

SAINT OF RATS AND BOILS

by

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Abstract

Ameline feels stagnant growing up alongside her quickly maturing friends in their idyllic town. That is, until a half-forgotten goddess approaches her with a proposal: save a city from a curse and gain eternal glory. The only catch is that Ameline cannot truly perform miracles, she must *pretend* to be a saint in order to protect the city—and Ameline hates lying above all else. Combining conventions of *bildungsroman* and tragedy, *Saint of Rats and Boils* follows a young woman's rise to ambition and those who help or hinder her. Within a world of vengeful gods, living saints, fools, and kings, this young adult novel examines what it means to be renowned instead of being truly known.

General Summary

Saint of Rats and Boils is a young adult fantasy novel about a girl who pretends to be a saint and loses herself along the way. The book explores female friendships, conviction, and truth using the framework of the fantasy genre.

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part one: girl

Prologue

They were almost-forgotten stories, and they were three, always three.

The door, the hinge, and the handle. The Gods of the Threshold. The one with the crick in her neck and the creak in her voice had argued that three was overkill once, but such roles are not prone to rewrites. Three is a sound number, a number for good luck. Three rings to a circus, three beats in a waltz. Three bones in the human ear, three colours of wine, three notes in a chord. Red, yellow, blue; land, air, sea; door, hinge, handle. If three gods had been named, then three would remain, wrought into each other for better or worse. And worse it had been.

Their annihilation hadn't been a slow fade from memory—the goddess of the hinge, could remember little of the ending itself, but she could remember this: it had been an act of brutality. Their Door slammed shut, bolted, and the whole thing set alight for good measure. Until they became a crumbling, gaping threshold devoid of a door, hinge, or handle. Their names were sliced out of the history books, their stories bottled and thrown overboard.

The gods of the threshold had been forgotten on purpose.

While she floated, a god without a story to latch onto, nebulous and dreamlike, Hinge remembered that it all may have been a little bit her fault.

All that trouble, her scheming and secrecy, all for this. Stupid. How could she have forgotten that it was three, *always* three? The tendrils of eternal erasure tightened around her. Oblivion. Failure. It was too late now to even beg for forgiveness.

Sometimes Hinge brushed up against the world, she could peer in on the five hundred years that whirled by without her.

She could listen in only when speculations of who the forgotten gods had been came close to any kind of truth. Around dinner tables, in dialogue with old monks, conversations batted between friends laying in the grass; when the stories told in hushed whispers or broad condemnation nearly stumbled on the true names of the burned gods, that was when Hinge could see the world outside her nothingness. It was when she could almost reach out.

She could wail and scream and toil against the syllables, hoping for someone to call her home. Hoping for their lips to form her name and tell her story. From her nearly-recalled state, she could almost ask—and they would almost hear. The speaker would pause, would cock her head, listening to something that sounded like a creaking hinge. Then, inevitably, the chill in the room would be shrugged off as a draft from an open door, the idea of the old gods would be laughed away, and Hinge would slip away once more into nothing; the conversation closed, and with it, the door of reawakening clicked shut.

Many had tried outright, valiantly, desperately, brokenly. Praying and howling and sacrificing and bartering. All saying *please*. All with perfectly respectable reasons. But want alone is not enough. Need is not enough. Not when the god has been so carefully and completely removed, tidily done away with, their earthly bodies burned.

There were specific rules that must be followed in order to reawaken a god or three, rules to awaken both their own memories and those found in the faithful. *How many had been successfully resurrected?* Hinge wondered as her consciousness knocked about in her new form.

To wake a god is a deliberate and consequenced act. Rarely is it an accident. It requires significant synchronicity to remember someone loudly enough to make them remember themselves, let alone three *gods*.

The door, the hinge, and the handle.

Three, always three.

How, exactly, did one go about bringing back a forgotten god? Many had tried, and just as many had come close by accident, by fumbling in the dark for something to believe in. A half-remembered god could almost reach out, though they didn't often see what they were doing, eyes in the dark. Grasping hands could only administer chills or make someone *believe* they were walking a moonlit path by choice. Hinge had tried to coerce it once, though she didn't know how long ago—time had been loose to her when she'd been immortal and was even more useless now that she was nothing. She'd tried to cajole a bright-eyed kid whose head was full of stories into channeling his need and hope into those three critical elements. His wanting alone (so palpable! so shiny!). A want so concrete and pure she could *taste* it, his wanting had almost been enough on its own. But he would not sacrifice; he didn't know how yet. And she'd had to leave him to his wandering path, slithering from the fringes of his consciousness. Ador had been burned first, it would take longer for him to come back. Knob had only ever slenderly known himself, he would wake more slowly, too. But she was awake. Even then, clawing, drifting, and staggering back to godhood was no linear trajectory.

Hinge knew she needed a new story, something to tether herself to the world, to herself. She needed someone to be that was not the miscalculation she'd made.

In the church which had once been theirs, Hinge remembered burning. She remembered choosing wrong. She remembered becoming ash and molten metal and the instant heat of regret.

Now, in the first chapel to have ever been theirs, she returned to herself beside a pile of hinges and screws. Slowly, slowly, letter by letter, the name of the girl who'd called her here came to her. She was gone now; she had no idea what she'd done.

The three girls who had stumbled through movement, grasped onto magic, bled by mistake.

They'd brought the girl who would be Hinge's new story; her name ringing through Hinge's head.

The three gods came back to themselves, awoken through blood, magic, and movement But they did not come back empty-handed:

The handle came back wanting to be held.

The hinge came needing to swing into a new story.

The door blew open with a curse.

Chapter 1

The day was sun-dappled and cooling, the breeze chasing the three friends out of the river. Madwen, Elyse, and Ameline had been a trio for years, and the silence between them was comfortable. They trekked into the woods, past a field where Ameline and Madwen's goats followed along the fence after them, bleating for their keepers to come back. The young women followed the path into the tumbling expanse of the forest, where the air grew even cooler, nipping at their still-damp skin. They were exploring. There were only so many more summers, only so many more days they could perform this kind of willful avoidance of real life. For Madwen and Elyse, the woods were an increasingly nostalgic way to spend an afternoon before returning to the growing momentum of lives kept mainly indoors.

Madwen would return to a tidy cottage and tidier fiancé. Elyse would go home to little sisters and her apprenticeship as a glazier, her craft improving by the day. Ameline would do everything she could to stay outdoors past dark. She'd linger with the wind, the stars, and the pretence of having something warm to return to.

Ameline had no plans.

But for now, the woods were cool, and the trees leaned conspiratorially overhead. The girls walked in silence, letting the birdsong crescendo uninterrupted. Or, mostly uninterrupted. Ameline kept catching the toes of her too-big boots on discarded branches or uneven terrain or loose stones. The boots were one of two things she'd borrowed from her father for that afternoon; the other was her unfortunate, noisy lack of self-awareness.

At the first clumsy stumble, Elyse had shot her a poisonous look. *Get it together*, the look said, although Ameline read it further imbued with, *you oaf, with cow's hooves and moss for brains*.

But perhaps she was reading too much into it.

Something *had* felt different this summer between the three of them, and it always seemed to spin around to be Ameline's fault, at least with Elyse. Madwen never took sides; she hovered indiscriminately between them, flapping from shoulder to shoulder. Either way, Ameline stepped with more vigilance, each boot placed with a delicate *clomp*.

The deliberate pace meant she fell behind the other two, and it meant she was the last one to see the church.

Tucked between the trunks of two oaks was a half-ruined assemblage of stone walls cascading down from a steeple with what looked like a bite taken out of it. Crumbling stone, crawling moss, a spindly new-growth tree spearing through a ruined roof.

After sitting forgotten for several hundred years, the chapel was ready to be remembered. The building was nondescript, waiting for the conditions to be met in order to reveal its secrets—blood, magic, movement. Temples to older, less critical gods weren't unheard of, but generally, someone remembered enough to keep the buildings to a certain level of polish. Churches had even been known to maintain themselves. So long as someone sent a flimsy prayer the god's way, like table scraps, the god would survive. It was why Domare celebrated so many festivals, to appease and feed the memory of the old gods just enough to prevent buildings that had been built in honour of a deity from collapsing. Or worse, a sputtering god could still issue a curse. So, dances, feasts, dinners, festivals,

prolonged sporting events these were thrown to keep the gods flush with new stories, to keep them alive in memory.

This church was one of forgetting.

The three girls met it with mixed levels of reverence.

“Wow,” Ameline breathed. She’d caught up. Silently. Elyse wished she’d crashed her way through the underbrush just so she could snap at her.

“If you whisper, it looks just like our church,” Madwen said quietly. She craned her neck to look at the marred steeple. A stray dapple of sunlight caught her cheek, blistering it white against the otherwise green shadow offered by the canopy. “I mean squint. If you squint.”

Ameline snorted.

“All churches look like our church; you just haven’t seen any others,” Elyse said haughtily.

“Neither,” Ameline pointed out, “have you.” None of them had ever left Domare. Elyse didn’t have the upper hand in identifying religious architecture.

But Elyse was already stalking towards the crumbling doorway, lifting her feet high to step over curling ferns. Elyse needed to be the first one in, if only so that she could be the authority. It would be her finding, her treasure, her church. She was already kicking herself for bringing the other two along. She should have come on her own; then, she could have presented the special place; she could have controlled it. She could have lied about a handsome knight who’d shown her the way through the grove. Elyse knew that Ameline would want to share ownership of the church now that they’d found it together, and the

thought rankled—Elyse was already at the end of her rope with Ameline today. Soon, one of them would be swinging.

Elyse reached the doors. Two worn, wooden slabs, each the size of a horse, rose to a point in the centre where the two doors met. Ornate hinges wrapped their arms from where they were anchored in the stone to halfway across the doors themselves. The handles, while hefty, looked as though metal teeth had chewed on them. Elyse grabbed one.

She swore.

Pulling her hand back sharply, a pinprick of blood welled in her palm. A metal sliver was nestled in the soft part of her thumb, the part between the joint that was fleshy and giving. Elyse felt a personal sense of betrayal. She shot a glare at the ornate handle. The wind rustled overhead.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Madwen asked. She’d moved to the wall and had her palm pressed against a stone at shoulder height. Madwen wore delicate lace gloves, an odd choice for a forest romp, but Elyse figured it was because, deep down, everyone was as vain as she was.

“No,” Elyse lied.

“Here, let me see.”

Elyse stuck her hand out and looked away. Madwen took the offering in both of her hands. It was an odd sensation, the folding and rolling of skin under someone else’s ministrations, especially with the lace. Elyse disliked it intensely, but because it was Madwen, she couldn’t retract her hand now. She glared at the door handle some more.

Ameline stepped delicately past the other girls, ignoring the medical emergency. *Of course, she would swoop in like this; of course, she would get to go in first.* Elyse burned. The door swung open for Ameline without so much as a creak.

“I can’t believe you’re going in without us,” Elyse called after her: “You’re so selfish.”

Above all else, Elyse was a liar. She wasn’t picky; she would lie to anything that moved. Big lies, small lies, white lies, lies with doe eyes and fanged teeth. Lies that wrapped themselves around slender wrists like ribbons. Lies people could see coming and lies people had to adjust measurements for. She survived on untruths—sometimes, it felt like the only thing she could control.

“Hold still. I can’t get it out if you’re tense.” Madwen muscled her way into the grisly bits of Elyse’s joint. It felt like she’d manipulate the bone into popping out. Ameline was inside the church now.

Elyse hoped it was nothing. She hoped it was an empty room with the long-gone floorboards overgrown with mold and grass. She hoped a badger was inside and that he’d rip Ameline’s thumbs completely off. How was this taking so long? Why hadn’t Ameline said anything?

Elyse wrenched her hand away from Madwen’s care. There was blood on the white fingertips of the gloves.

“I’ll get you to do it later. It’s fine.” An easy lie. She would rather live with the sliver forever than allow Ameline to be the brave one, the one who’d gone in alone, the one to whom the story belonged. Ameline would tell it all wrong; she didn’t have a flair for embellishment the way Elyse did.

Elyse *would* live with the sliver. It would callous over and press awkwardly any time she lay her hands flat or kneaded dough or gripped a mug, a niggling reminder that her pride had no patience. A mar on her perfect hands.

Elyse was careful not to touch the door with her hands a second time. She shouldered the already cracked door and followed Ameline into the dark.

It was just an empty stone room with a grass floor. A tree had grown up through where a ceiling must have once been. A pile of metal scraps on the floor, nonsensical carvings on the wall. It had that feeling of churches, of whispering and repeated prayers, but it was just a decrepit room in the woods. Filled with junk and nature.

“It’s hardly big enough to call it a church, anyways.” Already Elyse was already trying to soften the glory in case Ameline did want to keep the story of it for herself.

“Chapel.” The word found the space quite agreeable, the perfect size. It was Madwen who’d offered the definition. She clung to the doorframe, solidly planted on the outside but wanting to see, too.

“It must have been built for those gods that died,” Ameline said. Between the murky half-dark and the echoey space, voices floated oddly, coming from impossible places. Ameline sounded like she was speaking from the doorway still, though she stood the deepest inside.

“The god that was *killed*, you mean,” Elyse said.

“Yeah, that.”

“It’s giving me goosebumps,” Madwen whispered. Her voice seemed to be rising through the floorboards.

“They’re not around anymore to get you,” Elyse said, “you’ll live.” Elyse’s voice sounded like it was coming from everywhere at once, loud and permeating.

Ameline rolled her eyes. “As though you’re not cowering in the door there, too. Come on in if you’re so brave.” Ameline was the only person who called Elyse on her posturing, who found no patience for it. It was part of why they’d been friends for so long, but it was also responsible for the splintering, too. If Ameline demanded that Elyse be a version of herself she didn’t like, one without a shiny veneer on top, how could either of them coexist as their grown-up selves? Elyse didn’t want to be a child anymore, and Ameline didn’t want to have to become someone else in order to grow up. She didn’t want to tolerate it in her friends, either.

It was something neither of them had talked about, punishing each other silently for their slip-ups and their lies.

Elyse stepped further in towards Ameline, who was deep in the room, shadowed. Ameline knelt. *Muddy-skirt-Ameline, what else is new*, Elyse thought.

Elyse watched Ameline pick something up from the pile of odds and ends and scrap metal. A slender iron pin, a rusted nail, some keys. It was the kind of assortment of things that seemed like they should make more sense, as though, if only Ameline could focus her eyes more, she’d be able to see what the pieces were.

Madwen started up a fervent prayer, a litany to all the gods and saints’ names she did know, a prayer for them not to end up like this. Even wary of religion and weary of it, too, Elyse and Ameline felt a respect for the place. It had been built far away from anything else, far from the town, the cottages, the main church that sat squarely in the center of Domare, to say *I believe this*, to say *I believe so strongly I need a place to hold all that belief*. And now,

dilapidated, crumbling and forgotten, it said that someone had once believed and no longer did. They were no longer around to believe. Madwen's prayer paused, and she went, "Oh." It was a soft exclamation. Everything Madwen did was soft, fluttery.

"What?" Elyse said, spinning to where it sounded like Madwen's voice was coming from. Ameline still knelt by the shrine of scraps. Madwen's shadow crouched with her face to the wall; a hand braced beside her head.

"There are words carved here; I can almost read them."

"What do they say?" Ameline asked.

"She said she can *almost* read them, not that she can."

Madwen ignored them. "It must be the old language, the language of saints."

"Sound it out," Ameline said, and Madwen shook her head, "I couldn't; I'll butcher it. It'll be wrong."

"Give it a try; it's just us. It's not like you're going to offend a dead god if you can't pronounce its name."

Madwen sighed. "Well, from what I remember learning, the way this is capitalized means it's a name; only there are three here. It was just one god they killed in Aurells, right?"

"Stop waffling and read it; let's go." Elyse had walked over to where Madwen was looking. She mimicked her posture, crouching and placing her still-bleeding hand on the wall.

"Oh!" Madwen said, a slightly less soft sound than the previous exclamation.

Ameline stood up to join them, clutching a lump of metal in her hand.

"I can read it! *Three-faced threshold, Ador, Hinge, Knob, may they protect the boundaries of home and heart.*

"Stupid names," Elyse said, "No wonder they got offed."

Just as the letters had found shape on the wall, the metal in Ameline's hand revealed itself. The stolen relic became a peculiar thing as the words were read aloud: an ornate bronze door hinge cast with winged lions. Ameline kept it for herself. She knew Elyse had seen her take the hinge; she also knew that her pride wouldn't allow her to ask just yet. Not until it served her. She slipped it into her pocket, avoiding Elyse's eye.

"Well," Madwen said, "May they rest peacefully or whatever it is dead gods do." And she prayed again, including the newly remembered gods' names at the end of her litany.

The walk home had been filled with chatter about who had built the chapel, why three gods were needed for a single doorway, how the stories all seemed to say that only one god was killed in the ancient city of Aurells. They wondered if they'd collectively hallucinated the whole afternoon. It felt like they were kids again, in awe of the world, an inseparable team. Elyse and Ameline and Madwen.

The three girls had left the church, tramping their way back to town, and behind them, three gods arose.

Chapter 2

Domare was a middling town. Of middling size, middling importance, and middling expectations held by the middling people who lived there. It was a place for moderately sized families to make modest incomes, for mild weather and milder politics. There were midsize trees, midsize buildings, midsize life expectancies. Utterly forgettable. Sickeningly pleasant. It was a place that had once birthed gods and wanted everyone to forget it could do that particular magic trick.

The roads were carved in straight lines, each leading gently to rolling hills of no great vastness. There was a church, a smattering of cottages, a river, a town square, a tanner, a butcher, a sky, a field, a line of beige houses set shoulder-to-shoulder. Everything as boring as could be, and intentionally so. Like the church, which was long ago painted a greyish white so that when it faded through time and sun and whatever generally mild weather the valley would throw at it, the paint would fade to a more specific greyish white. Everything made sense, plodding from one day to the next. The church would half-fill each week with people half-filled with faith, who would mumble prayers to half-remembered gods they half-believed would save them.

Muted tones, reasonable hairstyles, practical shoes squelching in underwhelming mud. It was the kind of place where one could easily feel too loud.

Ameline didn't want to feel too loud, too brash, though she did, and she knew she was. She wished she could learn to walk anywhere but the middle of the road. She wished that even if she couldn't, she could feel comfortable with her goose-honk laugh or take ownership of a joke taken too far. She didn't want to keep overcorrecting and making herself

small after an explosion of noise, sound, colour. If she couldn't be small, like she so desperately wanted to be, it was a shame she couldn't even take pride in being loud.

And so she tried again and again to find balance, the middling part of herself. Instead of yanking at people's ponytails in the town square as an afternoon activity, she took up goat-herding with Madwen. She tried to listen to the saints' stories in church without snickering; she took formal dance lessons from Elyse. She tried and tried, but the middle was such a narrow ledge.

The only time Ameline felt balanced in Domare was when she was with her friends, often just outside of town, swimming in the river or exploring thickets like the one they'd stumbled into that morning. Days when the girls were just themselves and not part of the common fabric of the town.

So it was a glancing blow, the kind of panic that Ameline felt when she realized she probably hadn't grown up. She was quite comfortable with her level of responsibility, the goats, the river she believed in more than the gods.

The realization came when Elyse had afternoon plans. She split off from the other two as they neared town; Elyse lived closer to the centre of Domare than Madwen and Ameline's family cottages, but it was rare that Elyse had anything to return to that couldn't be brushed off. It was rare that Elyse didn't want to stick around to make sure that the found church was shrouded in enough mystery that no one else went looking but glamourized enough to be intensely interesting. The only explanation she gave was that she had work to do with her mother. Elyse's mother worked in stained glass, and until now, Ameline had never heard Elyse express any interest in the craft.

It started a ball of panic at the back of her throat, under her tongue. Her friends were growing up. And she was not.

Madwen would get married soon, and her new cottage was farther from Ameline's house. Elyse wasn't engaged yet, but that didn't mean she didn't have her pick of the town. Perhaps even out of town, if a merchant passed through Domare and Elyse really put her mind to leaving. Ameline wasn't *not* interested in love, in building a family or a legacy, or whatever marriage was about. It was just that she found swimming and laughing with her friends so much more interesting. Courtships were fun, but no one stuck around. She was too loud, too brash, not worth hitching the cart to. She kicked at a rock. It kicked back.

“Ow!”

Madwen looked over from where she had a long-haired goat wrangled between her knees.

“Ameline, have a care.”

The goat bleated its agreement.

It was of little matter that Elyse had plans; it was shearing day for Ameline and Madwen's shaggy goats. They could have got sheep, like the families on the other side of town, but Ameline couldn't stand to raise something so middling; she couldn't stand to be another in the flock. And so Madwen had researched and asked around until the girls found a travelling merchant who'd told them about woolly goats. *Stubborn as mules, stupid as sheep*, the man had promised. Madwen hadn't laughed when Ameline had told her, but Elyse had. *Well, you've found your match*, she'd said and downed the rest of her blood-red wine.

Shearing always went like this: Madwen and Ameline would corner the goats in the low stone shed where they housed them and grab one at a time to bring into a smaller pen

outside, fingers catching in the gnarled fleece. Ameline was the one to sharpen the blades. She would crank open the two handles of the shears, propped open with a block of wood.

Then she would use a whetstone, dragged in precise, quick movements along the edge of the blade. Madwen would look away, she said this part always turned her stomach. *It's just a blade*, Ameline had said once, *and it's just for the wool*. But Madwen had shaken her head, eyes fixed on the gathering clouds overhead, tracing seams of grey. It was precisely because they were still just blades. Capable of slicing anything.

Ameline didn't understand, but she was happy to do the sharpening. Knives weren't dangerous until they were in someone's hand, she figured.

It amused Ameline, too, that once she'd taken the shears off the block and after she'd closed the mouth of it, Madwen then took the handles with ease. Ameline watched her sturdy friend as she'd grab a goat squarely with one hand, fingers grasping dirty fetlocks, dragging the rest of the body behind. Madwen's meaty hand clasped the shears in her other fist, fearless once she was in control.

The act of shearing started at the head. This part turned Ameline's stomach end over end to see the blades flashing silver close to skin, in and out of view. She didn't like the not-knowing until a snick of blood welled up. She feared for Madwen's hands, which guided the rolls of fluff as they poured off the goat's flat back. The unpeeling goat wool revealed a soft white layer under the coat of greying grime—snick, snick, flashing silver. Madwen worked fast. Efficient, competent. Every muscle engaged and focused. She liked a task, and she liked her goats.

Ameline wished she liked the goats half as much as Madwen had taken to them.

The animal quieted as though it had figured out that Madwen knew what she was doing. It leaned on its hind end, sitting like a plump child on the trampled grass. Snick, snick, deft clipping down the backs of the legs, clearing straggly, dangly strands. Madwen never sliced into a goat's shoulder or ear, the thick rolls around their necks. She was precise.

The coat itself was a beast of a thing. Damp and strong smelling, larger than the spindly creature that was supposed to be the goat left behind. Ameline was mesmerized by the transformation every time. The reveal of the triangular head, the bulging eyes. The emergence of a rotund belly, two sizes smaller than before. Delicate, tendony legs. And the fleece falling with a hulking, lifeless droop.

Ameline didn't trust herself to be so careful with the shears, so she watched and sharpened and waited in the building wind for Madwen to do a good job.

They wouldn't do the whole herd today. Madwen, while strong, didn't want to get tired and sloppy. Only the best for her goats. After three this afternoon, they would return to clip the last four tomorrow.

As soon as the last goat was released, kicking up tiny hooves, unsteady in its newfound lightness, Madwen got scared of the shears again. She placed them gingerly in the long grass, not wanting to give them to Ameline blade-first, not wanting to walk with the blades in case she stumbled and stabbed someone. Ameline stepped over a discarded goat fleece. It was still warm, densely fuzzed, and a bright cream colour on the inside, a fallen cloud against the dark viridian of new spring grass. She leaned down to grab the shears just as Madwen put them down, the backs of their hands brushing. Madwen reacted like Ameline's skin was acidic.

So repellent even my friends won't touch me, Ameline thought. Probably a good thing she wasn't interested in love, then. She picked up the shears and shoved them, point down, into her pocket.

This close to the ground, the discarded wool stank: barnyard-y, stuffy, like wet animal and cozy socks worn too long.

"We'll get a good deal for these. They'll dye well," Madwen said.

Even with the rank smell, it took everything in Ameline not to pick up the fleece and lay it over her shoulders like a cape.

"See you tomorrow morning? I need to meet Aldric."

"Yeah, that works for me." Ameline nudged the edge of the fleece with her toe.

"Say hi to your dad from my dad," Madwen said.

"You know he'll hate that."

"At least he's trying."

