, an involuntary spasm.

And when he spoke again to praise their wisdom, his voice was still harsh, still a threat wrapped in silk, but there was strain there, too, strain within the deadly song.

The One Who Came Before was tired.

“What do we do?”

It was Vincenzo who hissed in Manon’s ear as they passed through the gate into Verdienne. Whatever force had held it closed had melted away, no doubt at the crowned man’s command, and at his bidding, the four of them crossed the sand and stepped under the shadow of the gatehouse. Telemon’s body was left where it had fallen.

“Manon?”

She meant to cast a withering glance his way. Meant to snarl at him in the hopes of driving him to seek reassurance from Captain Lumero—or anyone but Manon, really.

But no words passed her lips on account of the fact that her first sight of the new Verdienne turned her tongue to stone in her mouth.

Yes, there was ash and smoldering ruins. Yes, there was smoke and destruction. Manon saw bodies half-buried under fallen timbers. The waters of a fountain in the middle of the plaza just inside the gate gurgled muddily into the sludge-filled basin. The plaza was a wasteland of debris and drifting ashes. But there was also a thing of such astonishing beauty that Manon found it difficult to look away.

Across the plaza, three shattered statues lay in pieces around their plinths. Whatever form they had taken, Manon would never know. But the fourth stood yet—a woman astride a horse. She wore armor and brandished a sword as the horse reared beneath her. Manon did not know her name or her place in Verdienne’s history. But what had once been white stone veined with shades of grey was now black glass, smooth and polished and without flaw.

And as Manon gaped, she realized the statue was not the only thing inside the walls of Verdienne that had turned to glass. Here and there whole buildings stood amid their crumbling, charred brethren, seemingly unmarked by the fire that had ravaged the city in the night, and each made entirely of the same black glass.

“Beautiful, isn’t it.”

Manon flinched from the voice and turned. The One Who Came Before stood close—too close—though Manon had not heard him descend from the gatehouse or approach. Whatever weariness she had seen and heard had vanished. The golden skull grinned endlessly, but what set Manon on edge as she found him no more than an arm’s length away was the immense stillness of the armored figure, an unnatural quiet that seemed to hold the very air around him.

“What do you want from us?”

She had not intended to speak or draw unnecessary attention to herself. Such a thing, in the wake of Telemon’s sudden death, did not seem especially wise. But the words slipped free on a voice that hardly seemed her own.

She got an answer. But despite the fact that she found herself fixed in place by the weight of the skull’s stare, despite the fact that the One Who Came Before laughed—which was, incidentally, the most beautiful sound she could ever remember hearing—despite all this, Manon could not have repeated that answer. Because in that moment on that strangest of all days, something more extraordinary than all that had come before happened. A voice whispered inside her head.

This ought to have broken her. Sapped her last resolve. Bewildered her mind. After all, one does not typically expect to hear a voice other than one’s own in one’s head. But Manon felt none of this. Instead, her heart seemed to bound free of her chest. If asked, she would have said she had never understood what it meant to burst with joy until that moment.

Because the whisper was Perrin’s voice. And he said her name.

There were survivors inside Verdienne.

Manon—understandably—had assumed the One Who Came Before had lied about this, a pretty lie, catering to the deepest desires of those who had escaped the fire. Those like the pregnant woman who now embraced her husband, both of them on their knees, their arms wrapped so tight around each other Manon felt her own chest constrict with the pressure.

But Luca was not among the men and women and children paraded into the plaza by the man with the silver crown, like so many gifts. Manon watched Vincenzo and the others greet those they knew among the small crowd, but she made no move forward after discovering no sign of Luca's broad shoulders or familiar smile.

She told herself she had not expected to find him. After all, surely the dead in Verdienne outnumbered the living. But the ache that settled into her stomach as she stood in the shadow of the gatehouse—as far from the strange black glass as she could be—was, admittedly, rather like what she had felt as she had watched her brother Victor breathe his last, his chest rising in shallow gasps, his skin going pale before her eyes, the physician too late to do more than murmur words of regret and condolence.

Manon had raged, then, raged at the physician, raged at the walls as they closed in around her, raged, even, at Perrin when he had burst into the room where Victor died. She had churned with the need to burn something—anything—as the spark in her ribs flared nearly past her control. But there, in the plaza of Verdienne, under the watchful gaze of a man who was somehow both that very same Perrin and another creature entirely, her spark was very quiet, swallowed by the pit opening in her chest, a sensation so real, so visceral, Manon nearly expected to see an abyss when she took her gaze from the scene in the plaza and looked down at her torso.