"Say hi to Aldric from me." It came out tinted with a venom she'd learned from Elyse. Unfortunately, Madwen knew where Ameline had picked up the trick, and she was immune to any viciousness when it came to her betrothed.

"I will," Madwen's mouth formed the smallest smile Domare had ever seen, an entirely private thing. "Maybe something will change this summer, maybe you'll meet someone. Then we can do things as couples."

Ameline snorted. Nothing was making her feel better; the ball of panic was building up in her throat again.

"You know," Madwen continued, "the priest is kind of cute. I've seen you staring at them before."

“They’re also a million years old,” Ameline waved a dismissive hand. “Not worth my time, and at any rate, I can’t stand being in the church long enough to flirt.” In theory, Ameline was interested in romance. In practice, she was fine alone, thank you very much.

“If not romance, the gods could be a good thing for you. Saints would be even more fun to sink your teeth into if you really had some time on your hands—”

“Not this again,” Ameline cut her off.

“As a hobby!”

“Stop trying to solve things I don’t want solved.”

“I’m just suggesting—”

“Well, I’m just saying, kindly, give it a rest. I don’t judge you for believing, don’t judge me for not caring.”

“But you do judge me. For getting married. For trusting in something bigger than myself. I know you do. I’m okay with it because I know you, I know why you’re judging.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re going to miss me when I’m all grown up. I’m just trying to say that maybe you could join me instead of pouting about the inevitable.”

“Sometimes, Madwen, you sound just like Elyse.”

Ameline turned on her heel in the goat pen. She’d leave Madwen to carry the three fleeces into the barn overnight.

Ameline wondered if there was a way to make her friends forget how well they knew her, if only so they could stop seeing who she could or would be. She stopped herself from going too far down that path. The dangled, tempting question of whether Elyse and Madwen

would even be her friends if they all met today was the only thing at the end of that road, and Ameline wasn't equipped to answer that question. Not yet.

Chapter 3

Elion wanted nothing more in the world than to see a miracle, just once. But it was the iron, the forge, the coin on the table, these were things that he was told mattered. Everyone in Aurells told him so, as he grew up. In this city, it was the visible, the strong and unruinable, that people clung to. Not the gods they'd killed over five hundred years ago. Growing up, Elion had been surrounded by shaking heads—his father, his mother, his practically-minded friends, the man who lived next door with the exceptionally bad teeth—they all said, *focus on what's in your hands, not in your head*.

No one thought that tracing the reasons Aurells had blasted itself off the holy maps might prove to be necessary to their survival. No one except Elion.

Being young and impressionable, his curiosity bided its time while Elion dutifully shadowed his father at the smithy. He filled his hands with lumps of metal to be turned into differently shaped lumps of metal, not hopes, certainly not dreams. He turned his hands to fashioning coins, which traded and turned into dinner on their family table, which was a transformation he could almost convince himself was magic. But it was an interminably boring magic, nonetheless.

Elion pounded iron into horseshoes. He burnt his fingers in the forge. He worked his arms until they were taut with muscle, flecked with pale burn scars from flying sparks, and he prayed to the gods that he would someday find it interesting. He worked, and he grew, and the clang of the forge never spoke to him in the way the stories of the gods did. And if the gods' stories spoke, the tales of saints sang.

Elion kept that to himself; this was the godless city, after all.

Elion knew little about the Miracle Years. He knew they'd taken place five hundred long years ago and had been chock full of saints. He knew that Aurells had been called something different before whatever patron god had been blasted through the cathedral ceiling. But whatever epithet Aurells of the past had borne had been scraped from texts and written over with "Godless City." Elion knew, from his measly research, that there were rules to miracles. They achieved the impossible, were tidily linked to an individual saint, and above all, miracles were irreversible. The miracles had been small, and there hadn't been another saint since Saint Rocte's healing blood finally dried up. The records of saints and miracles were locked in the library, sealed away behind heavy oak doors and the skittering feet of an ever-growing rat's nest.

Generally, people shook their heads at Elion and told him that the stories of the saints were outlandish, like taking a bedtime story as gospel, an odd moment in history, useless to a blacksmith. Who was Elion to want a miracle? At best, their eyes would glaze over when he spoke, and they'd ruffle his hair. Harmless, people called him, and so he was left to his saints.

Elion was not the kind of young man whose hair you would think to ruffle. Tall and muscled from hard labour, brow knit from thinking so hard; it wasn't until he spoke that the child that lived in Elion's chest shone through. He spoke in quick, blurred sentences, words that ran into each other like water, his hands flapping. This is when he would stop being taken seriously.

Even Rodge, his scruffy little dog, would interrupt his stories with burbling snores from where he slept at Elion's feet. If anyone believed in miracles and saints, Elion thought it should have been that dog. Elion had saved him when he was just a tiny brown and white

puppy from being pulled apart by rats, packed poultices in his bites, and helped him recover from them. Ever since then, the dog had been unwaveringly loyal but tragically believed in treats more than saints.

Some told him the saints had been cursed, but most didn't care enough to have an opinion. *Saints were a bunch of people who died centuries ago and left no miracles behind*, they said. *Saints couldn't haul water or milk cows. Saints were foolish enough to get tied up in all that nasty god business, but we put a right stop to that, didn't we? Right here in Aurells.* The saints didn't matter, *Focus on what's in your hands, boy, that's what matters*, they would say, but no one quashed his curiosity quite firmly enough for it to ever go away. Elion had hands for a smithy, not a miracle, no matter how much he thought about

But Elion persisted. In his most private moments, Elion admitted to himself that he thought the gods might matter, too. He believed the ones that were left had not entirely turned their divine backs on the people of Aurells. He kept this to himself. Aurells tolerated saints because they had once been human, but they wouldn't stand a god.

Elion wanted the dead saints' stories to *mean* something. Why were there records if not to be read? And what if the saints came back? Their miracles had never been in question; they weren't just stories; they were *histories*, they were *true*. But no one cared. No one opened the locked door to the ancient library.

Elion walked by the library every day to get to the cathedral that butted up against the library's back wall. In Aurells, the church wasn't a place to revere a god; it was a historic site, a museum of sorts. The ageing priest performed his educational sermons each week, under the condition that in them, the saints were dead, deviant, divine cautionary tales.

The only story the priest told of gods was The Ending.

It was a triumph of man, banishing superstition, memorized by every child in Aurells by the time they were ten years old. It wasn't a long story, because it is hard to make a long story out of something meant to be forgotten. He stood in the spear of sunlight that pierced through the hole in the roof, burnt edges left unrepaired since the immolation, and told the story of The Ending again and again.

Privately, Elion thought that no one cared about the saints because their stories were being mangled by the priest. The only story he told with any verve was The Ending. Elion could tell the saints' stories better, the way they *deserved* to be told. Surely, the people would want to hear them then, want to listen, to understand.

So, Elion visited the mouldering cathedral each week, walking past the library's oak door and its skittering rats, and learned the bare, tattered stories. Then he went home to his dog and his family and prayed to the saints while his arms collected starburst scars from the smithy's fire.

Elyse's favourite place in the world was the seat beside the window in her room. On the second, teetery floor of her family's timber-frame house, the square window overlooked the main thoroughfare of Domare, and from her perch, she could see the comings and goings from the tanner's, the butcher's, the Cat and Broom pub, the shoemaker's, the hall, and—if she leaned *just so*—the church.

Archibald, her orange cat, batted at her dress where it hung off her ankles, draping down from where her feet were resting on the windowsill. From here, no one could see her. She was invisible, a watcher. If someone did happen to look upward, they would catch a grin, perhaps a flirtatious wave. She was never shy of getting caught looking; she wanted to be

looked at, to be seen. Elyse spent so much of her time trying to be noticed that the impulse elbowed out most other thoughts.

She wanted to be seen in an entirely different way than the way she looked at the world. Nothing escaped her eyes or her judgment. The tavern's new hire sweeping the dirt from the Cat and Broom's front step into the doorway of the shoemaker's shop (bold), the sweep of pigeons alighting off a rooftop gable (dramatic), a woman's hat dressed in badly painted green pearls (tacky), nothing escaped Elyse's watchful eye. Knowing the scrutiny she applied to others, Elyse herself would rather be seen through a squinty sheen, or as though through stained glass: everything she'd perfected highlighted in warm orange and teal, and the parts even she didn't like to look at refracted and distorted, stylized representations of a perfect whole. Even up here, even invisible, she schooled her expression to that of disinterest and cool detachment.

She was winding hair ribbons that she'd borrowed from Ameline around her hand, feeling the cool slide of well-woven fabric against the smooth skin of her wrists. Her friend had worn them the week before for some ceremony or other, her auburn hair unfurled from its usual snarl into an ornate, shining pile of riches, her head practically glowing.

It had ruined Elyse's whole day.

Elyse had taken her time coaxing her thick mop—her greatest source of insecurity—into a semblance of order, arduously braiding tiny strands into larger ornate pinwheels, but all anyone had seen was Ameline's shining red masterpiece. Not that Ameline noticed; no, she was preoccupied with coming up with colourful comparisons for the priest's new robes. The priest was delivering another unintelligible sermon about saints. Ameline had decided stories about the saints' lives were more profitable for jokes than faith. The cleverness of the

jokes did nothing to soothe Elyse's mood; she'd focused her eyes on the stained-glass window above the priest. Afternoon sunlight clawed through the bottom corner, illuminating the screaming face of a saint as his heart was ripped from his chest. It was a gruesome thing, to be so pretty. She focused on the chips of glass blood.

Madwen, on the other side of Ameline, had to stuff her hands into her mouth to avoid gasping aloud, her jaw dropping open at the blatant blasphemy. Ameline grinned, the picture of shamelessness with auburn hair. After a particularly long-winded punchline, Madwen's gasp had echoed up to rattle the church rafters.

The priest stumbled in her sermon and looked up to find the disturber. Elyse had sent a withering look at Ameline, who shrugged piously, the golden monstrosity of her hair winking in the filtered sunlight. The priest had levelled a squinty glare at Elyse before clearing her throat and continuing to drone. *The heavenly saints who guide us, without their fearless sacrifice...*

Shame and jealousy whipped up in Elyse.

Ameline would never change. She would forever be the kid-version of herself, able to pull off the blank look: *who, me?* Elyse hated that Ameline never faced any consequences. Elyse thought that by now, Ameline should have grown into someone better. She knew that Ameline was smart and funny, and she wanted her friend to be more than she was.

After the service, she'd asked to borrow the red ribbons. She'd said it so sweetly. She'd said it was what friends, nay, *sisters*, would do for one another. Ameline's doe eyes widened hopefully. *Sisters?* She'd pulled the ribbons from her hair right there on the street. It was too easy. Silken curls tumbled loose, hardening Elyse's heart once more.

She watched now as a cart laden with butchered pigs, likely in preparation for the upcoming feast, made its way slowly down the cobbled street. The cart driver, pulled by a stubby donkey, looked up at her window as he passed by. His shoulders were massive, sculpted things, she could tell even through his shirt. Elyse could spot a pair of nice shoulders from a mile away. She blew him a kiss.

The donkey plodded on; one tiny foot placed in front of the other until the cart trundled to a stop in front of the banquet hall. The man with nice shoulders swung down from the cart and promptly got into an argument with Feric, a weaselly vassal to the local lord who owned the hall and commissioned the saint-celebrating feasts. The lord never joined in the festivities himself; he communicated with Domare solely through Feric, much to everyone's dismay.

The man threw a look back up her way when Feric scrambled off. She held his gaze and then raised an eyebrow. *What are you going to do about it?*

Feric returned, and the two men carried the massive slabs of pork inside. It was rather comical: the hulking breadth of the cart driver could probably wrangle the entire cartload on his own, the job was only made more complicated by scrawny Feric's insistence on helping.

The two disappeared inside.

Elyse bet the man with the nice shoulders liked auburn hair coiled in scarlet ribbons. She stifled a scowl, not allowing the expression to show beyond a slight pressing of her lips.

Fat grey raindrops began to fall out the window, the darkening sky pulling Elyse's reflection out of the windowpane. Her lips pressed tighter.

She waited. The meat was dropped off in the hall kitchens, and the man with the shoulders emerged. He looked up at the clouds and got back onto his cart, shoulders hunched impressively against the onslaught. He drove off the way he had come without looking back at Elyse's window. Forgotten. Unworthy of pursuit. But glanced at, perhaps thought of as beautiful, if even for a moment.

Elyse pulled the ribbons tight around her wrists. Hefty material. Expensive. Brighter than the blood red that had stained Madwen's gloves, more of a triumphant scarlet. They were likely the only nice thing Ameline owned, and she'd handed them off without a second thought. Elyse wound the length all the way around her forearm, up to her elbow. She loosed it slowly, gathering the ribbons into a tight bundle in her palm until no red showed.

Archibald was now snoozing on the bed behind her, and she crooned to him. Then she tossed the ribbons to his claws.

The lump that used to be ribbons sat a frayed mess on the floor for days. Archibald chewed and batted it around intermittently. Then, one morning just before sunrise, Elyse heard the cat retching. She'd rolled out of bed before her eyes were open and grabbed the scruff of his neck. Her other hand plunged fingers between his teeth and ripped gummy wet threads from his clammy mouth.

A moment after extricating ribbons from gullet, Archibald showed his gratitude by clawing a hot red line across the top of Elyse's foot. She cursed him and stuffed what was left of the ribbons into her dress pocket before stuffing herself into the dress, too.

She was awake now; she might as well bother Madwen, the infuriatingly early riser. Madwen, like all things, did not escape Elyse's scrutiny, and she was reasonably sure there were secrets to be ferreted out, yet.

If nothing else, Madwen would absolve her of the ribbon crime.

Elyse made a face at Archibald on her way out, feeling her lower lip stretch into a broad line, flat and taut and unattractive. She quickly wiped the expression from her face, feeling the ugliness subside. She made a mental note never to replicate the face again and swept from the room.

Chapter 4

The swimmers orbited each other. The three. One fair, one tall, one timid. One reckless, one fluttery, one liar. Ameline, Madwen, and Elyse waded in and out of the shallows, the spring sun tentatively brushing the surface. They came to the river year after year. Growing together and apart, taller and fuller and emptier all at once. One swimming, one treading water, one lying on the shore.

The river itself grew with them, gushing, rushing, trickling, abating, drying, bubbling, remembering. The river ate into the bank, flooded, and trickled again. Seasons bled together, winding and infinite and the river stayed the same. Ducks had ducklings that flew away. Pond walkers huddled under frondy shadows. Mosquitoes chattered and bit and died and chattered and bit and died. Silty fish would crawl up through the depths to reach the rays of light on the surface.

The river knew the shape of the swimmers. Paddling hands, clunking feet pushing through the surface, gasping breaths that took on water. The river learned the shape of the swimmers at its slimmest point, well before it met the other river in an open-mouthed kiss and became a thing much different from itself. A thing to drown in.

The slimmest point of a river is a good place for listening. Here, the river heard Elyse promise that she would pay for their drinks, that she would remember to close the gate, that she would return ribbons. The river knew about rivulets, ribbons of current. She talked of red ribbons for winding into hair. She spoke loudly, her voice echoing off the surface and scattering into the underbrush on the other bank. The lies turned in the river's eddies like bubbles, carried away downstream.

The three sat on a log with their ankles in the water, dripping tear-sized droplets from their shoulders and hair, returning the water to the river. The liar would count them down, standing tall in the wind and sun, only to let the others take the plunge without her. Streaks of white bubbles grew up the other girls, the river happy to take them.

Madwen, fluttery Madwen who had to be coaxed into jumping at all, usually only waded in up to her thighs. Content to stand in the shallows. Afraid of the current. Timid. It takes a long time to dry butterfly wings.

After the thin sun dried the remaining droplets from loose hair, Ameline splashed her feet, disturbing sandy banks, overturning stones. She wanted to see what would move, what would happen if the water were full of silt.

The other two sat together, running fingers through each other's hair, passing secrets like smooth river stones.

Ameline climbed back up the fallen log. She leapt in with her arms splayed, unafraid of water up her nose or the smack of limbs against the surface. Often, she would let herself be swept downstream only to test her strength against the current, like a salmon returning to its hatching place. She wanted to see how far she would let herself go: out past the nest, emptied of ducklings, through a net of mosquitoes. The river felt the expulsion of air into bubbles as the swimmer dove. And dove again.

Ameline let herself get carried too far in the current. She forgot about the river's purpose: to move, to move, to *move*. Swept up, carried away, too intent on following through to think clearly. The river bore her along—lulling, shushing, burbling sweet nothings in its watery voice. The river loved her, after all, and the river never lied to her about what it wanted.

Eventually her exhausted limbs flailed in slow motion. She paddled against the swelling current, towards the riverbank. Pulling at roots, at clay mud banks, not herself, she was nothing more than a swimmer scrabbling onto any handhold. Bedraggled, far from her friends and farther from home, Ameline ripped herself from the embrace of the water. The river let her go reluctantly, the current still pulling at her.

The river wished it could keep her from walking back to where she'd started. They'd come so far together, drifting and bubbling.

The walk back from the river, once Ameline washed up again, was punctuated with a cold breeze. Shadows lengthened out behind the three girls heading home.

“We have the feast tonight, right?” Madwen asked. Ameline already knew that *Madwen* knew it was tonight. With hundreds of nearly forgotten saints and too many gods to appease, feast days were more common than non-feast days. Fluttery Madwen just had to confirm.

“In the hall, yeah,” Ameline said, breaking forward and twirling. Her father had once said she could dance herself to death, back when they'd been on speaking terms. She cast it out of her mind, tonight would be a good night.

“Saint of something, thank you for providing an excuse to get messy in public.” And she blew a kiss to the sky. “Speaking of,” Ameline stopped spinning and faced Elyse, walking backwards, “Could I have my hair ribbons back tonight? I want to try ramshorns.” She twisted twin locks of hair up by her ears, damp curls splaying across her face. Her hair was soaked a dark, tree-trunk brown.

“The red will look *so* nice,” said Madwen. Elyse fixed her eyes on the treeline ahead.

“I told you. I’ll get them to you.”

Ameline asked again. “Please.”

Elyse shrugged. The wind curled through Ameline’s exposed baby hairs, chilling the back of her neck. She dropped her hair and it fell wetly to her shoulders.

“You’ve had them for weeks; just give them back.” She stopped walking. Ameline put her hand on Elyse’s shoulder to stop her too. Elyse flinched at the touch.

“You want the ribbons?” Elyse thrust her hand into her pocket and emerged with a fistful of tangled threads. “Here’s what’s left of them.”

Ameline’s voice was percussive. “What happened?”

Elyse shrugged. “I guess they fell to pieces when I unbraided my hair.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Ameline asked. The frayed ends of the ribbons flapped in the wind, clearly wrecked by something other than wear. Blood bubbled in her veins, hot and angry and familiar.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?” she demanded, her voice rising. “I could have bought more when the market was in town. I can’t do anything now.”

Elyse shrugged again.

“I can’t believe you.” Ameline pawed the ruined threads from her friend’s hand, her nails intentionally scratching Elyse’s palm.

“They’re just ribbons,” Madwen jumped in, “I can braid your hair for you.” It was meant to be a kind offer.

“You knew!” Ameline turned on Madwen. She wound the threads around her fingers until it hurt. “You knew she’d wrecked them.”

Madwen's eyes were pleading. *Peace*, they said, *all I want is some peace*. Ameline registered the plea, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't forgive so easily.

They were always like that when they were *supposed* to be a trio. Ameline had seen plenty of things balanced on three legs and made stronger for it. Sturdier. But if two legs kept stealing away, well... Ameline felt like she was leaning further and further into friends who didn't support her. She whirled back towards home and strode off, fast.

She knew it was just a ribbon, just a frilly hair ribbon that her friend hadn't meant to wreck—probably—but she was already stalking down the path. She had no choice but to keep simmering now.

The narrowing path bit at her, blackberry brambles snapping at her arms. Why did they try to hide things from her? Why did Elyse have to lie? Why did the lies not drive Madwen into anger the same way?

Looking down, her fingers were bulbous and purple where they were wound in the threads. She loosened her grip. Unwinding.

The path broke open into a cobbled street. She tossed the remains of the ribbons on the ground and the clump of red string was plucked up by the wind.

Chapter 5

Banquets and feasts in Domare were a performative act, and tonight was no different. Tables laden with roast pork, glazed pheasants, tiny, candied fruits, flagons of wine, casks of mead—exorbitant spending for a god whose name no one could quite seem to remember. It was about the ritual, in any case. If the god ever turned its eye on Domare the town wanted to have left a favourable impression; it didn't hurt that they also wanted an excuse for a party. Whoever was on the receiving end of tonight's offerings would receive drunken ballads, elbow-forward dancing, and illicit alleyway trysts.

The feast fell on the full moon, so Ameline's walk was well-lit, if colder than she'd anticipated. Normally, Ameline would walk with Elyse and Madwen to the banquet hall in the centre of town. Tonight, however, she was still miffed and wanted to make a point. The point in question was, unfortunately, muddied by the fact that Elyse lived measurably closer to the centre of town, and Ameline hadn't thought to put on her warm winter cloak, fooled as she was by the warmth of the mid-afternoon spring sun. She resolutely marched from the far edge of Domare, teeth gritted, shoulders up to her ears, splayed fingers gripping her bare arms, refusing to admit her mistake. Her unbound hair laughed its way onto her shoulders.

Noise poured out the open front door of the hall and tumbled off the houses that leaned together across the street. Cobblestones bounced bits of conversations in odd directions. The feast, as formless as it was, had gotten swinging early in the evening. Ameline loved the wildness of the banquet hall on a feast day. Just being closer to the sound of the party loosened her limbs and made her feel warmer. People were having fun, chatting, more prone to rowdy, raucous behaviour. The chaos of parties was the only time Ameline felt like

Domare kept pace with her. Gossip and good times. She couldn't be too loud in a room full of joyful shouting.

Ameline stepped over the threshold into flickering half-light and loud laughter, looking for Elyse and Madwen. It was hard to recognize anyone in the dim firelight, thrown by equidistant braziers, but she wanted them to see that she'd walked alone. That she'd made it. That she could survive just fine by herself, thank you very much. She spotted them by a back table, Elyse's eye socket nearly pressed to the rim of her goblet, eyeing the bottom of her empty drink. Madwen's head was thrown back in laughter.

Well. Good for them, able to have fun without her. Ameline spun on her heel and made for the table where pre-filled cups of mead were lined up in tidy rows. A dancer's elbow caught her in the shoulder, jarring Ameline into her body. She laughed.

A party was a party.

Someone must have remembered at least part of what the forgotten god stood for because halfway through the evening, a large door was carried by six people into the middle of the room. It was a broad, red, double-panelled thing that rose to a point in the middle. Ornate iron hinges stretched nearly to the seam, curling and undulating in metalwork too detailed for Ameline to make out from across the room. The part of the hinge that would have anchored the doors to the wall swung loose on one side, creaking too lightly to be heard over the din. The other side was missing its mirroring hinge. Two round door knockers were welded in the centre of each door, one ring on each panel mounted in an iron lion's crying mouth. It was imposing, and it rankled at Ameline in an uncomfortable way. She tried to shrug it off and took a hefty swig of her drink. She tried not to think about the hunk

of metal she'd taken from the abandoned church. She tried not to think about Madwen's laugh, tinkling brightly above the noise.

The door sat in the middle of the dance floor, watching the farandole, listening to the lute. Ameline watched the door. She felt Elyse and Madwen cautiously come to stand at her left side. She didn't look at them. She looked at the door.

"You look like you're in a good mood," Elyse said.

Ameline hid a scowl by taking another large sip of mead. Madwen put a hand on Elyse's arm, shushing. She tried a different approach.

"We missed you when we were getting ready."

Then why didn't you come and get me? Why didn't you pick me instead of her in the first place?

Ameline was tired of her reactions being treated like overreactions. She took another sip. Sighed.

Ameline also knew that she wouldn't have any fun tonight if she kept acting wounded. She packaged her feelings until they were tiny, inconsequential things, smaller than pebbles and river sand, and then said, "I bet they're going to put a lion behind the door, and someone is going to have to fight it."

Not an apology, not an acknowledgement, but an unspoken agreement: *We move on.*

Elyse jumped in right away, "Or a wild boar, that would be better."

"That's barbaric," Madwen said. Her hand rose to her heart. Her newly gloved fingers stood out like pale white fish against the deep marine blue of her dress.

"You wouldn't mind watching Aldric slay a boar, though, would you?" Ameline teased, and Madwen blushed on command. Madwen and Aldric had been betrothed since birth and pining after each other for years, but the mention of her fiancé still made her shy.

“With his big, strapping muscles and long, *long* sword,” Elyse added.

“I’m going to kill you both,” Madwen said. “Besides, he’s training tonight.” The tips of her ears were wine-red.

And then the music stopped. Braziers were lifted off the walls brought close so the flames were arranged in a circle around the door. The far walls flickered with formless shapes made of wings and monsters and flailing arms, all shadow-patterned onto the wall. Everyone drew nearer to the door, people’s faces made hot with fire and with drink. They looked on, anticipatory.

“It looks familiar, somehow,” Madwen whispered. “I wonder...”

Ameline shushed her before she could continue; a bated silence had fallen over the hall and, one friend to another, she could not let Madwen be too loud, now. Madwen bit her tongue and looked at the door.

It would be the talk of the town for weeks after. An unsolvable puzzle, a trick of the light. People would shake their heads and say that surely there was an explanation.

The door sat in the middle of the feast hall, eyes on it from every angle, tall and wooden and firmly part of this world. Then, there was a knock. It clearly came from one side, and the people who had been on that side of the door swore up and down that there was no one there.

It was a self-assured, cheeky knock. *Rat-ta-tat-tat*. The already silent and huddled room hushed more, drew closer together, children around a campfire of scary stories.

Would anyone answer the door? Was this part of the show?

“Hinge,” Madwen breathed.

The knock came again. *Rat-ta-tat-tat*.

Still, there was no one close enough who could have knocked on the door. And no other surface in the room would make that same quality of thud.

“Ador.”

Ameline’s shoulders crawled with goosebumps. Madwen clung to her arm. Ameline stepped forward, compelled to open the door. To make it stop. To get to the next step and put everyone out of the misery of tension. As she stepped forward, the knock came a third time.

“Knob.”

And then the door opened.

A slim figure in a jester’s cap leaned through the doorway. Then, a jangly pointed toe stepped over the threshold, coming from nowhere. Another step revealed the whole of the figure: a body made up of angles, draped in yellow and black patterned fabric. A fool’s cap tied under his chin, two leering points jetting off from his head, dangling bells at the ends. A shiny yellow bib that came to a point over his middle. Droopy sleeves tied with red tassels at the elbows. In his hands, an iron doorknob. He stepped through the doorway and spun around to look at the crowd. The light cast him in an orangey haze. The room held its breath.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he bowed, and the room erupted into applause. Whistles and hoots and stomping accompanied the clapping. And everyone was content to return to the party. To the flagons of wine and the tables laden with bread and cheese.

But as the fool finished his bow, he looked up, and Ameline saw that his wide-set eyes were entirely green, like marbles in his head.

The story was told over and over again that night, of the knocking, the pounding hearts, the success of the show. No one had guessed a god might walk among them. The fool mingled, jangling his way across the room, sharing foolish things with everyone. It all added to the charm. *He stepped through the door and then told me a riddle about herringfoxes! Well, he told me to plant my turnips early!*

Some folks got nonsense: a recipe for a ninth Saturday in June, or a dirty rhyme about kings and saints. Some got advice, like the turnips, or eerily personal, entirely truthful observations that could be knocked aside as foolishness if you didn't examine the wisdom too closely.

The fool asked everyone the same question before spurting incoherence. *Will you hold me?* And with every sputtering no or leering false yes, he would then offer his words. He told the baker he knew why he hated his birthday, although the reason was whispered quietly enough that the baker got to keep his secrets. He told the tanner his horse would come back from lameness in three days' time. Improbable details. Harmless and entertaining enough but nothing so bold as to get someone to cry out, *"That's a god!"*

Every person in the hall received a riddle of some sort, and though his movements were unarticulated, unscripted, meandering and chaotic, he seemed meticulous. He'd peer into a person's face, his knobby cheekbones and unmoving green eyes pinning them in place while he rattled the unscrewed doorknob in his hand or did a jig while reciting lines in verse. At one point, he removed a pointed shoe, sat down on the floor, and began counting his toes.

Ameline tried to avoid the fool—the god, whatever he was he unnerved her.

Besides, Elyse was quickly moving from drunken giggles into drunken taunts, so Ameline's hands were full of keeping her away from anyone who might matter, or at least remember her cruelty. Surely, the fool couldn't give a fortune to everyone, she thought, surely, she could leave unscathed.

The fool snuck up on the trio.

He was more solid, up close. The points of his faded cap drooped where the bells pulled them down, casting bouncing shadowed lines across his face. He turned his green glass gaze first onto Madwen.

"Will you hold me?"

"Knob," she said in her gentle Madwen voice, "I will not hold you," and his unseeing eyes lit up—filling for a moment with clarity. The fool—Knob—seemed to settle, relaxing into himself. Solemnly, he said to Madwen: "Your friend, Time, left a message today, but it was far too short to relay."

Ameline giggled, alcohol fizzling in her nose. Madwen's eyes narrowed.

"What does that mean? Tell me what that means." Madwen's voice was low and fast, more intense than Ameline had heard her friend in a long while. Alarmingly, she grabbed his shoulder with a gloved hand.

"Wen, it's nothing," Ameline said, "he told Jeanne to climb the moon. It's nothing. Leave him."

Knob grinned—too widely. His gums were crawling with black fungus, his teeth yellower than his cap.

"Don't cough on the blackberry stew," he said, sounding as though he were agreeing with Ameline. He then turned to Elyse.

At the same time as Elyse said a pre-emptive “No,” Knob shrieked.

“A rat! A rat I see!” He jumped up and down and pointed at Elyse’s face as he cried out, “A rat, a nasty ratty rat, you are!”

Elyse had flushed an impressive shade of maroon. She took a single breath, and as though by sheer willpower, her complexion cleared once again.

With dignity, she said, “Shut up.”

The fool’s mouth snapped shut. He leaned in close. His unseeing eyes were swimming as he whispered, “Do you know what *kills* a rat, my pet? Salt from under a lake, sugar from the table, and the ash of a loved one. But that’s not what you need to hear, is it, little rat?”

Ameline’s hand found Elyse’s, squeezing tight as Elyse’s face became stone. Knob danced backwards, nimble on his feet. His every step jangled discordantly.

“You need to know that the towers are always worth visiting.”

In the wake of the nonsensical advice, it occurred to Ameline that he would say something awful and true about her, when it was her turn. Every third person in the room seemed to be reporting the accuracy of the fool, while the rest were merely entertained or unimpressed by his unhinged ramblings.

When Knob finally looked at Ameline, dread thudded in her heart. What would he tell her? His face turned upwards to look into hers, his eyes two green pools. They looked more like gemstones now, emeralds reflecting the flickering light. He looked at her and froze for a moment, as though listening, reading. Pulling wisdom from beyond. Ameline was sweating; the room felt too bright, too hot. Her skin prickled. She wanted to run; she couldn’t move; she needed to be outside; her feet were rooted until he shared his verdict, and

she knew what he saw in her. It felt like a beginning. What he said would change her understanding of herself or the world. She felt it.

The fool opened his scummy, gangrenous mouth, and he laughed.

He laughed and laughed, the kind of high, hysterical noise that finds the farthest corners of a room and ricochets around until every wall laughs, too. The kind of laugh that makes other people look over their shoulders, wanting the perpetrator to either share the joke or shut up. The kind of laugh that's a pitch too high to be contagious.

It went on and on. Regurgitating. Petering out and then finding new footholds. Tears spurted from his eyes, his cheeks straining and pink, his gullet wide open to let the loudest sounds muscle their way outwards.

Ameline just stood there.

Too many moments later, the laugh rounded out and floated from the rafters to rest as a rumbling staccato in the Knob's chest. The partygoers turned back to their conversations; their interest lost. Another trick of the fool.

Ameline had reached the limit of her confusion and hurtled into self-righteous anger. She reached over for Elyse's still-full wine goblet.

"Hey, numbskull." Ameline tossed the contents of the drink in his face. "Go find someone else to torment."

His face now dripping burgundy, Knob's laughter abated to a small chuckle, the dregs still spilling from his chest. Watching twin droplets of wine fall from his chin and smash to the floor in bloody haloes unrooted Ameline from her spot. She grabbed Elyse and Madwen and made for the exit. She only looked over her shoulder once, and Knob still stood there, checkerboard clothing stained with splotchy burgundy, smiling eyes following

her. Partygoing eyes followed her out, and she could hear the whispers, the judging. *She's too loud, too reactive. He's harmless, why'd she have to ruin things again?*

Ameline needed to get away from it all.

Outside, the night air swallowed them up, crisp and grounding. The shift into the quiet of the outdoors from the close, hot commotion of the banquet made Ameline's ears ring. All she could hear was her own pounding heart and panting breath.

She would have stayed rooted to the spot, unmoving. That was what unnerved her the most, her complete lack of response. She built herself on movement; who was this washed-up jester to strip her of that? How did Madwen know his name? There was no way that was truly a god from the church they'd visited the other day. It had to be some pretender—a trick of the light, a part of the party.

The longer she stood under the stars with the heat of the banquet leaching from her, the longer she drank in the midnight air and cricket sounds, the more the whole ordeal felt like a silly dream. She remembered that she needed to say thank you to Elyse.

“Sorry about your drink.”

Elyse picked at a seam on her dress. It was a soft linen, its draped layers falling just-so from the tucked waist.

“He was a prick.” Which meant she admired the move but couldn't directly give voice to it.

“I hope he's okay,” Madwen said.

Ameline didn't really care if he was okay. She was busy wondering if his eyes were really made of glass. What he could see. She wanted to know what was on the other side of the door, and if he was truly a god. Were there others? What havoc would they unleash?

“Do you really think he’s...” she couldn’t say it out loud. It felt too foolish. It was a close save, too, because Elyse immediately scoffed.

“A god? No, he’s just a lowlife with a big ugly mouth.”

“What did he mean about time, ‘Wen?’” Ameline asked. “Was that nonsense stuff or scary-true stuff?”

In the glow of the moon, Madwen became an even more fluttery version of herself. Her small hands couldn’t find where they were supposed to be, as though they would rather fly away than stay attached to her wrists. Still gloved, her hands looked like moths flapping around at her sides. A night breeze sent a rustle through the grass near them, treetops close-by keening at the push.

“It meant nothing because he’s a prick,” Elyse said.

Madwen grounded herself on the comment, tethering herself to the line of attack.

“He was a bit rude. The rat comment was entirely unnecessary! I can’t believe he said that to you.” She squeezed Elyse’s shoulder, a perching dove. “Let’s go home.”

Elyse made sure to catch Ameline’s eye before she said, “I can get the dress back to you tomorrow, Mads, I’ll be sure to hang it up, so it doesn’t wrinkle.”

Ah, so they were still fighting. Elyse would borrow from Madwen and return her things promptly, in better care than they’d come to her.

The comment flew over Madwen’s head, and she smiled up at Elyse and told her not to worry. In turn, Elyse smiled at Ameline, the glint in her eye saying she knew that Madwen would always trust her, no matter what. That she was the favourite, that she was infallible in Madwen’s eyes. Finally, the look dared Ameline to make a comment; *you’ll take care of Madwen’s things because they matter more.*

Ameline was suddenly exhausted. She had a cold walk home after the commotion of the evening and the earlier swim, and the tension that never really went away. It all seemed impossible.

“I’m leaving.”

She knew the argument would dissipate by tomorrow, but then there would be a new one. They were plodding in an unending circle, a rut.

Madwen chased after her to walk the same way.

“Why do you do it? Why do you treat her like that?” Ameline asked when Madwen caught up.

“Treat her like what?” Madwen was slightly out of breath. “You mean lending her my things?”

So, she had caught onto the double standard, then. Ameline sometimes forgot just how sharp Madwen was under the shyness, and the waffling. They were quiet for a moment, walking in the dark towards the outskirts of town. Madwen was thinking, and Ameline would give her space for as long as she could before she needed to be loud again.

“I think maybe I treat her like that because no one else does.”

Ameline thought about how easily Elyse shrugged off responsibility with a delicate smile, a well-placed pout.

“Elyse has never reckoned with a mistake in her life! It’s like she’s made of glass, never treated roughly. *Everyone* treats her like that.”

“I treat you the same way I treat her,” Madwen reasoned, “And you make a lot more mistakes.”

That hurt, but only because it was true. Ameline's boisterous approach to most things often required a clean-up crew, while Elyse calculated her risks more carefully. Elyse would never rig up a bucket of spoiled milk to drop on the butcher unless she'd already planned an escape from the knives. Ameline wouldn't think further than the falling bucket.

"It makes me feel bad," Ameline said, at last. She wished she was better with her words.

They'd made it to the churchyard. The light and noise from the banquet hall were far enough away, it was as though it had never happened. Ameline was hot with shame and self-righteous anger, but the night's cold skittered goosebumps up and down her arms.

Madwen was surprisingly unruffled. Her fair skin reflected the moonlight; she looked like she was made of marble, her dark eyes punched deep into their sockets, unreadable. She huffed a breath.

"I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I will *not* choose sides."

"And that's exactly what hurts my feelings! She's clearly lying about my ribbons, and you let her get away with it!"

"It's just lies. They're harmless."

Ameline kicked the dirt road.

"You don't get it." A lie was a lie was a lie. Unforgivable. Not only was the truth always more interesting, but fewer people got hurt, and you could measure your expectations to be the right size. You wouldn't end up waiting by the door every new moon for a mother you were told would return on the darkest night or waiting for ruined ribbons to come back whole. The truth was real; it let you sleep at night, and it never crumbled underneath you. Ameline couldn't understand why anyone would think a lie could ever be the right answer.

Madwen took her friend's hand in her gloved ones.

"Maybe I don't understand. But I'd rather have you two be at peace with each other than always reaching around me to stab each other in the back."

Ameline sighed. Beside them, somewhere in the dark behind the church, a bone whistle blew in three short blasts. Coordinated stomps followed.

Night training. So that was why Madwen was so keen to follow Ameline to the very edge of town. Not to resolve the argument, but to rendezvous with Aldric. Ameline quirked an eyebrow.

"You, my friend, are not sly."

Even through the watery light of the moon, Madwen's cheeks were tinted pink.

"You know," Ameline drawled, "that you're allowed to be in love in the daylight, too. You're engaged."

Madwen was fluttery again. She stepped back, her shoulders rolling up and down as though she were on a boat.

"Well. I just." She jutted out her chin and then hid her face behind her hand and tucked the whole thing into her shoulder. It was such a Madwen movement that Ameline's heart cramped with her love for her friend.

"When you finally get married," Ameline said, "you are going to be stupidly happy. It's going to be the best day of my life. Also, the worst."

"Stop making things all about you," Madwen replied, but there was no heat in the words.

They rounded the corner. A single bonfire burned and around it, thirty young men practiced intricate movements with swords.

They looked so purposeful, all in sync. Ameline couldn't pick Aldric out of the crowd; they were interchangeable in the dark. Her hands itched. Maybe if she had a sword and orders to follow that weren't her own, maybe then she could focus. Maybe then she wouldn't get laughed at by fools or gods.

The entity that was the regiment shifted as one, putting their left feet out front and then jabbing with the swords in their right hands. Moonlight and fire glinted off the blades. The shadows were jagged and inky. An owl hooted twice from a nearby hawthorn tree, sounding, for a moment, like a fool's laugh.

"I'll leave you to it," Ameline said. "Here comes your beau."

One of the soldiers had peeled off, jogging lightly over toward the two girls. Everything seemed louder at night; each crunch of grass under his out-of-sync boots seemed to echo at an ungodly volume. Ameline saw him return to himself, extricated from the collective. His posture shifted, and he was no longer a faceless soldier but Aldric, bubbly and buoyant. The moon and firelight were behind him, and all Ameline could see were his uneven teeth.

He was awkward but charming. In daylight his arms were too long for his body, his hair sweeping in shiny chestnut waves across his forehead. Handsome, Ameline supposed, stable, and absolutely smitten with Madwen. It was obvious to anyone watching that he and Madwen were well-suited and over the moon about each other. The slowness with which they'd encircled each other these past years had driven Ameline nearly mad. She couldn't understand why they didn't just throw themselves at each other. Even now, under the cover of stars with only Ameline there to see, they acted shy.

“Don’t let her go home until she’s pregnant.” Ameline saluted as she stepped backwards into the full dark. She *heard* Madwen’s ears flush scarlet. Aldric sputtered out well-meant offers to escort her home.

Confident that Madwen was in good hands, Ameline shrugged off the offers. Hers was the only house past the church; she could see the candle left burning in the window from here. She left the lovebirds to walk themselves home. The bone whistle continued to bleat, keeping time to the symphony of crickets, wind, owls, and boot steps.

Finally alone, Ameline could turn over the events of the day in her head. The ribbons, the lonely walk to the banquet, the door, Knob’s cacophonous laughter. The way the river grew colder the deeper she dived, encasing her in a rush of bitter cold. Overhead, wind rustled through the trees, sending the branches chattering. The wind brought with it the faint smell of smoke.

Chapter 6

Elion prayed to the saints so much that he felt compelled to speak to the priest about it.

On his way out of the cathedral, Elion hung back. Merle, whose teeth overpopulated his bottom jaw, waved to him as he plodded towards the main door. Elion, Merle, and a few of the older women were the only regulars at the services; a performative re-enactment of dead religion drew few followers.

Elion liked the way that sounds ricocheted in the main space of the cathedral. Although the acoustics were imperfect—the hole in the ceiling—Elion found that it made him care more about which words he chose, knowing how they would float to fill the space.

He walked between the stone benches, dragging his toes in the hopes the priest would acknowledge him first. The priest wore faded yellow robes and a long dangling necklace with a scorched piece of stone strung on the end. It was a reminder of the might of Aurells or some such; he'd hold it to his chest and then thrust it in the air just as he delivered the final lines of his scripted story, the same choreography each week. Elion thought it was a touch contrived and insincere by this point, but he didn't want to lead with that thought, today.

The priest did not notice Elion's approach. Elion coughed politely, trying to be louder than the rustling paper as the priest shelved the single fragile tome, he pulled out each week, but even in the quiet of the room, the sound was almost lost. It was as though the church was listening, eating sound, drinking it. Elion stepped forward again, onto the raised platform—the altar—from which the priest performed. He felt displayed even with only the

empty benches there to see him. It was a delicious feeling, to stand where one could be seen. Elion knew his voice would echo from here, that the acoustics would favour him if he stood right here, in this exact spot, in front of everyone. He would be heard. He would be listened to.

“It’s addictive, the performance. It never gets old.” The priest’s voice was quiet when he wasn’t pontificating. Slightly wheezy, unsupported. “I am though, old. Getting old. I could use a young voice in here.”

That day, Elion became a priest novice.

From then on, Elion had snuck back into the cathedral antechamber after his days in the forge. He’d gotten his own set of lemon-yellow robes, and had been instructed on how to recite The Ending. He’d come back in the evening and run his hands over the pages in the tome, pointing at letters until the priest taught him enough to sound out the words on his own.

Then he’d been unstoppable.

He’d quit at the forge and never looked back. The priest watched on and only shook his head. He let the boy read, he let the boy dedicate time and energy to things that were long gone. Why tell him there was no use, why steal his joy so early? The boy could have it stripped from him the same way the priest had, slowly, one yawn at a time. He would let the boy have his saints for as long as he could.

Chapter 7

Sometimes Elyse wondered what her life would look like if she hadn't met Ameline, if she hadn't been pulled into her current. She would probably be sleeping right now. She'd probably have more spare time. She probably wouldn't be breaking into the town hall in the small hours of the morning. It had started with Ameline's leaping onto Elyse's bed several hours ago, announcing she had a *plan for the evening*. The plan was kept secret, the mischievous glint in her eye the only clue.

And then they were getting Madwen because they couldn't do it without her. At least, that's all Ameline would say when Elyse pressed for details about where they were tromping off to, well after midnight. Ameline was always exploring, as though Domare had had anything new to offer in the last five hundred years.

"You worry too much," was all Ameline had said, and tossed a glowing smile over her shoulder at Elyse. "It'll be worth it."

It was hard to disbelieve Ameline when she was like this. After Domare shuttered its windows and blew out its lamps, once the slumbering city of temperance closed its eyes, Ameline took that light inside of herself. She came alive without the rules everyone else lived by. It scared Elyse more and more every day. She liked rules.

Elyse was jogging after Ameline, who had been filled with more and more electric energy as the sun went down. Ameline was much more sure-footed on the loose rocks and dirt mounds at the edges of the goat pasture than Elyse, a fan of the indoors, who was less keen on the pitfalls of the field. At this point in the evening, Elyse was not thinking about

miracles, not yet, but she thought it might take a small godly blessing to keep her ankle bones intact.

Elyse hadn't been out in the goat field in months. She avoided it as best she could, and now daintily wrinkled her nose at the smells emanating even from outside the pasture. Ameline clambered her way up the wall of stacked stones that held in the herd, while Elyse gently laid only the very edges of her elbows on its topmost mossy stones. The low-slung goat hut stood several paces inside the fence line, milling with lumbering goats. Ameline threw another wild grin at Elyse then cupped her hands around her mouth:

“Maaad—” Ameline started.

Elyse rolled her eyes at the old joke, but still finished it:

“*Wennnn!*”

They took turns calling again, this time dragging out the vowels to sound like bleats.

“*Maa-aa-ad—*”

“*We-e-e-e-e-ennn.*”

Their voices tumbled over the flock and raced across the empty night field. Loud and raucous and playful. Unmuffled by the middlingness of daytime Domare. Childlike again.

“*Maaadwen, come save us!*” Ameline wailed, kicking the volume up.

Always with the dramatics, Elyse thought. But she smiled still, despite herself. There was something to be said for Ameline's commitment. A heartbeat later, Elyse was swept into it too, pouring her voice out beside Ameline's howling for Madwen to come out.

“Madwen, we *need* you,” Elyse moaned.

“Madwen, we're *withering*.” Ameline yowled, she laid her body against the stones in emphasis, her chest heaving with the force of her yells.

Madwen emerged from the goathouse. Her dark hair disappeared into the blackness behind her like she was melting into the night at the edges. She wore a pleasant, loose smile and a starched dress that Elyse assumed would be blue, in better light. Madwen always wore blue. The third part of their trio was extricating her skirts from the mouth of a goat, an argument the goat seemed to be winning. She hobbled over to the stone fence to meet her hecklers. The goat came with.

“Shush,” she said to her friends, not the goat, “you’ll rile them up.” But there was no heat in her words. Elyse knew she liked to see Ameline and Elyse being friendly instead of vitriolic with one another, and that approval prickled in a way that made Elyse want to pick a fight, but it was too good of a night to be mad at anyone. Elyse let the happiness slide. It was a good night to be friends with Ameline, it was a good night to see Madwen happy.

“What are you out here for?” Madwen asked.

“Ask this one,” Elyse jutted her thumb at Ameline, who straightened up to sit on the wall, glowing with pride and secrets yet to be revealed.

They were there to rescue her from a night of watching the herd. From muck and wet wool and protecting the flock from threats that didn’t exist outside of Madwen’s paranoia. Or so Ameline had said. Elyse thought that perhaps the flippancy Ameline had towards a responsibility she also held was perhaps unfair to Madwen, but it was a good night and she wasn’t going to pick fights. Elyse also wanted to see whatever it was Ameline had planned and if they needed Madwen, they needed Madwen.

It was a brief scuffle, to get Madwen away from not just the goat with the mouthful of dress but the rest of them as well, and Madwen’s undying feeling of duty. Ameline was hard to resist, now standing tall on the stone wall, gesticulating wildly as she plead the case,

her hair loose and flicking in the wind. She looked like someone to follow, and neither Madwen nor Elyse was immune.

In the end, a twinge of a grimace, a few furtive looks around the pasture to check that the only ones who could see her leave her post were four-legged, and Madwen was theirs.

When Madwen finally unlocked the swinging gate, Ameline let out a whoop and Elyse couldn't help but crow along with her. They were off.

“Are you just taking us to my house? Because I can assure you,” Elyse said, “that will not be nearly so fun as you've promised.”

Ameline didn't answer with anything other than a spilling laugh that was several degrees too loud for how quiet she'd encouraged them to creep through the town streets. They were allowed to walk around at night, there were no laws or superstitions against it. But the leaning houses and echoing alleyways and the stolen friend made it feel more furtive and Ameline had thought it would be fun to make a game of it. Elyse was feeling obliging, so she crept along theatrically. Madwen, who was always quiet, floated behind them like a ghost. Elyse shivered.

They stopped across the street from Elyse's front door, and she started to huff again when Ameline pressed a warm hand to her shoulder. A rat skittered around the street corner ahead of them, more a scrabbling sound and flash of shadow than anything. Ameline leaned towards Elyse's ear.

“My next question is so important,” she stage-whispered. Elyse batted at the hair that tickled her neck, pushing Ameline's face away.

“Get off me, first. Your breath stinks.”