There was nothing there, of course, but that was hardly reassuring. She wanted to see proof of the pain, a physical manifestation that could be treated—cured—cut out. Anything but another invisible scar.

Manon took a steadying breath—or as near to one as she could conjure—and risked a glance at the man in the crown, desperate for another sign that her brother

was alive within that blackened steel. He was watching the reunion unfold, or at least she supposed he was. The dark eye sockets of the skull gave away nothing. There was certainly no trace of Perrin's green eyes behind them, or the unfamiliar blue irises that had flashed into existence in the ruins of Elysium.

As though sensing her attention, the man looked up, that unfathomable gaze falling on her instantly. And then he was approaching, long strides eating up the stones of the plaza between them quickly, though he did not hurry. Manon swallowed, tried to summon anger—at Victor for dying, at her father for leaving her, at Luca though she knew he was blameless—tried to shield herself in the only way she knew. But her summons went unanswered and when the man who called himself a king came to a halt before her, she knew he saw her for what she was: raw, exposed, defenseless.

“You are not of this place.”

It was not a question. Manon shook her head.

“And yet you look for someone.” The voice behind the skull no longer rumbled with force and power.

Manon nodded.

He held out his hand, the fingers of the dark steel gauntlet unfolding silently. “Then you should look. I know what it is to lose someone.”

Of the two, the gesture and the words, Manon could not have said which was more unexpected. She wet her lips, searching for words. The man dropped his hand abruptly, as though annoyed with himself for offering it, and Manon braced for his anger—but it never came. Instead, he turned on his heel and walked away, his cloak rippling behind him, ash drifting in his wake—no, not drifting, Manon realized, not at the mercy of the currents in the air. No, it moved with him, rising to meet each footfall, swirling around his ankles with each stride, before falling inert once more, just like the sand at Telemon's feet,

Manon wondered if he would notice if she turned and slipped out of the gate and walked away from Verdienne forever. He was right. She was not of this place. She was not of these people.

And yet he had told her to look.

Before she could change her mind—in truth, before she quite knew what she was doing—Manon pushed herself away from the gate. She moved northwest through the plaza, stepping around rubble and the deepest piles of ash, then continued on that trajectory, aiming for the place she estimated the inn had once stood as she picked her way through the streets of Verdienne. For reasons she could not put name to, she skirted around the patches of black glass she encountered on the streets and steered clear of the buildings that had transformed, but when she reached a broad intersection near the western wall, there was no avoiding it. And there, across the flat, eerie surface, the burned remains of the inn smoldered still.

The inn had held its structure better than many of the neighboring buildings. The lower level was charred but largely intact. The roof had caved in entirely, however, exposing the upper story to the sky. There was no sign of movement, no bodies in the street.

Manon looked down at the black glass at her feet. Her reflection looked back, faint and distorted, but there. Slowly, Manon went down to one knee. She reached out one hand, let it hover over the flawless surface, watched the glass absorb her hand's shadow, saw it flash with blues and reds and purples as sunlight and smoke danced in the air above. Though logic dictated the glass was only a veneer, Manon could not help but feel that she was looking into endless blackness. And then at last she lowered her palm to the glass.

It was cool to the touch. Unnaturally smooth. But nothing more. It certainly didn't pull her into its depths or eat her hand—both of which had seemed like distinct possibilities a moment before.

Manon took a deep breath, got to her feet, and crossed over to the inn, her boots silent on the glass. The door of the inn was ajar, hanging awkwardly from its hinges, and the top of the frame was slightly bowed under the redistributed weight of the upper floors. The air inside was thick with dust and ash and Manon brought her arm up to cover her mouth and nose as she stepped across the threshold.

The body was exactly where she had known it would be, exactly where she had left it. The woman's arm was still outstretched, her fingers still reaching for Manon.

Her skin was grey with grime and her dead eyes stared across the floorboards. Manon moved past her quickly, trying not to see the marks in the ash around the woman's knees and feet—disturbances that told a story of struggle, of desperate attempts to escape from the smoke.