A flash of hurt bounded across Ameline’s face and she dropped the whisper and stepped back to ask more dully:

“Do you have our lockpicks?”

Elyse’s eyebrows raised, she refused to feel guilty. She dipped a hand into her dress pocket, first feeling a length of ribbon and there, the lockpicks. The two of them had picked up the hobby several years ago, when they had wanted to break Ameline out of her room at home and then when they’d broken into the tavern cellar. Ameline was more adept at using the picks, for some godsforsaken reason, so the compromise to keep Elyse’s pride intact was that she would keep the set of picks safe and Ameline would use them. Besides, no one really trusted Ameline to be able to keep track of small objects without losing them in rivers or fields or card games.

Ameline took the lockpicks from Elyse’s hand and set to work on the front door to the hall, which would be open the following night for another religious celebration. Celebration of Saint Rocte, Elyse was pretty sure. Saint of music. She’d seen the band load their instruments into the hall earlier that afternoon, as she’d lurked in her window above. Elyse had no idea what Ameline could possibly want with the hall if there was no one in there yet.

Moonlight glinted silver in Ameline’s eyes as she looked up at Madwen and Elyse, her fervour returned. This was her show, her game. Ameline swept a hand out dramatically, bowing deeply at the waist, beckoning her friends enter as though they were kings.

The instruments were like string bodies, leaning and leering against the wall. Lute necks lined up as dark shadows knifed against the wall, curvaceous harpsichord and dulcimer bodies standing contrapposto, slumped pipes in the corner. A whole slumbering band waiting for them.

“Ta-da.” Ameline sang, skipping ahead and splaying her arms out wide, gesturing to the array of instruments that were impossible to miss.

Ameline was buzzing with energy now that they were inside the hall, now that they weren’t caught, now that her friends had committed to following her into forbidden places. It was an energy Elyse couldn’t help but get caught up in, she grinned. Ameline ordered Madwen to pick up the pipes from their sad sack in the corner and Madwen was all too happy to oblige.

Madwen liked music in a passing way, she thought it was neat. She was just happy to be included in the togetherness of it. She cradled the pipes in her arms, as tender as she would a goat kid. She blew gamely into the instrument and Ameline stared pirouetting around the room to the warmup honks emitted from the pipe bag.

“Delightful!” Ameline cried, “Every note a symphony!”

The honks lengthened into notes and Ameline skittered to a stop beside Elyse. The two watched Madwen cautiously blow into the pipes as though it were a science. Artless, but along for the ride. Elyse felt Ameline bump her shoulder with her own. She gestured for Elyse to pick her instrument.

Elyse stepped towards the lineup of lutes. She trailed her fingers along the necks, plucking ghostly notes as she went down the line. Her hand settled on the third in the lineup.

She lifted it, the unplayed notes humming, ready, then settled it in her arms. She hadn't played in so long.

Through the dark, Elyse could feel Ameline beaming at her. She strummed a chord. It felt good. It felt like a language she forgot she knew, opening in her chest again. She nodded for Ameline to lead them; this was her show, after all.

Ameline knew a handful of songs. The one she began singing, her clear-as-a-bell voice rising into the cavernous room, was about tits. Elyse couldn't help it, she let out a laugh the size of the room. Then she jumped into the tune and Madwen, blushing desperately, followed.

Ameline voice belted and danced on breathy high notes. Her singing was showy and real, and every word felt in her chest. Madwen accompanied, drawing low bellows under the harmony. Elyse lost herself in the finger-plucking in the technical skill, intent on knowing how to make each note the perfect one. Elyse knew that she could play just well enough to make Ameline jealous, if she really tried. Generally, that was as good as Elyse cared to be. Slightly better than, slightly coveted. She didn't care so much about the music itself, though that was nice.

Another song followed the first. Ameline's singing was turning to a cascading, open caterwauling sound now that she was warmed up. She sat herself down on an upside-down bucket, legs splayed, hands on her knees, boyish. Her hair curled around her chin and dipped off her neck, eating the moonlight that beamed in an open window. When she sang the *oob's*, it was like she'd caught it in her mouth—sweet oozing berries, each of them delectable. Elyse marvelled as Ameline closed her eyes, tipped her head back, and howled out the sounds.

It was the magic of being in the dark with friends. Of not knowing this was coming when they'd woken up and trudged through the day. That was what made this special. It was Ameline's gift to know this was possible, she'd brought them this magic.

Elyse struck a discordant note on the lute. She grimaced, the outro was ruined. Her fault, her imperfection. But when she looked up, there was no judgment, no one had noticed. Madwen and Ameline were still smiling. It was just her and her friends in the dark cavern of a room.

"Remember that one we used to do?" Ameline's voice came from the far side of the hall, warbling through the dark from where she'd spun off to, lost as she'd been in the music.

She was talking about the song they'd played at the festival of light, years ago. When they were just young girls. Tender and delightful and built for sweeping harmonies. The song was Ameline's, it was theirs. Even without looking, Elyse could tell that Ameline's eyes were closed. She was in the memory, already she was the song.

What happened next was miracle. That was the only word Elyse had for it. It felt like the first miracle Elyse had ever seen, though she'd heard the stories, nothing had felt truly magic like this.

It was impossible to lie when you were singing. Well, you *could* lie, but it wouldn't move anyone. You have to know what you're saying, who is listening, who is hearing, what you want. It was a level of vulnerability that Ameline wore well. Elyse hadn't sung in years. Even the lute, its betrayal of imperfections, had nearly felt too raw just moments before.

But for those moments, Ameline singing with her arms spread wide, Madwen laying tremulous harmonies from her spot cross-legged on the floor, and Elyse accompanying with

gentle plucking notes, for those moments, the years pulled back. The lies and grudges melted with the melody. They were three, but they were the one in the song. That was the miracle.

And then it was over. And they were sitting in the silence in a kind of reverence reserved for transformation. Then Madwen spoke.

“When you sing, Ameline,” she said, “I can hear the gods.”

Ameline waved her off with a hand. “Oh, I’m not all that.”

But it tugged at Elyse. That the song, the singer, the voice, could pull the gods to them. Certainly, Elyse had felt a pulling her back to a version of herself she’d been, once. Someone a little more earnest. It had felt a little bit like relief. The song, music—Ameline—had given her that. Elyse wasn’t sure if it was something she would find in the morning when the instruments were in the capable hands of their owners, spinning deft reels and jigs in the saints honour. The miracle of seeing herself—being herself again—had come because it was nighttime, because it was dark, because of the goats and the theatrics and the shared lockpicks. The magic had worked because Ameline had seen that it would.

Elyse would not have seen the potential for magic in this—and she hadn’t. She’d watched the musicians trek their gear into the hall and leave empty-handed, she’d loomed over it all from her bedroom window. But she would never have thought to do this, to invite her friends for an illicit concert. That was Ameline’s magic—her miracle. If Elyse had not met Ameline she wouldn’t see the world through her. Elyse hated her for it. She wanted to smash a lute. But the instruments weren’t theirs and it wouldn’t be a very tempered move.

Madwen clapped her hands, suddenly too loud and jarring against the silence.

“Time to get back to the goaties,” she said.

Elyse didn't like it, but she agreed. Time to go back to the real world, no matter how compelling this pocket of time felt. She was tired, she had errands to run tomorrow.

Ameline, unsurprisingly, disagreed with them. She didn't want it to be over. Why did things have to end, she bemoaned, why couldn't they do this all the time. Why couldn't they live like this?

Neither Elyse nor Madwen gave a real answer, They didn't want to hurt her feelings so soon after the gift she'd given them. But the glance they shared was weighted with long conversations they'd had about their friend, their worries for her. They couldn't do this all the time; they probably would never do it again. It disturbed the balance.

They placed the lute back in line, the bag of pipes in a jumble once more, inanimate. Madwen stepped out first, eager to get moving now that that was the plan. Elyse followed, then looked back at Ameline, who still didn't want to leave.

Elyse wished she hadn't looked back.

She wished it had stayed pristine in her mind. A wonderful last night of whimsy. But, of course, Ameline was Ameline. She had to wreck it. Of course, Ameline had to let them down again. Of course, after the magic and the fun and the unearthing of memories, of course, she had to ruin it.

When Elyse looked back, she saw Ameline pick up a flute and tuck it into the top of her boot. Thefted. Vile, unnecessary, reckless, selfish, every rude word Elyse had ever thought about Ameline came coursing through her mind. First the hinge and now this. At least no one would miss the hinge, someone's job depended on that instrument.

Ameline looked up and saw Elyse watching, but she only cracked a grin and held a cheeky finger to her lips. Elyse fumed. No, this girl was not miraculous. How dare she ever

trick Elyse into thinking she was someone to be followed. She had no regard for rules, no sense of order, no sense of consequence. She was a girl who hadn't grown up into the real world yet, who cared for nothing but her own instant happiness.

“Everything you are disgusts me,” she said, and spun on her heel.

The three girls spilled into the night; the door snicking shut behind them. A pair of cats were fighting at the end of the block, their echoing hisses and spits breaking any memory of the girls' recent melodies.

And just like that, the magic was over.

And with the flute, any holiness of the night was stolen.

Chapter 8

The next morning, the wind curled through Domare without an agenda, a lackadaisical, mischievous breeze. It floated past the church to the lone house that sat in the field. It crept up to the window and tapped on the glass, no one answered it. It blew a rattling breath through the loose windowpane. The wind threw its shoulder into the house, it wanted a reaction. Could the foundation be moved? Would the cottage grow legs and run away? Would it sprout arms to punch back?

The wind blew. The house stayed put.

As the wind prowled around the house, it watched a girl creep out into the grey dawn. The wind, looking in through the rattling panes of the window, confirmed that she had left a hunched figure behind. His room was littered with tiny metal tinkering and faded pillows. He stayed focused on his task, even as the wind pelted stones at his window, begging him to play. *Tck, tck, tck.*

The wind loved to stir up a story. A blowout. The hot air that pours off an argument. But the tinkerer continued tinkering.

If the wind could hold memories, more than flitting impressions, the wind would remember watching the girl try to shake the man from his stupor. The wind had seen and forgotten that nothing would distract him. Nothing would draw him from the room of mad scribbling and scraps; not rocks hurled against the window, not slamming cupboards or lewd songs belted loud, not even flocks of goats herded through the kitchen—and the girl had tried them all. Now, forgetful, the wind creaked the door open, and let her pretend she would be missed.

Once free of the house, the wind followed the girl into the fields. Her hands danced in the wind, fingers interlacing with the current of the air. She was heading for the goats. Her steps rang with routine.

Another girl, this one in a blue dress that delighted the wind, it yanked and pulled at it. She waited at the goathouse; a low stone shed draped in moss. The wind snapped at her ankles, sending the hem rolling out in blue waves. Snap, snap, snap against her calves, against her boots sinking into goaty muck. The girl from the house leaned into the breeze, stride swinging looser with every step into the open. She called a word, and the wind gobbled it up—a delicious two-syllable, open thing, with a break in between: *mad-WENNN*.

The one with the blue dress stepped back against the low wall, out of the wind. No more fun. Her arms were crossed, a frown drawing itself across her forehead. She didn't call back. *Boring*, hissed the wind.

The girl in blue snapped something at the other one, then immediately deflated. The wind caressed her hair, teasing her into a fight, and it tasted a sourness there. She remained unmoved.

The wind crept past, doing its best to rustle the hem of her dress in defiance. Through the gaping doorway of the goathouse, the wind hushed around the goats that should still have been sleeping. Only, they weren't sleeping, they were gathered to one corner. Awake. Bleating little goat sounds. Restless. Milling. The wind flitted onto their exposed tongues. Sour.

The wind picked at the goats bedding twisting lazily in the animal-warm aid of the barn. A single goat kid was half-buried in the straw. Its grey coat streaked with mud, crusted and clumping in places. Its mouth cracked open; its eyes crusted shut. Unbreathing.

As the wind drew even closer, the sour smell pierced through it. The last thing the breeze saw before it melted into stewy, stagnant air, was a ring of delicate, erupting boils around the goat's lips.

Chapter 9

Yan gritted his teeth against the memory of laughter and pressed his calloused fingers around a set of pliers. He had always been apt to get lost in his own head, comparing and analyzing, measuring his memories against each other. It's a different kind of tinkering; he'd much rather work with metal than with people. Metal doesn't leave you, after all.

It had been better, of course, when Ameline's mother had been around. His memories of her—the ones he was allowed to dust off and look at, the ones he rationed out in small doses to not hurt his own feelings, the ones he shared with no one, not even Ameline—these memories were mostly of laughter. She had so many different kinds of laughs bottled up in her chest, ready to dole out. She was the only person who'd ever thought Yan was funny, with his clunky, methodical thinking. She'd drawn stories out of him, drawn his fear into the light and burned it away.

Then, one day, she left.

Yan twisted the pliers, it was hard to see in the dark, but he knew what to do by feel.

She'd been too bright, too full of life and laughter to be content in Domare. Most of the people like her in the Dome just accepted it, but it was sickening to see the way she made herself small, like them. No matter how much she loved Yan, it was dimming her, killing her, to pour her light into him rather than let it radiate into the world, unfiltered.

He'd asked her to go. He'd done it with a flourish, a single wooden daisy, a bow so low his forehead scraped the floor.

Staying was the logical thing to do, if impossible. She recognized his attempt at whimsy and kissed the right side of his mouth, clutching the daisy in her hands. He'd wiped a tear from her cheek, rough fingertips grating against her soft skin.

He didn't wipe a tear from his face now, but only because he'd long ago cried himself out. Three tears were all he'd allowed himself then, he wouldn't break that now. He wrenched the pliers again.

She'd left him and their daughter, who was only old enough to know the word "goodbye," but not what it meant. She was to go for only a month, and she would return filled with the world. That was the deal. She'd promised to come home for the new moon, and he'd watched her ride off in the direction of traders and merchants, proud and thrumming with excitement. She'd waved and laughed, leaving him with a tinkling bright memory of laughter, one he hid even from himself, afterwards.

Three days later, the horse had come cantering back to the barn, riderless. Yan had been plagued with nightmares ever since.

He spent his days locked in the back room of the cottage. Carpentry felt too big, too dangerous. Wood felt too pliable, too soft, too destructible, so he went to the market and bought scrap metal pieces, broken links of mail, a dented shoulder plate, several horseshoes. It was as though he was compelled. He couldn't envision what he needed to make, but he felt each step appear to him as he went through the motions. When he was unhappy with his progress, he smashed it all apart with a hammer and began again. It had to be exactly right.

While he smashed and tinkered and repressed his memories, his daughter grew up.

Her first mistake was to look like her mother.

Glinting eyes and bold, ruddy cheeks, freckles as though someone had spit clay on her nose. She was curious, inquisitive, and she liked to laugh.

She grew taller, taller, taller. She grew into Yan's nose, her mother's wide mouth. She had hair like dark orange flames. A fire at the end of the night, burning low, glowing.

Yan had started to develop a clearer idea of what he was making, though he was no closer to finishing the project. He dismantled and smashed and measured and hammered, and Ameline grew up on the other side of the door.

Her second mistake was being full of light.

Yan had known that Ameline would leave, one day, too. He'd seen it in the set of her little jaw when he told her she'd be lucky if she ever moved out of the cottage. Ameline may have forgotten, but for Yan, it was the beginning of another end. That night he'd locked himself in his workshop and pried apart every chain link piece he could find until all the loops were useless metal toothpicks.

Even sequestered, Yan could see Domare pulling at Ameline's spark. Something about her was too big for the town. She was too loud, like her mother. He'd hoped that if he left her alone, she'd find something to funnel her energy into; he'd hoped that there was enough of him in her that she could be happy with a project, if not a place.

The idea of the goats had been a gift, but he'd watched her lose interest and let her friend care for the animals. He hadn't allowed it to hurt him. Yan rarely told his daughter that he loved her, but he had never been the one who was good with words. When the goats didn't work, he'd tried suggesting marriage—it had made him happy. Wouldn't it make her happy, too?

You want me gone? she'd asked, her mother's eyes hard in her head. But how could he explain that it was only because he didn't want her to leave? That had been three days ago, and they hadn't spoken since. He heard the front door creak shut behind her just as dawn's light filtered onto the silver metal in his hands.

The link he was working on snapped in half, sending a piece pinging to the floor. He was lucky it hadn't flung itself into his eye since he was leaning so close. He needed to see, and his eyesight had worsened so much over the years.

It was almost done. Then he could rest.

Chapter 10

Hinge was trying to remember herself, and how she might have gotten to this point. She began by thinking about what it meant to be Goddess of the Hinge. Without a hinge, she thought, a door was just a wall with a handle. *She* held up the door, *she* ensured movement and mechanism. A hinge was required to bring everything together. Hinge liked to think that she was essential.

Hinges opened things that have been closed, and closed things that have been opened. Swinging back and forth. Opening, closing, opening, closing, watching all the while. Which doors were walked through, which ones slammed forever, which ones burst open, which were listened through.

Who really thought about hinges? And yet, they were everywhere.

She thought beyond the physical limitations of a door—to a broader kind of hinging. Closing the door on an old life, opening a new one. The first day of the month, the last minute of the year. The breath between childhood and adulthood. They brewed within her, endless possibilities. Hinge felt the familiarity of these ambitions; she'd had these thoughts before. An inkling of memory told her that neither Knob nor Ador had shared her stance. So she must have continued on as goddess of the hinge and the hinge alone and dreamt of bigger things.

She could see how boredom might lead her to thinking that three gods to oversee the management of doors was too many gods for the job. But they'd always been three. Always linked, forged together, screwed in tight.

Hinge saw how as the Goddess of the Hinge—goddess of pivoting, of creaking open—she might have grown to resent sharing the task with Knob and Ador.

She saw where things may have started to splinter.

Chapter 11

Ameline hated watching her goats die. It wasn't just that they would lose the profit; it wasn't that she had to watch her gentle friend wrench a too-small body out of the goat house; it wasn't that she now had to find another way to feed herself and her preoccupied father; it wasn't even that she was particularly sad about the loss of life. She hated watching her goats die because she was supposed to be protecting them. She was supposed to be doing a good job, and this was just another thing she was failing at.

It made her angry.

She'd left Madwen in the field and was stomping her way back into town. She couldn't buy any more goats until the sickness cleared out of the goathouse, but maybe they could scrape by on a few chickens and live off eggs until they could come up with a new plan.

Ameline hated eggs.

She stomped.

She felt the heat pour off her, the hot self-loathing. It felt good to be moving, even towards a bad plan. Her hair had come loose—she still didn't have new ribbons to tie it back—and it kept whipping her in the chin. Little reminders that she wasn't worth telling the truth to; and of course not, if she couldn't even keep goats alive, if she couldn't even get her father to pay enough attention to the world around him to realize she wasn't cut out to support them both. A hair caught in her mouth. She spat it out.

She was meant to be heading through town, past the church, past the banquet hall, over the stone bridge that arched over her river, and down the lane that led to Gregoire's. He

would be disapproving, but he would sell her the chickens and, maybe, feed her a cake.

Instead, her stomping took her right into Three Swords.

There were two taverns in Domare. The first was cozy, cast in a rosy glow, full of comfortably worn chairs and comfortably worn conversations. It served hot food and clean drinks and hosted any travellers coming through the town. The other one was the Three Swords.

Ameline rocked back on her heels in the doorway as her eyes adjusted to the light. The interior of Three Swords looked like someone had coughed charcoal dust all over everything, and it smelled sour, like a mix of beer and vomit and rotting wood. The broken glass on the floor by the bar glittered in the sunlight leaking in from behind her. Tables slanted at drunken angles in the crowded, low-ceilinged room, and several had people hunched over them, still as statues as they glared into their cups. Although there was no reason to favour the Three Swords over Cat and Broom, Ameline loved it more.

She slung herself onto a stool at the bar, mopping up a spill with her sleeve as she did so.

“Better pour it strong.” She knew that Raoul, who was as stout as his favourite beer, cut his drinks about half and half with river water, but she also knew that he liked her too much to cheat her out of a drink when she needed it. She was a very good customer. Some nights, when there wasn’t a banquet or feast or mandated observance of any kind, Ameline would drink five too many pints, get up on one of the tables, and sing. Even wobbly, her voice could steal a crowd, and no one ever said you were too loud when you were on a stage.

Raoul poured a drink. Ameline gestured for him to prepare a second one as well. He turned back to the bar and got a second cup with little more than a raised eyebrow.

Ameline nursed her two drinks—the second one clearly cut with metallic-tasting water, the first one sporting a crusted rim—and let the lull of mid-afternoon tavern conversations wash over her. Madwen wouldn't set foot in Three Swords. She said it smelled bad and just made her sad. Elyse liked Three Swords well enough, but she grew bored of it more easily. Cat and Broom had more hunks to flirt with, more compliments to be basked in. Neither of them was with her today, though. And thinking about them set Ameline further down the spiral she'd stomped her way here on. She needed to step out of herself for a moment. Breathe. Drink. Goats and lies and boils could wait for a moment. Although ale and dark rooms tended to encourage embellished stories or over-the-top song and dance routines in the evening, during the day, the Three Swords tended towards pockets of truth. Ameline learned her news through day-drunk grapevines and from the sweltering hot lips of those with nothing better going on.

“Summer will be dry, the driest yet.”

“Damned fish won't come back.”

“I saw that fool running around Thibaud's back pasture.”

“The fish will come back. They always do.”

“In Aurells, I hear. If you can believe it.”

“You don't say.”

“That fool told me my Rosie was about to foal, and then you know what happened?”

“I swear it. That stupid boy-king's all a-flurry about it. Telling his whole country he had a dream.”

Ameline tilted her head to hear better. Mention of the Preton King was always fraught; though the stories were tinged with real fear, the king was a mostly comical, mythic

figure. He'd been threatening war and coveting Gallia for years, but his army would never be strong enough to overtake the entire country. That he was now telling the world his dreams, well that was a new story. Perhaps he was going mad, finally.

"You don't say?"

"Horses have foals, that's what they do."

"Yes, but she dropped twins!"

"You don't say!"

"The king of Preton has a dream and I have to hear about it?"

"You're going to want to. He could march on us any day."

"Well, let's hear it then."

The gossip unfolded so slowly, now that Ameline had started listening. She tapped her fingers on the sticky countertop. She sucked the ends of her fingers, cleaning them off, and immediately regretted it.

"Way he tells it, he'll be King of Gallia by autumn. There was a prophecy or an old god or some such—they're even more religious than us, mind you, but he's collecting his army and will be marching on us at the end of summer."

"Hmm. With that tiny army?"

"The catch, though, is that he must take Aurells first. That's the prophecy part. If he can ransack Aurells, Gallia will belong to him."

"The Rat City? Does anyone still live there?"

"Must do."

There was a pause as both men drank deeply.

"Your stories are getting better, Berto. How's Greta doing these days?"

“Same, same. She could do a number on a boy king, send him turning tail for home.”

The men laughed and continued into the same conversations they’d had yesterday, and the yesterday before.

Ameline wanted to ask about the King and his dream. She wanted to know if it really was an old god and what would happen if the dream came true. She knew Gallia was strong, but she didn’t know if Aldric and the other soldier boys would be ready to fend off the mad Preton King.

A ringing jangle brought her out of her thoughts.

The sound of too many tiny bells set Ameline’s teeth on edge. She knew who that jaunty sound belonged to. She downed her first drink and chased it with the watered-down scummy one. Wrong order. She gulped it down anyways, grimacing.

She couldn’t face another run-in with Knob. God or fool or madman, she didn’t care—she didn’t like him. He’d hung around town after the feast, apparently; the door’s magic only worked one way, or maybe it had never been magic at all. It made sense that he would be hanging around the taverns, stirring up coin in exchange for jokes and jigs.

Ameline slapped a few coppers on the counter. She would rather deal with her failures and dead goats and lying friends than be laughed at publicly again.

A handful of metal pins was slapped on the counter beside her coins. Too late.

He smelled like the field after a rain. Like the underside of a dog. Like hickory smoke and shards of rock.

He was already giggling.

“Raoul, you’ve got to keep the riffraff out of here,” she said, borrowing Elyse’s malice again, an undercurrent of poison in her words.

“Strong sentiment from the likes of you,” Raoul returned.

She scowled, a fleeting thing with no real loathing behind it. It wasn't Raoul's fault. She turned to go, brushing the giggling Knob's shoulder with her own. A rush of cold poured through her, bursting from the point of contact.

Everything else was frozen. Greasy beer hung in midair from the bottle Raoul was pouring from. A man at the table behind her was suspended mid-chuckle, a glob of spit perching under his thick grey mustache.

Knob's nose whistled. Ameline pulled her eyes away from the stillness of the room.

“Caught ya,” said Knob.

And then everything went green, then silver, then green.

Within the glassy green eyes, she saw her own face reflected—and then, in the oddest sensation, she felt herself standing beside Elyse and, at the same time, she felt like she was being siphoned into the fool's eyes as though through a straw.

Ameline landed hard on soft soil. Mere feet in front of her was a cliff edge, and it radiated heat. The sky beyond was a hazy pink, the sun a vermillion coin high above.

She scrambled backwards in the dirt, then thought to look behind her. She paused. Behind her was herself.

Wide-eyed, half-mad, scrabbling in the red dirt, and definitely her. In a moment outside of her panic, the edge of the earth behind her, she thought that she looked rather young.

Tearing her eyes off her own face, she looked up, following the slight curve of the swirling silver wall as it rose up, up, up.

A mirror. That's what it was.

It was tarnished with great webby veins, blackened smudges shadowing the world behind her reflection. She stood shakily. Although she wasn't sure how she knew, she was fairly certain she was inside Knob's head—that the mirror was the back of his glass eyes.

She had to get out. Ameline turned and pressed her back to the mirror. It was cool, even with the waves of heat coming from the cliff's edge.

A keening wind built up below the lip of the cliff. It howled closer, winding around Ameline and forcing her away from the mirror. She staggered forward, towards the edge.

Below her was smoke.

The wind gusted again and Ameline's heels lifted off the ground, bringing her another step closer to the precipice, the wind wrapping a gentle hand around her throat.

Then, as abruptly as it began, the wind stopped. Smoke rose out of the abyss in a hazy wall that stained the blush-pink sky, turning everything an acrid dishwater grey.

A wildfire.

The smoke coalesced, condensed, became solid, until a woman—a goddess—floated over the edge of the cliff.

The goddess was taller than anything Ameline had ever seen. She was draped in a gown of clinking metal fragments; not mail, but as Ameline stared longer, she saw it looked like door hinges woven together, hanging in shades of brass, gold, silver, and iron. Hinges that were tied with red ribbons.

The goddess drifted closer. She was metal held aloft on smoke and wind. Her face was hard to focus on, shifting and organic. At once, it was the face of a beautiful child, then a bushel of fiddlehead ferns. A horse skull, then a wreath of rats.

Ameline fell to her knees again. This was too much.

The deity's voice crept into Ameline's head and settled like river rocks.

"You have awoken us: the hinge, the knob, the door. You saved us, and you damned a city."

Ameline's breath caught in her throat. "No." Her hands were on the ground, her palms grinding into red dirt. She was no one. She was just a girl that had taken a hinge from an abandoned church. Madwen had spoken the names; Ameline had barely even done anything.

"For your actions you will become a saint, to end Ador's curse."

"Who—"

"You will save Aurells from the descending army. And for it, you will gain everlasting fame." The goddess drifted closer, her face still shifting: a gaping trout, a woman's face made entirely out of polished bronze, a child with pox.

"I— I thought there were no more saints?" Ameline said. It was the only piece of logic she could cling to.

"True, it's beyond my power to make you a *true* saint," she said. "I can't grant you miracles. However, I can help you *convince* everyone that you are a saint, and that will be enough for this. Trust me. Together we will save Aurells. I must—*we* must."

"Why do you even need me? I don't even like god stuff." Ameline sounded petulant but she hardly cared.

"Gods can only act through humans, it's a rule." Ameline wasn't sure, but it sounded as though the goddess hit the word "rule" with a touch of resentment. The goddess continued, "Ador's curse will work through a king, I will work through you."

"And who... who is Ador?"

“That’s all anyone asks,” the goddess sniffed. Her dress clanked as she tossed her head, now a drawer-shaped thing. Ameline didn’t want to think about the lack of a mouth as the goddess’ voice creaked in her head again. “Ador, god of doors; Knob, god of handles; Hinge, goddess of, well, hinges. One was killed, but three were dead. Until *you* brought us back.”

“Oh.”

“So, you see,” Hinge said, “You will be a saint. You will protect the city of Aurells that *you* have endangered.”

Ameline paused for a moment to think about the weight of the word *saint*. It would be a colossal lie. She was just Ameline, with clunky boots and a directionless future and dying goats.

“I won’t lie.” This much she knew. She would not lie. She wasn’t Elyse.

Hinge waved a dismissive hand, “A false saint can be just as powerful if everyone believes. Either way, it doesn’t matter—your story will be told forever.”

The wind rose again, twining the smoke trails into ascending spires.

“No.”

A saint, a lie. The wind howled.

“No! I am *not* a saint,” Ameline shouted over the rising scream of the wind. Wisps of hair were catching across her face, in her mouth.

The deity halted and began again.

“You will become a false saint and be remembered—”

“Stop!” Ameline threw her hands out. “I won’t lie. I won’t pretend to be a saint for people I don’t even know. I won’t leave my friends, my home. I won’t do it!” The goddess cocked her head, now a brittle facsimile of Ameline’s own face.

The smoke spires funnelled and collapsed around Ameline. The vision shifted.

She saw herself adorned in armour, astride a warhorse. This version of herself looked serene, mature. She saw an army tripping over themselves in their haste to flee. She saw stained glass rendered in her image. She saw adoring crowds screaming her name—

“No!” Ameline turned to the mirror and hammered her fists on the silver wall until the vision-within-a-vision subsided, and she was back on the cliff.

The goddess was puzzled. This was supposed to be easier.

“Listen, it’s a good deal,” her voice croaked, dropping the layer of silky persuasion. “Eternal glory is nothing to spit on.”

Ameline hadn’t even known this goddess’s name before today. Who was she to talk about eternal glory?

Ameline put her palms to the tarnished silver of the mirror. Her own eyes looked loose in their sockets. She looked dead already.

She closed her eyes and willed herself through the mirror. *This is just a dream*, she told herself, *I’ve had enough. It’s not real.*

She turned back toward the goddess, who seemed to swell at the perceived acceptance.

“I am the Goddess of the Hinge. I look forward to working with—”

But Ameline took three quick steps and launched herself off the windswept cliff, into the pink smoke and oncoming wildfire.

When Ameline landed in her body once more, she was back in the bar, as though she'd never left. The mead was flowing again, her friends were beside her, the lute preened in the corner. Knob was nowhere to be seen.

But as Ameline breathed phantom smoke out of her lungs, she realized two things:

One: her palms were coated in red dirt.

Two: she'd started something much bigger than she'd wanted to when she'd taken the hinge from the church.

Chapter 12

Ameline stumbled out of Three Swords. She felt drunk. She was drunk. The sky had clouded over, and frigid raindrops sailed towards the cobbles below. Her ankles twisted underneath her. She needed to tell someone what had happened. She never wanted to see that stupid fool god again. She was no saint. She was a failure of a goatherder, a girl with too much hair, a bad friend who drank at seedy taverns in the daytime. No, she was no saint.

She careened into the outside wall of Three Swords. Taking several deep gulps of air, Ameline straightened up.

She would go to Madwen's. Madwen would help.

She would flutter, and her fluttering would make Ameline see things more clearly. She could snag Elyse on the way, and Elyse would tell her that the fool was nothing more than a mean lowlife. She'd give Ameline grief over drinking Raoul's brew and tell her the vision was nothing but a bad fermentation. They'd be friends again, the balance restored.

Ameline rushed down the narrow streets of Domare. There weren't many twists, but the closeness of the buildings made the center of town feel endless, claustrophobic.

Elyse wasn't at home. Her younger sister just shrugged when Ameline blew through the door. Maybe she was with Madwen already? The door barely caught the latch behind her before she was leaving again.

Back into the avenue. Back down the way she'd come, clouds darkening overhead, turning everything beneath them a dull grey. Imminent spring rain. Down the main road, swing past the banquet hall, towards the church. Hard left, instead of out to the

field to her own cottage, towards the second in a row of three squat houses. Their doors circled towards each other, the windowpanes and doorways gossiping.

Through the door. Madwen's house was cozy and bright inside. Her father sat at the kitchen table; goofy grin already plastered onto his face.

"Ameline!" Madwen's mother said, emerging from behind the stove. "What a nice surprise. The girls are around back." So, Elyse was here. And seemed to be here more than Ameline was aware of. Interesting.

"Thank—" she started, before being cut off.

"What are you up to? Engaged yet?" Madwen's mother had come around and was dusting off Ameline's shoulders, admiring the seam work on the dress sleeves.

"I always thought that butcher boy would be nice for you."

"Swimming Swameline can't be engaged, yet!" Madwen's father chuckled. "She hasn't caused nearly enough ruckus. Any pranks gone awry lately?"

"Hi. Hello. Not engaged yet, no. Nope. No pranks, either. Just same old me, up to me things—bye! I'll be outside!"

Out the front door again, around the side of the house. Up the hill a little, she could see the silhouette of two forms, hunched over something on the ground. Slate clouds above, rich swathy grass underfoot. The air smelled like rain about to come. Trees shivered in the distance, a warning call. Ameline tried not to hear the echo of Knob's laugh.

She powered up the hill.

"You're never going to believe what happened."

Neither girl looked up.

"That same jester, from the feast—what is *that*?"

She had finally reached them at the crest of the hill. Wind whipped at Ameline's hair. In the grass between Elyse and Madwen was a dead rat.

It was curled on one side, tiny belly distended, its eye a fat pinprick of wet black. A rivulet of dried blood crusted its nose. Its little rat arms and legs were struck out in front of it, tiny rat fingers clasped together.

"A donkey," said Elyse. Madwen hit her in the arm.

"I tried the recipe," Madwen said.

"What recipe?" Ameline dropped to her knees and rocked back onto her heels. She couldn't look away from the rat's paws. It's tiny pink knuckles, like hands.

"The one that Knob gave." While Madwen's patience was infinite, her skills of description were incredibly limited.

Ameline thought she might implode from confusion. "What? Are you talking about?"

Madwen looked at Ameline as though she was a child, and then she recited: "To kill a rat, use sugar from a table, salt from under a lake, and ash from a beloved."

Ameline's mind whirred; she would catch up; she would make herself understand. Salt, yes, salt from a lake, Ameline didn't know that much about lakes, but she'd heard from travelling merchants that some were full of salt. Sugar was expensive but Elyse would have a store. Ash—*ashes*.

"Ashes of a—Aldric. What happened, is he okay?"

"Aldric's fine; he's," Madwen blushed, "good. Very good."

Elyse snorted. Madwen shot her a look. Her gaze was softer when it came back to Ameline, paired with a sad smile.

"It was Jeremie."

Ameline was still careening. Part of her was still on a clifftop, part of her was reeling that she'd thought Aldric was dead. She worked through the possibilities. Madwen had a big family, perhaps Jeremie was a cousin? A secret lover, a favourite baker? All Ameline knew was that there was someone Madwen cared about who no longer breathed. Someone important whose body had been burned and the ashes used to poison a rat.

Ameline blew a breath out, unable to focus, unable to catch up.

“Who the hell is Jeremie?”

Elyse barked a laugh. Madwen's smile grew an inch sadder. A breeze coursed through the grass, whipping the long green strands flat against the ground.

“The goat from this morning. I burned his body so I could try out the recipe. It's what he would have wanted.”

“The goat.”

Madwen nodded.

“The *goat*.”

Ameline thought for a moment. She got angry and got drunk over its death, but Madwen had had an entirely different reaction. At length, she said, “I can't believe you loved him enough for this to work. That was the component, wasn't it? Ash from a loved one?”

Elyse rolled her eyes and leaned backwards; her hands planted on the ground. Madwen shrugged. “He was just a baby. He trusted me to take care of him; he was all too easy to love.”

Ameline worried that perhaps she was a terrible person.

Then she remembered that a deity had just asked her to become a saint—all the more reason she was the wrong girl for the job.

“Wow.”

“Rat ate one bite and keeled over,” Elyse said. She was the kind of person who quickly grew bored of the sound of other people’s voices.

“Well, not quite,” Madwen said, sheepish again, “But it was a surprisingly fast reaction. It was equal parts salt, sugar, and ash. The salt was just what we bought the last time the market came through, but it seems to have come from a lake, since it worked.”

She was gazing intently at the rat, in a way that felt entirely detached from the intimate sadness she had surrounding Jeremie. Apparently, Madwen’s love for animals did not extend to vermin.

“Too bad we don’t have more rats to use this on,” Elyse said.

“How did you even find this one? There are hardly any in town,” Ameline asked.

“Mads sang a song in falsetto and it ran right into her arms.”

“No, really, *how?*”

“We asked its rat father for its hand in holy rat-rimony.”

“Elyse.”

“It’s been in my pocket since last night.”

“Ameline,” Madwen cut in, “It was pestering around my workshop this last week. You were saying something when you came up?”

Right. She looked back down at the rat. Away.

“The fool, *Knob*, I guess. I had this thing—okay, his eyes, they’re a *mirror*, and I was in it, them, the eyes. His eyes. Like a vision. A dream? But my dress was *dirty*, for *real*, so definitely not a dream. Then there was this cliff, and I jumped but *no*, wait, the deity. This is the important part. She wants me to be a saint.”

No matter how she fit her words together, Madwen's brow would not unknit. Elyse choked down more scornful laughter. Panic built in Ameline's throat. She sounded as though she'd drunk the entire cabinet at Three Swords.

"That's what it was. I think we woke up the gods from the church, and they want me to be a saint." Her voice was incredibly small. She clasped her hands like the dead rat, sinking into herself. She couldn't stand Madwen's pitying glance. She could stand it even less when it flicked to Elyse. As though they were a team that had to deal with her, as though they had to navigate a way to get through to her, two against one instead of three together. Against Ameline the Childish.

"I'm not lying."

"Of course not," Madwen squeezed Ameline's shoulder with her dove hands, meaning to be comforting. Something in Ameline shattered into flames.

"She wouldn't dare lie. Amie doesn't have the stomach for it," Elyse said.

Ameline took three clearing breaths. It was against her own rules to yell at Elyse because she'd receive a cold shoulder for a week, and it was against her rules to yell at Madwen, because it felt like yelling at a wilting flower. Her words came out clipped.

"I am telling," she said, "the truth." The wind snaked an arm between the three of them. "A goddess spoke to me. She asked me to become a saint. And I said," she brushed her hair away from her mouth, "no, thank you."

"Amie, are you drunk?" Madwen's voice was infuriatingly soft. A patter of rain started to fall.

Elyse scoffed, "Probably."

But Ameline was already getting to her feet. Her friend's faces turned upwards, over their shoulders, to look at her. Pale and pitying.

“Good job with the rat, Wen. That was really clever. You've killed it.” And she walked away.

Chapter 13

Long after Ameline left, and the rain came, and Elyse went home too, Madwen kept working. She wrapped the rat in a length of soiled cloth and, in an ungloved hand, carried it into her workshop. She would bury it tomorrow.

Several years ago, Madwen's father had built a makeshift solarium onto the back of their house. He'd bought castoff glass panels from Elyse's family and melted them together, piece by piece, until a mosaic wall of windows turned into a fully enclosed structure. It was a labour of love, one that cut into his callused hands, his limited time. It had all been worth it to see Madwen's delight. He thought his heart might burst with pride as she'd squealed and twirled and put her tiny hands against the hours of work.

"A workroom," he'd said. For her to make her remedies. Her small mouth fell open, all her teeth visible. She moved about the room.

"I'm going to make this corner for poultices, this one for mixing tinctures. Oh! I can grow things through winter if they're covered from the snow! This will be perfect!"

When she'd turned to him, her eyes were lit up. She barrelled into his ribs with a hug that seemed much too powerful for her small, childish frame.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love it!"

And all the hours of work, the sleepless nights, the scars on his hands, they faded away with the joy of his daughter.

Now, as Madwen sat in the sunroom, a breeze creaked in through a broken panel, chilling her fingers. She was hunched over a particularly complex recipe, unhappy with the result. Her legs were folded up underneath her on the wooden workbench Aldric had made,

and they were slowly going numb. She wouldn't notice until she tried to stand later, and her legs would pitch her to the floor, like a pile of limp dandelion stems she'd laid down and forgotten to clean up.

Madwen couldn't write, but she could read and count, and she had an impressive memory. She also had a knack for knowing when something was Right. She'd tried the recipe for this tincture three times, adjusting the measurements on the onion, garlic, and white wine. Each time she remade it she felt closer, but it could still be more potent. Reaching her fingers into a clay pot, she carefully sprinkled bile salts into the bowl. It was collected from her family's slaughtered cow; she offered up another prayer of thanks for its life, the same words she'd said for the rat.

This was it. A vile smell rose from the concoction as she ground it with a pestle, until the globs of chopped onion ran smooth.

She'd let Helene know tomorrow that she could come by for the paste. Helene would place her large foot on Madwen's lap and Madwen would apply the concoction and she'd watch the inflammation, the infection, the swelling and red marks fade nearly in front of her eyes. The recipe was *right*.

She knew she should be focused on the other recipe, the one that shouted at her from the end of the bench, especially now that this one was perfect and could be bottled and placed on the shelf. Madwen took a deep breath, and immediately regretted it as the foul smell knifed into her throat.

It wasn't a finicky recipe in the way the bile salts one had been. This one was egg white, eggshell, sulfur. Rub into the boils for three incantations of the saints' prayer.

For this one, the part Madwen was afraid of was the patient. She could deal with broken teeth and rotting fingers and lacerations without a hitch. She could swaddle babies and comfort crying men with splinters. Some people bit at her fingers as she poured cleansing ointment onto battered ribs, others had walloped her full across the face. Everyone had apologized afterwards, stuttering and shocked at their own behaviour, but Madwen knew that pain made it hard to think. It changed you into a swirling, reactive beast. She never held it against any of her patients, and she never minded in the first place.

But this time, her patient was herself. And she knew the salve would work. It felt Right.

Madwen rolled up her sleeve. They were on the inside of her forearm, pressing up from under her skin—boils. Pale, lumpy, taut, ringed in red. Hot. It made her feel like her insides were bigger than her skin, like there wasn't enough space to fit both her and the pustules.

The problem was that she'd waited too long. She would rub the ointment along her skin, press it into the affected area with a hot compress, and the hard lumps would disappear beneath her skin for a day or two. They'd fall dormant.

But she knew it was already too late.

Elion was reading a story about spring, and he was thinking about his fingernail.

The saint's story, Saint Leck's Spring, was an especially difficult translation. The text told the story of a devolving saint, and how it was his dedication to the gods that exalted him beyond his reputation as a madman.

This was how the story normally went: in an unrelenting winter, a benevolent man, Leck, saw visions of spring and told his village of the bounty to come. He spoke of flowers, and rabbits, and things that were so lovely against the backdrop of sleet that no one believed him. These visions of spring came true only after he'd been killed by a village mob who ran him off a cliff. There was a single sentence in the book, offhand, that said Leck may have told everyone about glass raining from the sky, but it was such an oblique reference that the priest usually left it out in his telling.

It should have been an easy story for Elion to memorize, to put into his own words. But it felt too simple, and rereading the story provided more details that the priest didn't include in his telling.

Details were precisely what Elion was interested in.

The daughters left behind. The leap from a cliff face. The milling outrage at claiming near-godhood. The glass rains. It was more than a story about having patience for brighter days, or devotion to gods, or promised spring. To Elion, it was a story about a loss of faith in favour of suspicion. It was dark, more interesting, more nuanced.

Elion was also thinking about his fingernail; the fourth one on his right hand was slowly turning purple. Luckily, it was his non-dominant hand, so it wasn't too much of an inconvenience, but the entire tip of his finger pulsed with warm pain. He'd jammed it trying to put a book back on a stone shelf. Normally he was more careful than this, but he had been frustrated by the service that morning. Bad storytelling. *Incorrect* storytelling. People sleeping and giggling to themselves instead of listening to the real saints, their real lessons. He'd shoved the leather-bound volume into the last slot of the stone shelf and his fingernail

had gotten caught on a rasping stone along the way. The flash of pain had cleared the image from his mind: a loud-voiced girl sat in the pews, trying to hide her voice behind her hand.

He reread the sentence about glass, wondering why it was mentioned at all.

He hoped the fingernail wouldn't fall off.

He kept absentmindedly pressing the pads of his thumb and forefinger of his left hand firmly on either side of the injured finger, as though he could press the nail back into the bed. The whole digit radiated heat.

He wondered if saints ever got injured. It never made it into the texts—well, other than their deaths, which were often grisly. Really, Leck had gotten off easy with a cliff dive. Most saints' bodies were raked over coals or riddled with holes or carved into bits before they were canonized. It takes a lot to make a saint, and although a gruesome martyrdom isn't technically a requirement, the Church of Saints seemed to prefer their crop that way.

Beheaded, teeth punched out, eyes gouged, innards knit into scarves. Hateful people took what they could out of saints, trying to root out their divinity, their soul as if by defiling their human body, the miracles and meanings would be defiled too. And these were the stories from *before* Aurells had killed a god.

Elion slammed the yellowed tome shut, sending another throb of pain through his fingertip.

He'd read almost every saint story in the pitiful Aurells church library: the disintegrating volume of *Gods of Saints* that the priest waved around each week and three worn, leather-bound volumes of saints' parables.

If only he could get into the Rat Library, a hulking, behemoth of a building entirely overrun with rats. Elion sighed. It was likely that all the scrolls and texts were chewed to

oblivion by now, anyways. He looked at the words he'd penned about Leck. Elion had larger problems than a bruised finger.

It hadn't been his fault, really.

Translation is always an act of violence. An act of war on text. To translate from the old language, to translate from long-winding text to something spoken in front of an audience. Adaptation was inevitable if one wanted to tell a compelling story.

It hadn't been intentional, and Elion probably would have been fine his whole life to memorize the priest's stories verbatim to recite forevermore. It had been an accidental find, a by-product of learning to read and enjoying it too much. Of needing to read all the stories himself.

The first act of violence was this: Leck's story had been written twice.

There was a version in *Gods of Saints* that told the priest's story, the one in front of him now. Ornately illuminated, the text told the tale of a man who dreamt of springtime but tragically never lived long enough to see it, a sanitized story of the importance of patience and faith, with only an undercurrent of darkness implied. There were sections here, so faint you almost couldn't see them, where a second scribe had scraped away the efforts of the first and written softer and prettier words. A sentence here about daffodils, a line about patience there: the palimpsest was only just barely crooked; the scribe had scraped away the careful rubrication along with the letters.

In the second leather-bound book, there was a longer story. This one told of a winter that burrowed under the skin. Cramped, plain handwriting on poor, pockmarked parchment detailed prophecies of a glass rainfall. The scribe's words curved sharply around a great hole in the middle of the parchment as he described the village people, cut all over from the

shards that rained down on them, laying the blame squarely at Leck's feet. This version brought the reader onto the clifftop, his daughters watching on. It blew into the promised spring as a shock, the overnight melt and thaw so warm the fields boiled.

The overarching details were the same in both, but things were clearly missing, or intentionally misinterpreted. Elion had slammed the book shut at the time, cheeks blazing as though he'd seen something truly scandalous. As though he'd be caught out for it. He'd paced around the room. He was reading sanctified texts. He was alone. He opened the books side by side. Many sentences were the same or shaped the same; it was just the omission of details. The later copy brought the seasons to the forefront, the hope, instead of the consequences and fear that led to the hopelessness.

This adaptation opened a door for him.

If someone altered the story at one point, surely Elion's minor adaptations and embellishments were not entirely blasphemous. So, he told himself.

His edits started small. A tweak here, a substitution there. Nothing substantial. Words that were easier to say out loud, an emphasis stressed or withheld.

But when he spoke the stories week after week, the details started to spiral.

With Saint Leck's story, he leaned into the bleakness of the winter, with the wind that should have bound family and friends together through lean times, ripping them apart instead. He whispered about the chill of disbelief. He painted images of the saint: a lone figure on a clifftop, facing off with a mob of bleeding, glass-struck strangers that were once neighbours. The first streak of sunshine rising only after his fall.

Elion was sure his purpling fingernail was simply the first penance he would pay for his stories. A sharp, living reminder that he was no one to the gods and saints. He was a mortal man with no right to alter anything sacred.

But still, he couldn't stop.

The guilt ate him alive, but he found he would rather live with guilt than with a story bottled in his throat.

Chapter 14

It wasn't pretty.

The grass bowed, crushed underfoot, bursting with the smell of green and dew in the night air. The girl in the blue dress stumbled, carving a haphazard path through the field.

Each blade spoke in its own raspy voice: *What is this? What commotion?*

Green stalks crashed into each other like partygoers: leaning, pushing. A collective sigh of bent blades went up as the girl fell. The grass leaned into her, shedding dewdrops to burrow into the seams of her dress. Cold tears. The grass held her, as the grass does dirt, bones, or rocks, while she convulsed. She was alone, and she was dying.