The staircase loomed before Manon, transformed by fallen timbers and debris—a charred hand visible beneath the rubble—into a steep, treacherous ascent. She placed one foot on the pile, testing it with only a fraction of her weight. It held, though ominous creaking suggested a less than ideal degree of fragility.

“Luca?” Manon directed her voice upward and held her breath in the silence that followed. No response. Of course there wasn't a response. Manon shook her head at her foolishness and took a determined step forward, aware that she was likely moments away from bringing the rest of the inn down on herself.

She was three steps from the bottom when the pile began to shift beneath her hands and feet. A mad scramble had the desired effect of getting her to the top and the—questionable—safety of the second story landing and the equally undesirable consequence of sending the debris cascading down to the common room floor where it clattered and landed with enough force to kick up a fresh cloud of ash. As it settled, Manon saw she was stranded, separated from the ground floor by the gaping absence of stairs of any kind. Only a few supports remained, and these were so heavily charred, Manon could not understand why they were not already dust.

With only one option before her, Manon continued to climb, testing each stair carefully, stepping over the massive timber that had nearly crushed her the night before.

She emerged into the hall of the second floor. Where the rooms on the right hand side had once stood, nothing but open air remained. A single doorframe stood upright—just below, Manon realized, where the door to her own room on the third floor ought to have been. To her left, the rooms were largely intact, if blackened and flame-licked beyond recognition.

She searched each room, fighting against the urge to make quick work of it before the inn collapsed. Three times she had to stop and retreat to the hall in search of fresher air. Twice she thought she found Luca, rushing forward to roll a

body face up only to discover a stranger's eyes looking back at her. She closed those eyes, crossed the arms over the chest, tried to give some semblance of dignity to the dead, a mindless task performed on instinct.

It was the last room, its entry barricaded by fallen timbers, that brought her to her knees.

It shouldn't have, she told herself. It was no different from the rest—a scene of death like the others.

But the others had not contained three children in nightgowns, their small hands entwined together. The others did not have the body of a man, his strong arms wrapped around a fourth child, his bow useless against such a foe, his pack discarded for more precious cargo.

They had been trapped, Manon understood, unable to breach the timbers that stood higher than the tallest of the children. Luca could have. Alone, unburdened, the hunter would have made short work of the barricade. Manon sank back on her heels and closed her eyes against the tears that threatened to spill forth, but the darkness behind her lids revealed the terrified faces of four children, of Luca speaking promises he could not keep as smoke gathered like a shroud, and Manon jerked back, her breath coming heavy and hard, her eyes opening wide. It took a long moment to regain some semblance of composure.

Manon was not in the habit of seeking forgiveness, indeed, of even feeling the need for it. But as she stared unseeing at the form of the man who insisted on being her friend, who had made her smile despite herself, she would have given a great deal to hear his voice again, to tell him she was sorry.

But when she opened her mouth to speak, the closest she could come to that was, "You should have stayed in Licenza," which was really not very close at all.

And yet a curious thing happened next—Luca's eyelids fluttered.

Manon sucked in a breath, not daring to move lest she somehow disturb the illusion before her—for surely it was an illusion, one last cruel trick of her eyes, deceiving her into holding on to hope. And Manon knew better than to cling to hope.

And yet Luca, fittingly, seemed to be insisting she do exactly that. She saw the eyelids move again, saw a lock of the child's hair shift on his chest, which Manon could not find a means of explaining other than that the hunter's lungs yet functioned within his ribcage.

Manon leaned forward, one hand outstretched, telling herself he was dead even as she touched her fingers to the inside of his wrist in search of a pulse.

There. Faint and weak. And yet it seemed to Manon the boldest of insults to death.

There was no waking him. She discovered that quickly enough. No response to her touch or voice. No movement when she extracted the child from his arms. And then there was the staircase—or lack thereof—to consider. Manon scanned the room—perhaps the window?—and gasped when she turned back toward the doorway. The One Who Came Before was watching her, framed by the harsh light of the exposed sky above.

“I can help,” he said.

“Do you always move so silently?” Manon flung the sharp question on instinct, trying to disguise her discomfort, as though the man opposite her were not capable of reducing her to a memory in an instant.