If the grass could do more than whisper against the wind, it would have shouted. It would have grabbed at their ankles and pulled someone to her. Maybe it would have reached the girl with the mean laugh, who stood at the edge of town, regretful, or maybe the girl who was watching the goats and crying.

But in the end, all the grass could do was hold the dying girl as she choked and sputtered, as her arms erupted into red and thick yellow.

She was alone.

Secretly, the grass wanted to hold her, wanted to envelop her under the dirt and roots. Under was safer than up, up, up in the air, above the ground. If one grew too tall, too close to the sun and sky, that's where grass would get cut down. Better to keep frail things like this girl safe, in the soil.

She'd flattened a swath of grass with flailing arms. Foamy spit dripped from her mouth, her nails raking blood from her arms and ankles. Boil after boil split, seeping pus and blood into the earth. No one was there to hold her but the ground.

The grass lapped it up. Gently wiping her forehead, it whispered the news across the fields for all the night to hear, if one only listened close.

The plague has taken the girl in blue.

Chapter 15

Madwen's funeral was held on a Saturday.

It was outdoors. Dawn. That threshold between night and morning, life and the beyond, indigo and orange. Stars and dew both awake, with wisps of clouds blurring it all together.

Someone had claimed her body was contagious. Plague victims were burned to stop contagion, and so, Madwen would be burned.

Crunching dirt underfoot as she walked towards the unlit pyre before Madwen's home, Ameline refused to believe the putrid smell was her friend. Gentle, sweet, fluttery Madwen, with a butterfly's lifespan. She'd up and died overnight, alone in a back field.

Funerals in Domare, particularly the gruesome ones, were quietly bustling affairs. The town was small enough for most everyone to have known Madwen in some capacity, and so the crowd of mourners swelled with well-intentioned noise as its numbers grew: Aldric's regiment arrived, then the butcher who usually bought their goats. Madwen's horde of cousins from the west side of town came next, their fluttery, flapping hands, small voices, and wide eyes belying the family connection.

Her body was to be burned in the house that would have been hers and Aldric's. A cottage with a thatched roof and enough room for a butterfly family. Aldric stood beside the cottage in mourning black, the only colour on him a thick armband in soldier's red. His jaw clenched and unclenched as well-wishers came to gape at his once-beautiful bride, as they murmured. *He's still young. Do they have to burn the house? What a shame. Other pretty girls live in town, too.*

Madwen had picked flowers yesterday morning. They still sat on the windowsill, blue petals wilting in direct sun. They would burn too.

She couldn't stand to look at the wrapped bundle in the doorway. The body. What a callous word, an empty word. She needed to keep busy, or she would melt into despair and rage. It wasn't fair; Madwen was the one who played by the rules. She was smart and kind and loved too easily, as though that was ever a crime. It wasn't fair. Madwen was the only one of them who loved her life, she deserved to keep it. The world was tilting under Ameline's feet, her vision blurring. It wasn't fair. She needed to help, to move, to do something. She couldn't think about this head-on.

"You've done more than enough." Elyse's voice was ragged as her bony fingers gripped Ameline's forearm. She pulled Ameline off her trajectory; she was headed toward Aldric.

"What?" Ameline's own voice was a whisper, unused since she'd heard the news. Since Madwen's father had walked over to her cottage, since she'd brewed him a weak cup of tea, and he'd poured his daughter's death out on the table. Her own father had left his tinkering room only at the third sob—Brion's, not Ameline's. He'd surveyed the scene, taken stock of the already-served tea, and decided he could do nothing to make the situation better. He'd gone back to his room and closed the door tight.

Ameline hadn't cried then, as she'd put a hand on Brion's shoulder. The words didn't make sense.

Madwen had the plague.

Madwen is dead.

Madwen is dead.

Madwen is—

“What?” Ameline scraped again. Fresh-turned earth for flower beds lined the wall of the cottage.

“Haven’t you done enough?”

Ameline didn’t disagree, but she didn’t understand the logic.

Elyse could see that Ameline didn’t understand. Her voice was lethal, channelling all her grief into a shape she was comfortable with.

“It was those stupid goats that you convinced her to get, the ones you never helped with. She complained about it all the time, that you were useless. She was just too nice to tell you to your face.”

Ameline still couldn’t follow, but Elyse continued.

“And now they’ve given her the plague, and she’s—” she faltered, “she’s gone, and it should have been you. It should have been you.”

Ameline felt like she’d spent the whole week catching up in conversations, and she felt it happening again.

Plague.

Goats.

Her fault.

Elyse opened her mouth to say something, but a plucky lute strum interrupted her. It was time. Elyse shook her head and walked away.

Her fault. Everything seemed to ring true.

Aldric stepped into the house, over Madwen’s body. He was holding a burning torch, which he touched to the curtains, the table, the walls, the bed. The shroud burned first. It

unravelling, threads snapping into sparks. Ameline bit the meaty part of her hand to stop from crying out. Aldric stood beside it and watched, embers flicking onto his pant leg. When the flames caught and began snacking on the wood frame, he turned and looked back through the doorway.

Slowly, Ameline came to understand that he meant to stay inside. He would burn, too. The crowd realized this only a moment after she did, and the furtive muttering crested into cries of shock. Maybe he forgot to leave an exit path? Maybe he knew he was infected too and wanted to stop the spread of disease. But as he stared resolutely through the rising flames, anyone present could see that he simply would not live in a world without his love.

Ameline felt sick.

The flames worked fast, hungrily eating their way up the walls and towards the roof in a display of heat and power.

A cry came up from the back of the crowd. *Aldric!*

The boys of the military regiment, Aldric's friends, pushed their way through the crowd. They had likely been asked to stand in ceremony at the back of the procession; they probably hadn't noticed the look on Aldric's face as he set the fires. They'd only just discovered that he didn't plan to come back out.

Fifteen young men swarmed the house; voices wracked with pain as they cried one word over and over: *Aldric, Aldric, Aldric!*

They tried to get through the flames, ripping at burning beams with bare hands. Some of the older boys had to pull the smaller ones out, to hold them back. Cries turned to screams, and Aldric still did not emerge. Their friend would not be saved.

Fifteen men with burned hands. Guttural sobs and shocked silence from the crowd. The soldiers slowly, took up their posts again. The fire burned on, hot and bright.

Eventually, people recovered enough to speak and speculate.

“She had the plague. From that goat the other day, y’know.”

“Would have been better to get the whole herd in there, then. Burn it out at the root.”

No. That was the only word ringing in Ameline’s head. No, no, no, no. It wasn’t true. Ameline hadn’t killed Madwen; she hadn’t doomed her with something so stupid as goats, she couldn’t have. She groped for truth: Elyse was a liar. Elyse had to have lied. Ameline turned to her friend, unable to watch as flames punched their way into the sky.

“She would have told us if she knew she had the plague.”

Elyse relished in the killing blow. In words as wretched as the rising smell of smoke and burning pus, in low tones so no one else could hear, Elyse wove a tale of three friends: how two were forced to lift the third onto her feet and teach her how to be a person. How the stronger two grew tired of the third. How one of the two grew sicker and sicker, boils raising on her arms, her neck, loud and red and garish. Obvious to anyone looking.

Elyse kept her voice leashed, but it burned with years of pent-up rage as she revealed Ameline’s incompetence.

“No. No, she would have told me. If she knew she was dying, why didn’t she tell me?”

“She did, in her way. You just never listen unless it’s about you.”

“That’s not true. You’re a liar. You’re lying. You have to be.”

Elyse's smile was a cruel, grief-ridden thing. She wished she was lying; then Madwen would still be here.

“Don't talk to her family, Ameline. They don't blame you, but they should.”

Ameline had surpassed numbness. She was feeling every emotion, blazing hot, all at once: anger, disbelief, shock. All of it was caged within a grief and guilt unending. She might as well have killed Madwen. She should be the one on the pyre, burning off the lingering fumes from her trip to Three Swords.

The flames bathed her face, heating her with shame. She hadn't seen that her friend was dying. She hadn't been worth telling. It was her fault; she was too stupid, too self-involved. Ameline wondered—when was the last time she'd asked Madwen a question? A high-pitched squealing sound came from the fire, a cut-off yell that may have been Aldric, then the crackling sound of bodies shrivelling, shrinking, becoming less alive by the moment. Roaring flames. Was this what Madwen had done to Jeremie's body to make the rat poison? Strip the source until it was no longer beloved, until only ash remained.

The goat shears from the other day clanked against her thigh, deep in her pocket. Ameline plunged her hand into her pocket; the handles were warm. The last hands to touch them had been Madwen's. A wail began to build deep in her chest, a rumbling thing over which she had no control. It erupted, keening and ragged, from her lips. She had no control over the sound. Those closest to her fell back as though her grief was vulgar. As though it were contagious.

After three wails, the lute stopped playing. Ameline's voice alone scored the crackling flames, growing louder by the second. Hot orange fire crawled up the front windows,

snaking towards the roof. Smoke billowed, Aldric no longer visible through the doorway, Madwen just part of the fire.

Ameline stared into the flames until her eyes hurt as much as her brutalized lungs. She kept screaming, breathing fast and jagged, smoke coated her tongue. The flames jumped and pirouetted and dissolved to nothing against the pink dawn sky. She stared until the flames no longer looked like flames. Until she saw a shadowy figure walk from the house, an axe lodged in his skull. He was made of smoke and walked steadily right past Ameline until he dissipated into the crowd; behind him came a woman with a bloody chest, smoky rivulets of blood coursing down her legs; behind her came a young man pierced through with arrows. They emerged one by one from the fire and paraded past: a man holding his own severed head, a woman with no teeth and a bloody jaw.

Saints.

An apparition of saints through the smoke.

No one else saw the saints as they marched into the first row of mourners. People just watched the fire, drew themselves into prayer and small conversations. No one saw what Ameline did.

Or, almost no one. There, hovering over Brion's shoulder, was a pale moon face under a pointed, familiarly jangly cap. Knob. He waved at the toothless woman, who did not wave back, then he grinned up at Ameline, canines glinting orange in the firelight.

Ameline reached into her pocket again and withdrew the shears. She closed her mouth but couldn't stop the wail; it emerged a shaky hum. The shears were sharp. Made for work, for action. Like Ameline.

The last saint emerged from the burning doorway. She wore Hinge's face, which is to say, no face at all. A formless animal skull, a ruffling foxglove, Madwen's face mid-scream.

Madwen was dead. Madwen was dead and not coming back and there were people who would choose to die rather than live in a world without her. Madwen was dead, and Ameline was alive. Madwen was dead and she thought Ameline did not care about anyone. Madwen was dead, and Ameline's self-obsession had killed her.

There, bathed in the firelight, Ameline made a vow. She would become a saint. Ameline would devote her life to others, even if it killed her. *Especially* if it killed her.

She withdrew the shears and held them up above her head.

Most saints alter their physical appearance after the first vision. Tears streaked sideways across her face.

She opened her mouth, and the building wail escalated to a shrieking scream. The crowd fell silent. The scream cut off abruptly and left them with nothing but the sound of raging fire.

"Are you listening? Do you hear me?"

She spun slowly, so the fire blazed behind her.

"I will be a saint!"

She took the shears and chopped off a chunk of her hair. The piece fell dully at her feet. She yelled louder this time, voice cracking from the strain.

"I will be a saint!"

Another handful of hair lopped off, shears snicking easily through the locks. Blades flashing silver close to the skin. Revealing the wide-eyed face underneath, shorn. She threw the fistful behind her, wind carrying it into the fire, incinerating it into grey smoke. Fistfuls of

hair flew until all that was left was an uneven lop on her head, chin-length. Ameline tilted her head to the sky, fire casting her face in shadow, her back with heat. Far behind her, the sun rose.

She stood for a moment, her chest heaving. Slack-jawed faces and terrified eyes faced her. Madwen's mother had her head buried in Elyse's shoulder.

No one moved.

The line of saints had blown away with the wind, and she stood there, a girl half-mad with grief. Soot stained and teary-eyed.

She would burn for those she loved.

Knob cackled out a laugh that was lost in the rumble of the fire as the cottage roof finally caved in. A shower of sparks rained down, embers falling at Ameline's feet.

She would make herself a saint.

Chapter 16

Leagues away, in an island kingdom principled on greed and baubles, there was a king who was tiring of being king of nothing. King of nothing greater than his father and his father's father before him. Sure, he had his island, his diamonds and rubies, his dogs. But a large swath of fertile soil and happy folk lay to the southwest. Beckoning. Taunting.

The king had never let himself dream of it, even in sleep. If it could not be his, he did not want to think of it. And it could not be his, for reasons that had less to do with his limited island army and more to do with a fear of ambition, and a greater fear of failure.

But tonight, the king had a dream.

It wasn't the usual sort of dream (naked coronation, climbing up a hill that never grew any shorter, busty women just out of fingertips' reach); this dream bled light at the edges as though it were more than a dream. As though it had been shrunken and translated so that it could be held in his mind. *Divine*, his dream-self whispered, *god-touched*.

Even in dreams, the king did not like to be fanciful, and he smartened himself up. He preferred his dreams to be conquerable. The king's first dream had come when he was a boy, when he was still a prince of ruddy hands and wooden swords and lessons in languages he didn't want to know. He'd dreamt that he would receive a terrier as a present, and for his next birthday, he had. The prince told his parents about the serendipity over breakfast, trout juice and flaky pastry slopping out of the corner of his mouth. His father told him dreams were not wishes and that he should make demands with authority, as befitting a king.

A year later, his father died, and the prince had been crowned king and demanded four hundred terriers.

But tonight, the dream grabbed him like this:

A man in armour rapped on his forehead with iron knuckles. He wore a wooden helmet, with a long flat piece covering his nose and shadowing his eyes. The king followed the man as he pulled him from his body to float over a map. He saw his own piddly island kingdom stretched before him as though over a canvas; a small emerald on a big sea—shining, but small, nonetheless. A gauntleted hand guided his chin to look beyond to Gallia. Though it was a shining, verdant slice of the mainland, it was the one thing, above all others, that the king would not let himself dream of. He could not stand to entertain the foolishness or the humiliation of it, even in sleep. He tried to turn his face away, but the man would not let him avert his gaze. His chin was forced closer, closer, closer to the map as it rushed up to meet him, angling towards a stain of dirt and dustland in the northwest of Gallia's kingdom.

They paused inches away, and a single drop of blood fell from the king's nose. It landed in the shape of a heart, and inky red spirals drew themselves in the air, thickening and growing until their arms wrapped around the king. Within the dream, he was pulled headfirst into the blood on the map.

This dream, this vision, was even closer. He saw a city with a hole burned through it. He saw its dead-eyed cows and walked through its dry crackling wheat stalks. He stood in a dry lake. He saw a heart on fire in the middle of the city, burning in a husk of a cathedral; he saw himself walk through the flaming heart and on the other side he saw victory. A door opened, city after city bowing to him until all of Gallia was his. He felt himself crowned with two crowns: the spiky circlet of his own kingdom that his father himself had welded and the sturdy, boxy brass crown of Gallian rule.

He saw the man in armour, lit from within, standing on the ramparts as he approached the city with his army. The man burst into red flames that sent a punch of heat into the king's lungs.

When he awoke, terriers draped on his arms and feet, their hot tongues lolling in sleep, the king knew two things:

One, his nose was still bleeding.

Two, the city's name was Aurells.

part two: liar

Chapter 17

Five hundred years ago, Aurells had killed a god, and five hundred years ago, three gods had died. Because five hundred years ago, Hinge made a mistake.

They had been a family of three. Always three. The door, the hinge, the handle. The door was the most well-known, the most powerful. The others were always only known in conjunction: the door-*hinge*, the door-*handle*. The handle was just excited to be included in something; the hinge groaned in disdain.

See, the hinge wanted more. She wanted to be the Goddess of the Threshold, unfettered by others, beholden to only herself. She wanted to be known, celebrated, called upon. So, she concocted a plan. She would act at the Festival for the Gods.

Aurells, wondrous Aurells, with its shimmering silver salt lake and bustling thoroughfares. One couldn't walk through the streets of Aurells without having a flower placed in one's hair, or without an invite to a hearty dinner and tales around the hearth. Aurells was a city of brilliance and joy, and Aurells loved its gods.

The City of Open Doors, that was what it had been called, back in the Miracle Years. Aurells exalted its three gods—though mostly Ador—and stayed flush with opportunity.

Hinge thought she might be able to turn Aurells against its darling Ador. He never seemed to enjoy the praise as much as she thought she would, anyways. Hinge thought she might just be able to get the city to put its beloved door god to sleep, and then she would take his place. She would be adored and celebrated and made useful. She was unworried about Knob; he was a fool at the best of times.

And so, Hinge creaked in squeaky door frames, whispering tall tales of Ador's hatred for Aurells, about the cruelty he planned to enact at the festival. She made up big lies and small ones, all slowly winding through the collective mind of Aurells.

And when the day of the festival came, the Gods of the Threshold entered the cathedral in as physical a form as they could. Hinge with her gown of metal, Knob jokingly wearing jester's garb, and Ador in his wooden helmet. Ador was taken immediately in chains, and the Goddess of the Hinge realized she had made two miscalculations.

One, she hadn't calibrated the potency of her lies, or the loyalty to each other that the Aurellians would feel. They took Ador and bound him and set him on fire. Their belief in his cruelty was enough. They would kill a god.

Two, she hadn't remembered the rule of three. There were always three. So, while Ador might have been the one on fire, Hinge and Knob couldn't leave the cathedral. They were wrought together, co-constructed. There were three, always three, and one was nothing without the others. A door that wouldn't open, a handle to nowhere, a hinge merely a forgotten piece of metal. Their fates were welded together, even through betrayal. Even though she'd only poisoned Aurells against Ador, all three deities burned.

Hinge's own ambition killed her that day. It was her own fault.

Aurells erased any memory of the gods, initially in shame. Then, as the shame turned into fear, and that fear morphed into pride, the God-Killing City forgot why it had done what it had. Time erases such things. And without the gods to make it important, Aurells emptied, the trade route shifted to align with a different road—a godly, more blessed road—and neighbours within city walls stopped being neighbourly.

But now, the rule of three had brought the gods back.

Chapter 18

The woman in the doorway was just a voice at first. A squat, sturdy thing. A voice like a worn table.

“You,” the voice said, “you need a hot meal.” What should have been an invitation was an order.

That was fine by Ameline. She was too tired to make choices; someone else ordering her around sounded great. She rolled her head to one side from where it had come to rest, heavy as a bag of rocks, on her forearms. Ameline peered up through one cracked eye. Even the inside of her eyelids had dried out. The voice belonged to a woman who looked a bit like a table, too. Solidly built, worn by years of good, honest work, legs stock straight and bracing. The steps Ameline found herself sitting on must belong to the woman.

She had dark silver hair shot through with white, cut in an unbroken, perfectly straight line at her ample waist. A leather necklace hung at her neck with a palm-sized piece of wood strung on it; underneath, her dress was a mossy black.

Ameline closed her eyes again. She was so tired. She had no idea where she was, or the last time she'd slept. All she knew was that, even seated, her body felt like it was still walking.

“Get up. Let's get you fed.” After a moment, her footsteps retreated back through the door. Too bad. Ameline had half-hoped the woman would carry her inside.

With a heaving sigh, Ameline pushed herself up to a standing position. Dust clouded off her, a cumulonimbus of pulverized clay. She followed the woman inside.

It was dark, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but once they did, Ameline's jaw fell open. It was a magnificent house. Or, it had been, once.

Dark walnut panelling, and an ornate wrought iron chandelier hanging overhead. Rugs that once would have been called plush were now crusted solid with dust. Although riddled with cracks, the walls were painted a happy orange and draped with once-sumptuous tapestries. The house—an inn, Ameline quickly realized—was meant for a time, for a town, much grander than the one in which it currently stood.

In sharp contrast to the rest of the decor, small bowls filled with thin, hollow bird bones and curved seashells collected dust in every room. The woman did not mention the bones as she led the way to a kitchen bathed in reds and yellows.

“I'm Marta,” the woman said by way of introduction. She was bustling in drawers, opening and closing them seemingly at random before surfacing with a knife in hand. “Come, sit now.”

Ameline sat. Marta hacked at a piece of bread with her knife. The knife was clearly too dull to tackle the stale loaf, compressing it into a hard knot. Even though Ameline hadn't said anything, Marta began speaking as though Ameline had asked for a rundown of everything and everyone in the town.

“Aurells is a strange place when you first look at it, but we all stopped looking long ago.”

So Ameline had reached Aurells. A blessing.

Marta handed her a tough knuckle of bread; with every bite Ameline's memories of her travels returned, first patchy and stilted, then running smooth.

A spray of violets on soft mountain grass; a black treeline perfectly mirrored in a still lake, cut through with blue sky; daisy fields running towards the horizon; small cottages and smiling waves from families she passed by; morning fog speckling her face with dew. Trees like spindling skeletal fingers, trees like bursting clouds of hair, trees like towers, trees everywhere.

She remembered walking along her river, following its gentle path while days turned into weeks until the river catapulted itself off a cliff and left her stranded. She had never looked at a map; she had no idea whether she was walking in the right direction. The bottoms of her feet tore open, raw and red, then healed again into thick flaky callouses. She walked, and repented to Madwen, and swore to become a saint. She would put everyone's needs before her own, she would represent the goodness of the world, she would serve she would smile, she would erase herself in the name of the greater good. She would embody a saint. Every step was a painful reminder to care, to dedicate herself to more than her own decaying body.

One foot in front of the other. As much as she tried to think of what good she could do as a saint, she mainly thought about how much her feet hurt. She thought about the sun cracking her skin open on her exposed shoulders. She thought about a single bead of water on her dry tongue. She did not let herself think about Madwen anymore. Nor Elyse. She dragged in heaving breaths, her mouth dry, her teeth dusty. One foot plodding in front of the other, a heavy tread, her feet took her over the low-slung mountains towards a flattened landscape. The sky felt closer. Fields refilled with livestock; she walked until there were no more trees, until the grass underfoot turned brittle and beige. The sky was a slash of cobalt

above, the sun a hot white star. She felt cooked. She never saw another town. She never knew whether she was any closer to Aurells than she had begun.

She walked until she found a dusty field of cows and collapsed to her knees beside a heifer. Its glossy black eyes turned to her, and it let out a lowing call that sounded like her name. She'd leaned into its leg, the hot fur grating against her sunburnt skin. She was so far from home.

She'd looked up from the sun-baked ground, from her dirt-worn dress, and she'd seen it. Straight ahead, the fields around her swept to a point, a spiky city at its apex. Spires and pointed roofs poked above the fortified wall, like the tips of a black crown against the hazy sky.

Aurells. The godless city. The city the rest of the country forgot.

She'd made it.

Now, sitting and sipping tepid water, Ameline felt as though she was surfacing from a long dream. Everything ached, and she was thankful that Marta told stories in a way that did not depend on a listener. She used names Ameline had never heard before as though they were all Ameline's close friends. She'd trail off and then say, in her squat voice, "Of course, you can imagine how that would go, with it being Merle and all."

Ameline could not imagine. Slowly, though, through the name-dropping and non-sequential stories, Ameline pieced together a small history of Aurells.

Apparently, the city was initially meant to be a pilgrimage site along the major Gallian trade route; the city had been intended for greatness. Massive construction began; depictions of gods were carved into every house, ornate gilded filigrees of saints were nailed to every gutter, handmade charms and chimes were strung from every overhang. When the city had

turned its back on the gods, everything had stalled; buildings were left unfinished, decorative iconography was hacked off. People fled the city, leaving it full of holes and scars for reasons no one could remember. Those that stayed either forsook the gods or didn't care about them in the first place. This was their home, blessed or not.

There was a belief in Aurells that, five hundred years ago, the saints and gods had been dispelled with good reason. No one was sure what the reason was, exactly, but it was a point of pride that a god had been burned there. That no one could remember which god was burned was a point of pride as well. They'd scrubbed the story from history entirely. Proudly godless, Aurells went forward without divine belief.

And as Marta continued to speak, another story emerged underneath the first. One of hardships in a dying town, dry summers, and of rats. Rats infiltrating empty homes and creeping into occupied ones. Rats, watching from dark corners, waiting for their chance to take a bite. A city without gods was a city susceptible to infestation, to things creeping through unlocked doors, through walls and windows.

"You'll stay here," Marta said, eventually. "The house will take care of you."

Ameline looked at the bowl of bird bones on the table. She hoped she wouldn't wither here overnight. Marta bustled out of the room abruptly, then bustled right back in and tossed a dusty green dress onto the table in front of Ameline. She asked then, like she hadn't just spent the last hour talking Ameline's ear off: "What's your name, girl?"

Ameline thought about giving a fake name, of becoming someone who was a saint. Through her long, aching walk, she thought that maybe she'd become someone new. Maybe a new name wouldn't be a lie because she'd be reborn as a saint. But she couldn't make it true.

In the end, she was only herself, and she was not a liar.

She gave her real name.

“Ameline.”

Chapter 19

The two buildings in Aurells that stood as relics of the time Before were the cathedral and the Rat Library. The cathedral stood half-burned, half-restored, a beautiful testament to the resilience of a people able to overcome their gods. The rat library was full of rats. Holy scrolls, illuminated manuscripts, the texts that would tell Elion about the true history of saints, these were kept behind sealed iron doors with only gnawing rodents for company.

Locking the rats in was the only solution that the citizens of Aurells had come up with that came anywhere close to working. Rat traps baited with cheese could only catch one rat at a time. Cats were outnumbered fifty to one, no matter how many cats they threw in the library doors, the rats were more plentiful and would leave chewed up cat carcasses strewn on the front steps of Rat Library. In the interest of preserving the cat population, the books had been left to rot and the library doors locked firmly, the keys lost to time. It would take a miracle to get the rats out of Aurells.

Elion pined after the contents of the rat-filled library with a keen sort of ache, curiosity mingled with desperation. The truth would be there if only he could find and read it. Which version of Leck's story was the real one? Why had it been edited so dramatically? Had there been consequences?

On a cloudless day like today, the rat library cast hulking stone shadows over the city. Elion rounded the corner of the library and stepped faster, eager to get out of the already rising heat. The east entrance to the cathedral was not far past the shared wall of the library, but it was in direct morning sunlight. He swung inside.

In the great purging of the gods, part of the inner wall had burned. Cosmetic repairs only went so far, especially when the cathedral's new purpose was intended as more of a museum than a gathering place. This meant that the damaged interior walls were simply covered with haphazard brick—a second layer of stone placed in front of the damaged, sooty original. Any wall hangings or rugs that had once muffled the echoes were long gone. No one had bothered to repair the main spire; it tilted drunkenly, visible through the ragged hole in the ceiling, a charcoal stake in the sky, looming over the room below.

Elion made his way to the small bookshelf behind the podium, seeing the yellow tome already laid upon it. It was flipped open to *The Ending*, as though the priest would need to check his notes through the retelling. Elion rolled his eyes, then immediately prayed for forgiveness from the unknown god.

Behind the dais, the back wall had seen the most damage. A too-shiny layer of stone flanked Elion as he practiced his stories for the ruined building and the empty benches.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a brick hit the ground behind him.

“Gracious saints,” he swore. Another brick tumbled after the first; he thought the whole building might finally be crumbling down after all these years as more and more leapt out of the wall. But no, the bricks were only falling in one tall column. Elion stopped his mad dash for the exit when, through the dust, he saw that the missing bricks had revealed a door: pointed at the top with large, ornate hinges on either side.

The back wall of the cathedral connected to the library.

Elion was too curious to stop and think, to wonder if it was safe. He stepped gingerly over the bricks on the ground, his footsteps echoing softly and opened the door. Pivoting the door on its hinge displaced another brick, which clattered dully to the floor behind him.

It opened into a small circular room. There were no rat droppings, no sign of teeth marks. If this was truly part of the library, it was well and truly sealed. Perhaps it had only been for especially holy texts? A door directly opposite the one Elion had entered sat on the other side of the room, but between him and the door was a pedestal with a single manuscript propped open, just like the one in the cathedral.

He stepped closer. The margins of the book were decorated in gold and red, painted with winged lions and interlocking mechanisms, with hearts and flames and swords and doors. A line of text burned itself into the open page as he watched.

THE BURNED GOD HAS COME BACK TO DESTROY AURELLS.

No one would believe him, not even the priest. They would say the gods were dead, that the saints were unable to return without them.

But this was a god's work.

As he stood there, slack-jawed, a second line of text etched itself into the page:

THE HEART CANNOT BURN.

Elion was certain that the feeling he'd always had—his path, his purpose, his compulsion—had brought him right here: to the door in the wall, to the manuscript. His heart was thundering in his ears. A final message appeared:

PREPARE FOR SUMMER'S END.

The scrawl slanting, crooked. Elion did not know much, but he knew the look of a warning well enough. *He has come back.* It was going to sound like he'd made it all up. He began thinking of how he could spin the story so that someone—anyone—would believe him. This was real. The gods were real. Aurells was in danger.

Elion shivered at the sound of skittering rat feet in the walls of the room. He quickly flipped through the rest of the manuscript, but there were no other words written on any of the pages. He took it with him, gingerly tucking the ancient-looking book under his arm. He was certain he would need it to prove his beliefs.

As soon as he was back in the main hall of the cathedral, the soaring arches and gasp of blue sky above him, the bricks leapt back into place, concealing the door once more.

The sky burned hotter and hotter, casting a pale haze over the fields Ameline could see from the window in her room in the inn. It looked like the cows were liquid, they wavered so much in her vision.

Today, she would go to the cathedral. She'd eaten, wrapped her sore feet, rehydrated, and got more than the lay of the land from Marta. Now, she would go to the source of whatever divinity was left in Aurells. If she was lucky, or if Hinge was still pulling strings, maybe she could get someone to tell her about other miracles, so she could at least have a point of reference for what she was supposed to do. That was as much of a plan as she could muster. She really should have listened to Hinge back in Domare.

“Can I speak to a priest, please?” Ameline asked the empty room, too loud, when she walked into the cathedral. Her voice reverberated, abrasive in the silent space. Her eyes hadn't adjusted from the light outside and she was blinded by the dark. Her question sounded rude, even with the *please* tacked on at the end. She stepped further into the room, clunking down on stone.

“Hello?” she called. The room started to take fuzzy shape around her, dim and grey at first. It was a massive space; she may as well still have been outside. Columns propped up

a vaulted ceiling, polished white until about ten feet up, then fading to a murky charcoal as they soared towards the ceiling high above. Dusty benches were lined up, empty, leading to a bare stone wall that was clearly newer than the rest of the structure.

A rasping, papery sound scraped from the far side of the room, and shadowy movement behind a podium told her there was someone else here.

“Hello? I want to speak with a priest. Please.” Ameline stepped cautiously toward the front of the room. “I have some questions. I think, um. I just need to talk with someone.”

A face suddenly popped up from behind the podium. Ameline was close enough by now to see it was a young man, probably her age, with a flop of chestnut hair. His broad shoulders stretched the fabric of the sunny robes he wore. He had a beautiful mark on his upper lip which moved as his mouth gaped open. He looked nervous, but it didn’t come through in his voice when he said, “No priest today, but I could arrange a chat with the novitiate?”

Ameline hesitated. “Sure. Whatever you’ve got.”

They both stood there for a moment, the man in robes half-leaning on the pulpit.

After a moment, Ameline blurted out, “Could you grab them?” The words came out too fast. She paused and tried again, in a loftier tone this time. “I’m afraid it’s for a rather urgent matter.”

Rather urgent matter, gods, Ameline thought. She was trying to speak like a saint, but it all sounded wrong coming out of her mouth.

The man in robes leaned back, standing up straight and gesturing to himself, “You’ve got him.”

“Ah, yes. Quite.” Ameline was going to slap herself in the face. *Quite.*

Ameline took a deep breath.

This could not sound like a lie.

“I am a saint.”

The novitiate’s face didn’t move, and the rest came out of Ameline in a rush. “I know what you’re going to say. There are no more saints, the gods as we know them are gone, they can’t make more saints, but listen. There’s a curse bringing a king and his army to Aurells, and only I can stop it.”

The novitiate had a faraway look in his eyes. Ameline was sure she’d be called out as a fraud right there. He’d have her hanged, or publicly shamed, or whatever they did with mad women in god-killing cities.

“There’s a god. Obviously. One—no, I’m not sure, maybe three? Communication is hard. They’ve come back, somehow. They were gone. There’s all this stuff about doors and hinges that I’m not entirely certain about, but—you have to believe me. Please. Believe me, because—” here, she faltered, “—because it’s true. And you’re in danger.”

He looked over his shoulder at the brick wall behind him.

Ameline despaired. He definitely thought she was unhinged, that she’d lost it. She was about to call the whole thing off, turn on her heel, and run away as fast as she could, when he finally spoke.

“A door.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“And a curse?” His face gave nothing away.

“Yes.”

Ameline watched the novitiate carefully. He stared at her for a minute, eyes searching her for something she wished she could give him before he pressed his lips together and glanced over his shoulder at the cracked brick wall behind the pulpit. His brows furrowed; he bit his lip. Ameline tried to breathe, tried to look calm, cool, and collected instead of looking like she'd worked herself into a spectacular panic. Finally, he looked back, towards Ameline.

“I believe you.”

A slow smile bloomed on Ameline's face, bright and shining, pulling hard at muscles she hadn't used in months. She knew it was only the first person, it was still her first lie, but she had an inkling that maybe all it took to make a saint was belief.

Elion felt as though the floor was spinning beneath him. He was buzzing, he was floating, he was on fire. Everything was moving so fast. *This* was his purpose. There was a saint in Aurells. He had been right, that *had* been a god talking to him through the manuscript.

His mind raced. Right now, she was just a girl, and the book in his arms was just a manuscript—how could he get everyone to believe she was a saint?

“We have to get you canonized. There will be a whole ceremony, the information will be in... it'll all be in the library.” Elion's breath rushed out of him at the realization. “They'll *have* to let me into the library now.”

The girl's eyes widened. “Cannons? No, thank you.”

“*Canonized*,” Elion corrected absently, still thinking ahead to the next steps, the curse, the coincidences of it all. “We need to make sure that you're officially recognized as a saint. If we're dealing with a curse, everything has to be by the book. No loopholes.”

“Ah. Canon...nized. I see. Yes. Quite.” She cleared her throat. “By the book, you say. Do you have a book we could follow, by chance? This is my first time being a saint.”

Hearing that made Elion pause. Her first time? Wouldn't—no, that was right, saints were just *people* before they were blessed, or martyred. He looked at her again, and even though he'd been looking at her all this time, it was like seeing her for the first time all over again. She was his age. She wore a green kirtle that gaped at the neckline, falling too wide over her delicately rising collarbones. The dress was laced as tightly as possible but still hung away from her torso; obviously, it had been made for someone older and larger than her. She had dirt smeared on her neck and short hair that curled unevenly above her jaw. A smattering of freckles. Elion didn't know her; she wasn't one of his regulars, and she wasn't someone he knew from growing up in Aurells. All he knew was that she had a loud voice, and she'd walked into the cathedral proclaiming herself a saint just after he'd come face to face with a god's warning.

The manuscript with that warning was now shoved awkwardly beneath his robes, dangerously close to falling to the floor. He readjusted it, again.

She looked young. Real.

Aurells would have a difficult time coming around to this—it would be hard to convince a town responsible for eradicating a god that something divine had come back and brought a curse with it. But he believed her.

“What's your name?” he asked softly.

She held his gaze, defiant.

“Ameline. Saint Ameline.”

“Welcome, Saint Ameline, to Aurells. May the gods help us.”

He shook his head and closed his eyes. This was real. He was meant to find the manuscript—whose sharp corners jabbed at him under his robes—and he was meant to find her. He would bring belief back to Aurells. He'd get to watch the story unfold and tell it in his own, true words.

Slowly, Elion knelt. Saint Ameline opened her mouth to protest the formality, but as the front door of the cathedral slammed shut across the room, so did her mouth.

They rested like that for a moment. Settling. Saint and believer. Faithful and followed. Both breathing charcoal dust motes and the stories that had been told in this room. Elion couldn't believe it. His saint. The first saint since the end of the Miracle Years, and she was here, and he was at her feet. He could weep, he could float through the hole in the ceiling, he could go and tell everyone who'd ever given him a pitying glance that he'd been right to wait. He'd been right to pray. She was here, she was here.

"You may stand," Ameline said haltingly, and she took his hands in hers to pull him to his feet. Elion rose before the saint, their eyes locking. Her eyes were a bright hazel, with spots of green that made him think of summer leaves swirling in a river's current.

"Thank you," she said, "And before we do anything else, what's *your* name—"

"I—" Elion began, but the manuscript under his robes had reached its tipping point. With both his hands in hers, and none left over to stabilize the book, the stolen text tumbled to the floor with a great thump. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, a pained, guilty look flashing across his face.

Ameline grinned and let go of him, stepping back.

“Hiding things, are we, novitiate?” she raised an eyebrow at the massive book on the floor between them, crossing her arms over her chest. “Doing some light reading? Referencing some entirely legal books?”

“I think it’s about you, actually,” Elion said, slightly flushed. He bent down to retrieve the text with a fluid motion. When he surfaced, the saint was gaping at him.

“Oh,” she said. “What does it say about me?”

If he wasn’t so preoccupied with the embarrassment and panic of getting caught, Elion would have sworn her tone was jumping somewhere between flirtatious and disbelief. He turned back towards the podium, flipping the priest’s yellow tome shut and propping the forbidden manuscript on top. Careful not to touch the elaborate marginalia, he flipped to the inscribed page, and read the warning there aloud.

“He has come back for Aurells. The heart cannot burn. *‘The burned god’* has to refer to the god Aurells killed at the end of the Miracle Years. He’s finally back for vengeance.”

“The door with the curse,” Ameline said. “Ador.”

“A door?”

“No, *Ador*, he’s part of the three door gods. Hinge, Knob, and Ador, who, I guess is the reason I’m here. Sainting. Apparently more than one god died that day.”

“Interesting. What doesn’t make sense is the second part.” Elion tapped the second sentence with his bruised finger. “*‘The heart cannot burn.’* What is the heart? Is it that the heart can’t burn as in, it’s fireproof and *will not* burn? Or that it needs to be protected, whatever ‘it’ is? Is the heart literal? Whose heart? Is it perhaps a person or an object? Does burning even mean fire, or is there something we’re missing?”

“I don’t know. I guess we keep fires to a minimum, as a precaution?”

Elion makes a small noise, lost in thought. “It’s fascinating. It’s poetic, and vague in a way that I’d expect from a god. We’re not allowed to access the prophecies, they’re all locked in the library, but even not knowing anything about how they communicate, you’d expect a god to only half-speak to you, right? It’s infuriating, but I *knew* it was something. There’s a god, and a curse, and now a saint—you are here to break it. It’s all *real*.”

“I’d like to prevent the curse altogether, actually,” Ameline cut in.

Elion blinked. “Interesting. Either way, I need to do more research so that we know what we’re facing, *and* we need to get you canonized as a living saint as quickly as possible.”

“Great! Let’s start there,” Ameline clapped her hands together. Elion turned to her, looking away from the words.

“You’ve performed a miracle already, I presume, to know you’re a saint?”

Her mouth turned into a very thin line.

“You need a miracle,” Elion said, disbelieving. “Saints have miracles. It’s in all the stories.”

“It’s in the works,” she said, waving a hand as though to brush it away. “Is there anything around Aurells that... needs a miraculous touch?”

Elion picked up the manuscript. Gold flashed; the binding had been done to look like great, grasping door hinges reaching across the cover.

“We’ll find something,” he said. “Aurells could use several miracles. I’m Elion, by the way.”

Chapter 20

If anyone had a way to get into the Rat Library, it would be the priest.

Unfortunately, he did not believe that Ameline was a saint. No matter how Ameline explained the visions, or how Elion re-enacted the appearing door and showed him the written curse, the priest would not reveal whether he even knew of a way to access the library. They stood and argued with him in his house, across town from the cathedral. It was a small wooden structure full to bursting with different coloured religious robes; Ameline could hardly walk, the floor was so covered in lemon yellow, mustard, and citrine fabric. Robes for summer, robes for celebration, robes for special guests, robes for shouting the same story over and over again.

He sat, unmoving, in a rocking chair.

Ameline thought he seemed jealous of Elion's easy belief, the way Elion's deference to her was immediate and full. She was shocked by this stubborn support as well, though she tried not to show it. Elion argued in her favour, stating and restating the points of evidence, of the necessity of accessing the books in the library. The priest seemed so full of bitterness; his arms crossed firmly across his chest. Ameline supposed she would be, too, if she'd dedicated her life to something that everyone around her was proud of killing. A trough of bitterness, drunk every day.

He wouldn't help them. No miracle, no saint.

On their way out of his house, the priest reached out a hand, signalling Elion to stop. Elion waved Ameline into the street ahead of him, but she lingered on the threshold, listening.

“Father?” Elion said, his voice soft, hopeful.

Ameline realized that the priest may as well have been his real father, as the wavering word seemed to hold double the weight it should. Elion approached the priest and grasped his hand.

“The gods won’t come back,” the priest said. “They abandoned us, even if they did come back they would no longer be our gods.”

“You have to believe her, Father.”

“They’re just stories, boy. That’s all they’ll ever be any more. They’re just words on a page; they’re not real. They’re not important.”

Elion was shaking his head. “You have to believe *me*.”

“Our job is to read the script, not write a new one. You can’t coerce a miracle, even if the rats are getting more unwieldy by the day. Elion, you have to wake up to the world we’re in before your hope gets any bigger, before there’s more to lose. Just stick to the script.”

Ameline stepped into the sun, into the street, squinting against the swell of light outside the priest’s house. She couldn’t listen anymore. She didn’t like the priest telling her no. It spurred her on nearly as much as Elion’s immediate reverence did. Now she *had* to win everyone over to her side, just to prove that she could.

In the growing heat of the day, the dusty swath of the main street already simmered with what was still to come. The back of Ameline’s neck prickled with sweat. While she waited for Elion, she watched three little girls, presumably sisters, devise a complicated series of rules for a game as they played in the dirt road. The tallest was clearly the ringleader, her

young body too filled with energy to stay still. She would shout out a rule and then run a few paces, looking over her shoulder and laughing. The youngest sister pumped her stubby legs to keep up, chasing the taller one in halting circles around the street. A third sat in the shade, her back pressed against the chalk wall of a cottage, her hands occupied with something too murky for Ameline to see.

“Keep up, Tilly!” The older one called, jogging backwards. They looked so young. Ameline wondered when she’d stopped looking like that—or if maybe she still did. She shook her head and put the burgeoning images of her friends away. She walked towards the kids.

When they saw Ameline approaching, the three girls stopped in their tracks.

“Who are you?” the younger one, Tilly, asked, out of breath. Long strands of brown hair were slicked to the sides of her neck with sweat, where they had escaped from her thick braid. “You have boy hair.”

“Tilly! That’s rude,” the older said, walking over to stand in between Ameline and her sister. She put her fists on her hips. “Who are you?” she repeated, looking Ameline up and down. She had the kind of impish face adults often attributed to a lovable troublemaker, with a little snub nose and a healthy dose of sun-induced freckles. She looked like someone Ameline had strived to be—cheeky, clever, aware of the line and able to toe it charmingly instead of stumbling across it full tilt.

“Why do you get to say it?” Tilly whined.

Ameline smiled in what she hoped was a convincing way.

“Do you know where the rats are?” she asked. “I’m Ameline, Saint Ameline.”

Tilly squealed, “Can we show her? Can we?” Her sister whacked her absentmindedly with her palm. Not hard, just a shushing motion.

The older sister regarded Ameline a moment more, before deciding she was trustworthy. “Saint is a weird name. Follow me.” She said it solemnly, quickly undercutting any severity with the full-tilt sprint she kicked into. She ran for the wall headlong, where the third girl sat. Only at the last second did she slam on the brakes, skidding to a stop inch before impact. Toeing the line perfectly. Ameline and Tilly jogged to catch up, Ameline keeping her pace slow so she wouldn’t outpace the younger girl.

“I’m Sigrid,” the runner said, spinning away from the wall once they caught up. Her eyes were alight again. “Fiora has a rat you can see.”

“She’s a freak. Rats are *gross*,” was Tilly’s input. She was missing a front tooth and it gave her a slight lisp.

The dark bundle in the seated girl’s lap was, in fact, a rat.

She cradled it gently, her childish hands light as moth wings on the rodent’s small head. She jostled it a little as she carefully moved to support its belly so that she could hold it up. Ameline leaned close. She’d seen a few rats running around the fields and barns in Domare, and of course, she’d seen the dead rat paralyzed on the grass at Madwen’s feet, but it felt like a different kind of creature in the hands of the child.

“This is Agnes,” Fiora said.

Sigrid sighed and looked at Ameline with her hand on her hip and relayed the story of Fiora and the rats. When Fiora was young—younger than she still was—their mother had told her that every cat she saw whose name she did not already know was named Mary. Fiora took this very seriously. She also applied this logic to rats, which she named Agnes. Her rules

were simple: a group of rats was a pack of Agneses; a single rat was Agnes. Every rat was alike because they were Agnes, but also intimately unique, because they were rats.

Agnes loved Fiora.

There were a few Agneses that loved Fiora more than the other, more feral Agneses that lived in the heart of the nest. These Agneses had never seen the outside of the library before and were less interested in children with soft hands, and more interested in seeking food. But to most rats, Fiora was a known friend. She could usually be found with at least one rodent nestled in her apron pocket, or with a naked tail wrapped around her wrist. She'd press her tiny fingers into their chests and feel their fluttering heartbeats, and she'd tell Agnes that she loved her. She'd whisper until the racing heart would soothe in her palm. Until Agnes calmed from a wild animal to friend.

Ameline examined the rat. Its eyes weren't beady, they were inquisitive. It was relaxed, lumpish. Soft and brown. A scrunchy nose and round ears rendered its expression rather comical. She could see why the child was at ease with it.

"I know how to kill rats!" Tilly hadn't learned volume control yet, and her unwieldy voice bounced harshly off the wall. The boom sent a visible jolt of fear through the rat. It looked once more like a rat, twitchy, all survival instinct. Fiora pulled it closer to her chest, where it nuzzled in. Ameline was astounded.

"It's true," Sigrid said, "Sometimes we go throw stones at them, for fun, if you want to try." The young girl was bouncing on the balls of her feet, impatient once more.

"Please," Ameline said. That sounded way more fun. Besides, the tame rat was making her uncomfortable. It was too precious. Fiora's affection was too similar to Madwen's love for the goats.

Fiora stood up to join them, gently plopping the rat in her front apron pocket. With its fat, uneven stitches, the pocket looked like it had been sewn on specifically for this ratty purpose, in a young girl's untalented but not undetermined hand.

They led her down an alley, and for a moment Ameline thought they might jump on her. But the girls were sweet, and kind-hearted, and they just giggled and jogged towards a dark corner around the back of the priest's house.

Tilly picked up a rock from beside a still-ajar door. It was a jagged stone, three rough edges fitting snugly in her soft, child-size palm. She wound up and hurled it without follow-through at the base of a slim tree growing next to the house. Despite the bad form, the spindly tree shook its leaves from the solid hit. Several dark shadows scattered at the impact. Rats.

“That was just practice! Doesn't count!” Tilly cried out.

Sigrid laughed, a raucous gleeful sound. “My turn!” they squabbled briefly over the turns and what counted as such before Sigrid emerged triumphant and plucked up a rock from beside the house. Ameline watched and wiped sweat off the back of her neck; the shade offered little respite from the heat. Fiora turned her back, ducking her head to put the rat in her pocket against her cheek.

Sigrid drew a line in the dirt of the road with her heel. Then, she and Tilly took turns hurling rocks at the assembly of rats camouflaged in the tangle of aboveground roots. A hit against the side of the cottage was worth a certain amount of points, hitting the tree worth more. A direct hit on the rats was not so easy. It was more about the game of it: the winning, the finding, and the launching. When Sigrid rocketed a smooth, thumb-sized stone end over end, there was a duller thud than the times before. Tilly shrieked with menacing glee and ran

for the shadow, chubby legs pumping just as they had when she'd chased Sigrid around earlier. The next stone already in her hand, Tilly dropped to her knees beside the trunk and drew her arm into the air. The rock came down against the stunned rat's head. Again, again.

The child on her knees, fist full of rock, knuckles spattered with blood.

Tilly looked back at her sisters, at Ameline. Her smile was as wide as the moon.

"I got it! I win! Did you see, Sigrid?"

Sigrid cackled, happy enough in defeat. Fiora whispered reassuring things to her apron pocket. Ameline saw what she might have become, had she grown up with rats instead of a river.

Ameline thanked the girls and went back to the front of the priest's house to see if Elion was done talking, yet. It was growing into a muggy day, the kind that sweats itself into eyes and drips down hot spines. The kind Ameline had never had to contend with before in mild, middling Domare.

Elion emerged from the dark doorway. His jaw was set. A small brown and white dog followed at his heels, its tongue lolling dangerously close to the dirt.

"We'll find our own miracle," was all he said. "Someone will believe us."

Ameline was grateful that he still seemed to be on her side. She felt a minor twinge of guilt that technically he was believing in something untrue; she wanted to tell him that he couldn't really hope for a miracle because she would never actually be able to perform one. But she couldn't trust him like that, not yet, and she couldn't afford to lose her only supporter.