He was quiet for a moment, as though he enjoyed making her wait. “More or less,” he said at last. He stepped into the room, his dark gaze raking over the four children and falling on Luca at last. Somehow Manon did not think the golden skull concealed remorse. “I can help,” he said again. “I can save him.” A heavy pause. “For a price, of course.” And with that his attention came to rest on Manon.

She smelled lemons in that moment. Heard the Archduke's voice making her an offer, binding her to him. Tasted the wine they had shared that day in his garden. Felt the complete and utter lack of control that had washed over her when she had agreed. It was not a feeling she enjoyed. And yet—

“Name it,” Manon said.

The crowned man took a step toward her. Manon again felt the unnatural stillness emanating from him. The empty eyes held her gaze. She did not know if she should feel anger or fear—anger at him for forcing her to choose, or fear of the

price he would name. The result of this inner conflict was that for the first time, she felt no desire to recoil from the darkness she saw looking back at her. An improvement, at least.

“What is the name of this place?” he asked.

“Verdienne,” Manon said.

“Verdienne,” he repeated, testing the word. If he found it pleasing or familiar, the mask revealed nothing. “I will draw the smoke from his lungs and you will seek out and bring before me every man, woman, and child of Carrier blood in Verdienne. That is what I ask for in return.”

For a man who had just burned half a city and slaughtered dozens, the price was, well, not nearly as grim as Manon had anticipated. She could not fathom what he wanted with the Carriers of Verdienne. But through her confusion, Manon understood one thing to be true. For all his power, for all his ability, the One Who Came Before could not sense the Carrier gift within her. Or, it seemed, in anyone.

“How will I know them? The Carriers?” Better to seem ignorant than too quick to understand.

“That is for you to discover. Decide,” the man who called himself king commanded.

“He will be himself again?” Manon asked. “Not like...” Her voice faded away to nothing as she realized what word was coming next.

He finished for her. “Like me? Is this what you fear?” A deep mirthless laugh rumbled forth. “There are none like me.” He tilted his head, the movement oddly casual, almost lazy, and that empty gaze seemed to dig deeper. “Choose now.”

Manon looked down at Luca’s face. “Save him and it will be done.”

The flames flickered into existence slowly, crawling with languid ease across his gauntlet until the steel was encased in white fire. Mesmerizing and soft and beautiful, Manon stared in wonder, trying to foresee how he would use them to revive Luca.

But this was no healing fire.

With a sudden gesture, the One Who Came Before shot a bolt of white fire across the room and out the door. Manon ducked, the bright light searing her

vision, and pressed her face into Luca's sleeve, her hands clutching at him, though whether to protect him or save herself, she could not have said. She heard the roar of flames, heard timber and stone shatter, felt the floor beneath her shudder. And then all was quiet—but for the ringing in Manon's ears.

She lifted her head, blinking away the spots of white still marring her vision. The One Who Came Before stood in the doorway once again, a towering black figure, his silver crown nearly scraping the frame, and for a moment Manon thought she saw the air around him shimmer and waver. But there was no heat on the air, no hot wave escaping to the open sky. She blinked again, rising unsteadily to her feet, taking a hesitant step toward the door, and then another, and only then did she understand what he had done.

Beyond him, what was left of the inn had transformed to black glass, shining and lustrous and so very, very deep. Every splintered piece of wood, every shattered stone, turned smooth and solid and black. And where the ruined staircase had stood, the glass angled down, forming a shallow ramp to the ground floor.

Suddenly aware her curiosity had brought her within a hand's span of the crowned man's shoulder, Manon stiffened and leaned away. But as she did so, he turned to face her. The chin of his golden mask seemed to hang closer to his chest, and for the first time she was aware of the rise and fall of his chest, a shaky inhale followed by a forced exhale.

"You will carry him," he said. Without another word, he turned and swept down his hall of glass, his black cloak whispering behind him.

Were he anyone else—well, and perhaps the Archduke of Arconia, if she were being honest—Manon would have protested the ridiculous nature of this command. After all, Luca was considerably bulkier than Manon and she was not in the habit of lifting grown men over her shoulders like so many turnips.

Manon slipped Luca's bow between the straps of his pack, then hefted it over one shoulder. As she bent to grasp the hunter under his arms, it slipped and banged against her elbow almost instantly, upsetting her balance enough to cause her to plant one foot firmly on his shoulder. He did not seem overly bothered by this development.

“Lot of help you are,” Manon muttered. Not bothering to adjust the pack, Manon tightened her grip and adjusted her stance and heaved—to very little effect. Grunting, she heaved some more, straining with every inch of ground gained, until at last she achieved the hall. The smooth glass helped—the ramp was even more obliging, though the lack of friction did cause Manon to descend a touch too swiftly, which in turn caused her to lose her grip, which in turn sent Luca sliding the remaining distance unassisted. Manon winced as he came to a less than graceful stop, but a quick inspection after she hurried down the ramp herself suggested he was none the worse for the trip.

The One Who Came Before was waiting outside. His gaze was on the sky and one hand rested on the bronze disc that lay against the intricate patterned steel of his chest piece. Only when Manon had finally stretched Luca out on the ground before him did he turn his attention to her. Whatever weakness she had sensed in him before was gone. There was only gold and silver and steel—and that dark, endless gaze.

“Help him,” Manon said. She wiped a trickle of sweat from her forehead, felt the grime from her hands smear across her skin.

With a flourish of his cloak, the crowned man went to one knee next to Luca. Manon resisted the urge to take a step back and tried to steady herself by crossing her arms over her chest, but this only sent the thrumming of her heart pulsing through her arms—far too desperate, far too hopeful for her liking—and she quickly resorted to clenching her hands at her sides instead.

The One Who Came Before leaned over Luca, his silence and stillness so absolute, so tangible Manon felt she could reach out and touch it—if she wanted to, which she most certainly did not.

He touched the disc around his neck once more, this time with purpose, his gauntleted fingers cradling the edge, then placed his other hand on Luca’s chest, pushing aside the hunter’s collar until his steel rested against skin.

“He will bear my mark for the rest of his life,” the One Who Came Before said. He was not, Manon understood, asking permission. She held her breath, waited for

Luca to spasm into wakefulness, waited for fire and glass and things she could not understand.

It was not, in the end, all that dramatic.

A moment of silence, the hazy smoke-filled air billowing around Manon, and then the man in the silver crown removed his hand.

He left a print behind, a dark impression of his gauntlet where the steel had made contact with Luca's skin, not quite a hand and yet recognizable all the same—almost skeletal.

Manon knelt, her gaze fixed on the mark—not a burn, not a brand. Glass. No, not glass, she realized, as one finger brushed against the mark. The skin remained soft and supple, not hard and smooth. And yet Manon saw a ripple of light reflect and refract, saw hues she could not name, saw the same promise of infinite depth and darkness as she saw in the black glass on which Luca lay.

Manon raised her head, her gaze reaching upward to land on the One Who Came Before. He was standing over her, over them both, this thing that had whispered in Perrin's voice, this thing that had poisoned a river with a touch, controlled the flight of birds, and turned a city to glass. And for the first time since that day in the ruins of Elysium, since she saw Perrin's eyes wink out of existence, since white fire had shattered the sky, Manon understood that nothing would ever be the same.

"Manon."

No, nothing would be the same, but Luca was alive.

Manon looked down. The mark was there, of course, shifting in the changing light. But where it had seemed dangerous and foreboding, now it seemed dull and lifeless—because Luca's eyes were open and shone bright with a light that was entirely his own.

He pushed himself up on one arm, his gaze darting from the black glass beneath him to the golden skull above—then returning to Manon's face. Her own gaze dropped, unbidden, to the mark on his chest, and though she jerked it away quickly, it was too late. Luca glanced down.

Silence. Manon held her breath.

“Well, that’s new.” Luca’s voice was soft as he contemplated the mark, but in that moment Manon saw him as she had first seen him. Soaked to the skin, bedraggled, cursing cheerfully about being left to wait in the rain—and perfectly unconcerned about the fire in Manon’s palm.

Manon flung her arms around him, catching him in a clumsy embrace, her cheek pressed against his ear, the force of her movement nearly sending him off balance. He caught himself—caught her—and for a moment was still. Then his arms folded around her and Manon could smell the smoke in his hair and the sweat on his skin and she almost—but not quite—forgot the One Who Came Before was watching.

He did not hesitate to remind her.

“The Carriers. All of them,” he said, his voice rumbling like the sea once more. Manon broke away from Luca and looked up at the golden face and the crown she had knelt to. Luca’s fingers lingered on her hip. “You have four days. Don’t disappoint me.”