She was shocked back into her body by Elion's sudden, brash yell: "Be the first to meet the saviour of Aurells!"

No one turned to look, not the woman with an armful of steaming pies hurrying her way through the street, not the group of young men jostling each other as they rounded the corner, not even Sigrid or Tilly, who'd returned to their chasing game. The only change was that the dog who stopped panting and instead gazed up at Elion adoringly.

"We're in danger! We're cursed!" he yelled again, still, no one looked. "Cursed!"

Ameline tried: "The Preton King is coming! He's going to burn the whole city down! We have to stop him!"

No one stopped to listen. No one paused on their way to the bakers or the chandlers. They stood there all afternoon yelling and waving their arms. Growing desperate. Growing tired. Everyone in Aurells passed them by, unmoved. Not one strayed from their routine to heed the call.

They stood, and yelled, and begged, until shadows stretched a dark blanket over the city. Ameline trudged by herself back to the inn and met Elion at the cathedral the next morning. For three days they refined their preaching, worked on their cadence and tone, and for three days no one listened except the dog, who sat dolefully at Elion's feet.

Ameline was failing. Her voice was growing hoarse, and the only person in the world who believed she was real was just as invisible as she was. It was rough work, standing and asking to be believed. Without Elion's genuine hope that someone would listen, Ameline was sure she'd have given up days ago. Not that she had anywhere else to go. She couldn't go home, to Elyse who hated her, to Madwen's parents who blamed her, to her father, who

ignored her. Ameline might as well be here, standing in the burning sun and shouting at passersby.

A woman with an impossibly tall, pointed hat walked by. It swayed with her stride, drawing semi-circles in the air above her head, encrusted with green emeralds. The woman tossed a flat coin at Ameline's feet without looking at her and walked on.

"I need a drink," Ameline said to herself more than anything else.

Elion, unfortunately, heard her and shot her an alarmed look. "What?" His strong, ropey arms were still raised above his head, billowing his dandelion yellow robes. He looked like a miniature sun. "I mean, pardon me?" He corrected himself, aiming for a more pleasant, saint-appropriate tone.

Ameline let out a breath, it would almost have been a laugh, if she wasn't so exhausted. She realized that perhaps a grimy girl knocking back cups of tepid ale wasn't the image Elion envisioned when he thought of his long-awaited saint. Unfortunately, it probably wasn't the image the rest of Aurells would want either, and she'd had enough trouble getting anyone to look at her when she was relatively scrubbed and sober. She scrambled for an excuse.

"A drink... like a swim, I mean. Maybe that's just slang from Domare."

"Fascinating thing, language," Elion said, relaxing his arms to his sides. "Some children swim in the lake, out past the west wall. I could show you if you want."

Ameline cocked an eyebrow. "I'm not familiar with your vows, novitiate, but I'll swim alone, thanks. You can just keep on imagining how I look without my clothes on."

Elion flushed pink and nodded several too many times. "No, I mean—Good, right. I'll stay here. With the books." He looked down at the dog, but only after nearly tripping

over him. “I’ll stay with Rodge. Enjoy your, uh, drink, Saint. We’ll see what I can do in the meantime about figuring out the curse.” He turned to go, and Ameline laughed outright. She probably shouldn’t tease her only devotee, but when they look like that—pink around the nose and ears, eyes turned demurely away—how could she leave something so cute alone?

“Elion,” Ameline reached out and hooked her fingers in his sleeve. How he could stand the thick, ghastly yellow robes in the heat, she had no idea; he must be halfway to cooked under there. She waited until he turned to her, looking from her fingers to her eyes, and then she said, “Call me Ameline.”

“Yes, saint.”

“And I changed my mind. You can come swimming anytime you want.” She winked. It might not be dignified for saints to drink, but they could flirt, right?

Elion flushed again, bright red this time, then composed himself.

“Yes, saint.”

He nodded once and walked away, Rodge trotting at his heels.

Chapter 21

Ameline walked out of town, down the gently sloping hill of the outer city ring, and up to the west wall. Aurells had, at one point, been entirely encircled by a massive stone wall that was thicker than two horses' nose-to-nose, and nearly as tall as the cathedral. Now, after the god-killing and the following exodus of townspeople, the wall wrapped itself around only three-quarters of Aurells, leaving the south gaping open. There was nothing to defend, and no one to defend it from, so the wall was left as another relic, another half-finished architectural marvel.

Ameline ducked through a gate in the western part of the wall. The massive black gate set into the stone wasn't locked; she supposed there was no point when an entire roadway remained permanently open. She pulled it shut behind her and trudged down the old road.

The lake was opaquely silver. A line of narrow trees bordering one shore must have blocked it from view when she'd walked past on her way to Aurells—either that or she'd thought the silver lake to be a mirage, a side effect of the heat and dehydration. It was smaller than she expected, fed by a trickling brook in a deep riverbed and ringed by a gritty white beach that stretched towards fields on all sides.

A gaunt cow lowed at her as she stepped onto the white beach. She moo-ed back, and it meandered away to the thin shade of the trees.

She kicked her boots off at the edge of the water. She hoped the water would be cool, that it would strip the salt and sweat from her skin; she felt entirely coated in a layer of

cakey dust. It was under her nails, lining her throat, laying over every inch of her as though her skin were mutating into a gummy mess of clammy sweat and dust.

Saints often undergo a physical change, Ameline thought and then scoffed, an ugly thing caught between a laugh, a snort, and a sob. She was so tired.

No one was listening to her. No one even believed her. She couldn't perform miracles. How could she stand to shout the lie when she didn't believe it herself? Saints were built on miracles, and Hinge had made it clear that Ameline was no true saint, which meant no true miracles. She was a fraud.

Ameline tucked her stockings into her boots and ripped the green dress up over her head. She got tangled in the fabric: girl from the waist down, green linen tangle from the hips up. At least it wasn't her road-worn dress, the one she'd left crumpled on the floor in her room at the inn.

She tried to remember more of her arrival. She must have passed the lake. She was pretty sure she remembered getting to Marta's house, trading the dress from home for Marta's green one; she vaguely remembered the old dress clanking to the ground, feeling like a symbolic shedding of her old self.

She snorted again. She was still herself: without a plan, too loud, and alone.

Freed at last from the confines of her sweaty clothes, she stepped into the water.

It wasn't her river, but the water lapped at her ankles, familiar. Her feet sunk into the flat, sandy bottom, feeling the ridges left by waves press into her soles. She walked until she was water from the hips down, woman from the waist up. Then she fell down backwards, allowing the water to catch her.

It was a billowing sort of swim. Everything felt lighter when she was in the water. Ameline hadn't felt this light in a long time. It wasn't cold or refreshing, but a comfortable sort of tepid that buoyed her up, up.

Elion would find a way to get people to listen. He had a sort of magnetism, a surety and charisma that would call people to their cause. He was the kind of person that Madwen would have liked. He seemed fascinated by details and mechanics in the same way she had treated her remedies. Ameline swam towards the centre of the lake. It tugged at Ameline that she was lying to someone who reminded her of Madwen, someone who shared her unwavering belief. She could not let him down too.

A hot tear snaked its way down her face.

The sun streaked towards the western horizon, bathing Aurells in orange light at the top of the hill. She was breaking her rules by thinking about Madwen. She shook her head and tried to sink under the water, but she was buoyed back up again. She dove forcefully, but it propelled her back up, just slightly more resistance than her home river, but enough. Ameline dove again, forcing the water to take her, to hold her. She pushed with her arms, until she was well below the surface. Once down there, she opened her mouth and screamed, just to do it once. Just to release. Her tears were lost in the lake.

The water kicked her back up to the surface and she emerged, gasping. She was lighter than she'd ever been when swimming before. She tasted salt. Why wouldn't the lake hold her? When she needed to be apart from the world and herself, when she needed a moment with just her and the water, why could she not stay under? She dove again. Screamed again. Salt water rushed into her mouth.

This was a salt lake. *Salt from under a lake.*

Suddenly, she remembered. She surfaced along with the memory.

Her dress, clunking to the floor. Madwen's mother pressing a jar of ash from the burned cottage into her hand, as was customary in Domare for those close to the deceased. Madwen's mother not letting Ameline leave without it—traditions and superstitions and faith overriding whatever hatred she must have harboured for Ameline, their daughter's killer. Ameline gulped again and focused on the meaning of the memory, and how it would absolve her of her guilt.

What had been in her pocket was *the ash of a beloved*.

And Madwen was guiding Ameline. Madwen *wanted* Ameline to succeed. She'd led Ameline to this lake, to this discovery; Ameline could kill the rats, and that would be her miracle. Her parlour tricks.

Ameline kicked clumsily to the shore. She tugged the green dress back on and then roved, arms outstretched, hair dripping silver droplets on the white beach as she collected fistfuls of dried salt from the lakeshore into her skirt.

Ameline detoured by the cathedral on her walk home, dripping water and salt all over the polished floor. Elion hadn't been in, but the old priest was there. He'd levelled a stern look towards her, especially when he noticed her skirts gathered high in one hand, exposing her leg up to the knee, but when she'd only asked to borrow a cup of sugar, he'd let her off without a lecture. She knew from Madwen's excited ramblings that several ceremonies involved throwing sugar in the air, and she was hoping a priest couldn't deny a request for prayer.

It was odd to be in the ruined cathedral, alone with the priest. Final rays of red sunlight slanted through the windows—which were plain, clear glass—making the room

glow. It felt holier, now, that she took the time to look around and notice how ancient the cathedral truly was. Swallows darted in and out of the hole in the ceiling,

“It’s a rarity in Aurells—we’ve been off the trade routes since The Ending, you know—so I don’t use the stuff, salt does just as well,” the priest said as he handed Ameline the nearly-empty bowl. She looked in at the fine crystals, glinting against the dark wood of the bowl. The priest continued, still holding the bowl, not releasing it to her, “Elion loves a little sweetness, in everything. He’s a sweet boy, you know.”

It felt like a warning.

Ameline just nodded, unsure how she was supposed to tell the priest that his novitiate was banking on a liar, but that she had good intentions overall.

She looked up at him. His face was lined with age, the grooves in his cheeks cut deeper by the red light of evening. A bird swooped behind him, the same silver as his hair.

“I know,” she said carefully. “And I am a saint, really.”

The corners of his mouth tugged ever so slightly upwards. He let her take the bowl of sugar.

“You should come to the show tomorrow,” he said, “I have a feeling you like a little showmanship, yourself.”

Ameline needed to get out of the cathedral. She would perform her miracle and then everyone would believe her. She couldn’t be having people—priests—see through her like this.

“Thank you for the sugar,” she said and stepped into the full glare of scarlet light pouring through the doorway.

Ameline swiped a long wooden spoon from Marta's kitchen and returned to her room in the inn, where she immediately stripped off her clothes. Even with her dress peeled off, there was little relief from the heat and the salt crusting her skin.

Her bare legs itched against the wood grain of the floor. In front of her, she placed the dress filled with salt, the jar of ash she'd rummaged through her other laundry to find, and the wooden bowl of sugar. She tipped the ingredients one by one into the half-empty sugar bowl. For a breathless minute, she thought the mixture might start glowing or spewing magical fumes, but it was just a grayish powder. Just a mostly full bowl of ash. Just the last of—Ameline had the sudden feeling of something looming over her, watching her with some sort of knowing malice. As though they saw her plan, saw its futility, her uselessness, her carelessness, and snickered in the face of it. She whipped her head around. There was nothing there. Just her open window and unmade bed. She shivered despite the heat and turned back to her concoction.

It was ready.

The poison had to work.

Chapter 22

Hinge was remembering more of herself every day. She was remembering things about herself, her past, things she didn't want to remember. She clung to three things she knew without focusing on how she knew them. One, Ador was angry; two, his rage was misdirected; three, it was her duty—her responsibility—to stop the fallout. This last one was the detail she didn't think she wanted to remember. Something clunked in her godly chest every time she thought about it, something that felt a lot like guilt.

From their murky place of self-remembering in the ether, Hinge could piece together parts of Ador's curse as he bellowed on about it. Since he had been the focus of the killing blow, he knew less of himself than Hinge, much less than physical Knob.

As she stewed and remembered her relationship with guilt, Hinge conceptualized the final details of her anti-curse. She couldn't reach out to Ameline again, not yet, she wasn't strong enough, but the false saint with the big heart was well on her way.

Knob wasn't sure he wanted to remember everything. He wasn't sure of much, but he was sure he already knew too many things. They all rattled around in his brain, everything at once; everything people said as they opened doors, thoughts people had as they passed through thresholds, it was all twisting around in his brain.

Palms and hands that never stayed, turning, twisting, passing through. Knob only wanted someone to stay, to hold him a little longer. To linger. He was so tired of making sense of everything all on his own. Where had Hinge gone? Why wasn't she with him? And where had the nice girl at the party gone, the one who'd heard him, who'd used his name? She'd called him back to himself using the magic of a name.

The third god, Ador, remembered only one thing: he had been wronged by Aurells.

He didn't know he was laying the blame in the wrong place.

Chapter 23

Ameline hoped it wasn't too outrageously blasphemous for a saint to break into a holy building. It was too late to change her mind, either way. Her arms ached as she slowly, painstakingly hefted herself up the outer wall of the cathedral. Wind whistled below her feet, the ground a dizzying distance away, even tempered by the dark.

Her plan was simple: climb the relatively graspable stone facade of the cathedral, using the carved flowers, statues, and reliefs as handholds. Then, march over the rooftop to the adjoining library, smash a window, and kill some rats.

Never mind that the cathedral was storeys higher than the smooth-walled library; never mind that the cathedral roof was pitted with rotting, burnt holes; never mind that she was banking on the window having a ledge to climb down from; never mind that she was trusting a poison recipe she hadn't personally tested; never mind she had just learned that she was afraid of heights.

One grip after the other. Ameline slotted her fingertips into the groove between two massive stone blocks. Once she passed this ledge, she'd have gargoyles and other decorative carvings to latch onto. Her right foot slipped, sending cascades of grit tumbling down to the ground below. She scabbled at the wall, her arms quaking. She felt her stomach plummet. Four deep breaths in, and she was able to move again. Her left hand reached up to a grotesque, winged lion that roared noiselessly at the night sky; she clamped his jaw in her hand and hauled herself up to stand on the ledge with the stony creature.

If only she and Elion had found a way to walk in the front door.

But no, Elion couldn't know about this part. Her parlour-trick miracle, using poison instead of faith, would lose her the only follower she had. She had to kill the rats alone.

Ameline patted the lion on the head and looked towards where she had to go next. She brushed her hair away from her face, from where it stuck to her sweaty cheek. If she stuck to the outer facade, she could grip the protruding decorations and walk without climbing any higher, but she would have to stay right on the ledge, at the drop-off. Or she could scramble over an arch in front of her and walk across the treacherous-but-navigable, notably drop-off-less roof of the cathedral.

Ameline crouched. She would scuttle her way across. Surely the weight of one girl wouldn't send her crashing through the ceiling—the cathedral had stood for hundreds of years already. It had taken a god to pierce it the last time.

Hinge, I don't think it would take a miracle to get me across this. So, help me?

Ameline wasn't sure if the goddess could help or if she even would, but it made her feel a tiny bit safer to have asked. She wished she could remember a single saint's name so she could send them a prayer too, though she wasn't sure any true saint would endorse her mission, so it was probably for the best.

She crept forward.

It was arduous, staying on the peak of a long beam, staying low enough that the wind wouldn't tumble her over to the edge. For the most part, Ameline was utterly aware of the placement of her hands and feet, how they gripped and swivelled to help her balance—one in front of the other. Grip, plant, swing, move, grip, plant, swing, move. If she thought about that and nothing else, she could almost forget she was on a rickety roof hundreds of feet in the air.

There was only one moment when everything groaned underfoot, and she thought it was over. She looked up from her scuttling path, *right foot under the left-hand hold, balance then swing hip outward to launch left foot out ahead* and saw the gaping hole beside her. The biggest one. The god-killing hole.

It was the size of her whole cottage in Domare. She swore she could still see the edges smouldering, white with hot ash and smoking, just a little. Faint light leaked upwards from within. She hoped that if Elion or the priest were awake, that her clambering footsteps on the roof hadn't given her away entirely.

You oaf, with your big heavy feet. Elyse's voice echoed through her head, and she batted it away, before slamming her hand back onto the roof for balance. The roof groaned.

No matter how much she wanted to, Ameline didn't let herself lean in to see the cathedral from above. She knew she would fall. It was so tempting though, to see the equidistant, toy-sized benches lined up below her. Maybe Elion would be there, reading. He would probably be enveloped in his research, thinking about curses. Thinking about her. Ameline wondered what he was like when he didn't think a saint was watching. She teetered forward—no. She couldn't look. Alarm bells were ringing in her head; she would look, and she would fall—reckless.

Ameline took a steadying breath and crawled away from the glowing chasm, into the dark again.

She'd reached the part of the building where the cathedral connected to the library. A fifteen-foot drop-off greeted her.

Of course, the library was that much shorter.

Of course, there were no stairs.

Ameline looked up and down the line where the buildings adjoined. Skylights wound in a circular pattern across the top of Rat Library, but there were no ladders, no convenient points of entry. This was likely the reason no one had tried to break into Rat Library before. *No one else is as stupid as I am, or as desperate.*

She sat down and ripped the bottom of her skirt into a length of rope. She'd have to ask Marta for a new dress. Or, if this worked, maybe someone would commission a room full of beautiful golden gowns for her to wear as a saint, and she wouldn't have to keep putting on the same hot, dusty thing every day. Either that, or she'd break both her legs in the next few minutes, and it wouldn't matter anyways. The rats wouldn't care what she was wearing when they ate her corpse.

Focus, Ameline.

She secured the length of green fabric to a gargoyle and gave him a stern look, then shimmed her way off the cathedral's ledge. The linen made a terrible tearing sound but held, leaving her dangling about ten feet above the flat roof of the library. She sent a final prayer to Hinge and let go, hoping to land somewhat gracefully.

Shooting pains raced up her ankles, her calves, then her wrists as she crashed into the roof tile.

"Bloody, blessed saints," she swore, *"Ow."* She didn't think anything was broken, though. She sat still for a moment as she regrouped. She should've had some water. Her arms ached from climbing up, and everything else ached from the impact. When she felt a little less like a collection of aches and pains, she stood again. The skylight closest to her was, upon closer inspection, a stained-glass window.

These must have been left intact when Ador was killed. The ones in the cathedral were melted on impact and left unreplaced, so there was no reason for anyone to maintain the ones left in the library. No one had been up here to see this except Ameline. She shivered as the wind blew her a step closer to the window.

She examined the image in the glass. It was hard to pick out in the dark, but it looked like a figure at the top of a cliff, the armour on his chest emblazoned with a massive heart. She leaned closer; smaller figures lined the bottom of the cliff, and she couldn't make out what was in the sky—Her foot slipped.

She crashed through the glass, shattering the mosaic, and falling into the rat-infested library.

Her stomach felt like it slipped through her spine as she tried to curl up and protect her face against the falling glass.

She landed in a pile of rats. Squirmy, hot. Everything under her was moving. Rat tails wrapped around her wrists, and everything rolled in a general *away* movement at first impact. As she lay there longer, the wind knocked out of her, tiny noses scuffled in her ears, tentative teeth nibbled along her arms, and the scraping sensation of tens of tiny feet began crawling up her bare leg, under the remains of her skirt. They converged.

She couldn't move. They crawled all over her, onto her face, her neck. It was pitch black around her, with just a jagged circle of stars directly above her for light.

All she could do was listen to the scattering rats. When air finally came back into her lungs, everything reeked with a sharp, pointed smell. She gagged and then covered her mouth with her sleeve, but it was little help.

Ameline got up and set to work.

She took off the rucksack she'd filled with poison. She still wasn't sure if it was toxic or not, so along with the wooden spoon, she'd stolen a pair of gloves from one of Marta's empty rooms. She reached into the rucksack and held her breath as she tossed tiny fistfuls of powder around the dark room, hoping to make it last. The poison sounded like sand as it hit invisible bookshelves and fell to the floor. Ameline felt a little ridiculous.

Please work.

She kept reaching in and scattering, reaching in and scattering. She wound her way by feel through reeking stacks of books, among the crittering feet.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the dim darkness of the room. The hulking stacks, the erratic shadows of rats, vaguely fewer dark skylights; slowly the library pieced itself together for her. She could feel hundreds of eyes on her. Thousands, maybe. It was rather what she imagined the theatre to be like, only with a touch more malice. And smell. She blinked hard. She looked back towards where she fell, at the unlucky rats that had softened her landing.

A knotty mess of viscera lay on the ground. She nudged the mass with her toe, trying to see if she'd killed them all. *Oops*. She supposed she was here to kill them anyways, but it was more gruesome, more immediate, to think of her physically crushing a small body rather than the distance and the impersonal nature of poison.

Morbidly, she wanted to know how many she'd taken out. The lumpy mass of dead rats was so malformed that it looked like they were one single creature. Surely, she couldn't have squashed them *that* much. She hadn't fallen that far. She squinted and plugged her nose as she leaned closer.

They *were* connected. About twelve rats, all joined by their tails in a messy, stick of gunk. A single one still squeaked and peddled its feet, half-heartedly trying to get away.

Ameline had heard, once, in a story told around a dying campfire, when the darkness pulls everyone in close, and belief in wicked, fantastical things gets stronger, that this kind of binding was called a king. Back then, she had thought it sounded like something wrought and intentional. Noble, even.

Nothing seemed noble about this. She tapped the stinking mass with her toe again, and the last surviving rat strained against his own stuck body. Ameline crouched down and trickled some of the poison directly into the rat's mouth. She could hardly see it in the light, but slowly, its movement stopped as the poison took effect. A complete, mutilated rat king sat at her feet.

Ameline stood up, now entirely confident that the poison would work. She made her way towards where she thought the door might be, trusting her night-senses rather than her sight to keep her from bumping into the tall bookcases in her way, tossing poison behind her as she went.

She found the front door, breaking the brittle, rusted lock from the inside with a heavy piece of rubble she took from one of the ground. Her arms ached as she bashed the rock into the lock and she wished, again, that she could've come in the front door in the first place.

She put her rucksack back on, thinking it was empty, and creaked the door open, the outside air a cool balm on her lungs. She walked out into the night, not noticing the trail of powder spilling from the bottom left corner of her rucksack.

Snuffle. Smell. Twitch. Eat. Eat. Hide. Eat. Small ledge, smaller hole. Tunnel. Down, down. Twitch.

Head down. Watch the looming figure, feet like rats. Watch her lean. Swinging through the glass sky, a thousand times bigger than rats. Not bigger than the pack, though. Open air. Smell salt. Open air. Stars. Rat blood on the wind. Dust and fresh salt.

The girl. Watch her fall.

SCATTER.

Watch her not breathe. Then breathe. She lives—scatter more.

Is she food. No? Sure? No? Sure? Still, no?

She stands. SCATTER.

Watch, does she see? She sees but only the whole. She sees the swarm, the mischief, the king. She does not see the rat for the pack. She blots out the sky.

Sniff.

She leaks salt from skin. Smells like bread, cheese. Eat? No? Freeze—the girl moves.

But still, she does not see.

Now, powder. Taste. Hmm. Sweet. Salt. Past. Drifting in the air. Feel coated. Sniff, eat, taste. Gorge on powder. Food. This is food, it rains down. The girl feeds! She does see! She is friend! Spread good news!

Food! Tasty! Sweet!

Gorge. Gorge. Gorge.

The door swings open, the door that never opens. No more trap for rats. She leaves—she leaves? No! Fight for food she left. Muscle around. Skitter. Mine, *mine*.

Lick until dirt taste. Lick more. Gone, oh, gone! Must follow for more. Need more.

Follow girl into night. Feeling full, feeling unsatiated. Never happy.

Trail her, tail her under moonlight. Tasting stars less, hankering, hungering for the sweet salty powder. Past. Travel together, losing the rat for the swarm.

Follow her. The Friend to Rats. Trailing sweet, salt, past.

Follow until—stairs. Tired now. Full to bursting.

Lie down in dust. Soft dust, smelling of stars. Lie in the swarm, coated in salt and sweet and past, into sleep.

Sweet, salty, sleep.

Into sleep.

Chapter 24

Sigrid was used to her sisters' tears. As the oldest, often she was the one to hold them, her arms only just long enough to sweep around one at a time. Their father did not like criers. If there was a problem, fix it, or fix your attitude. That was how he operated, and it had served him well enough. Having three daughters under the age of fourteen was no reason to change his ways now.

But it did mean that there was a permanent well of miscommunication between him and his daughters. Sigrid could see it now, as she couldn't when she was Fiora's age. So, Sigrid protected her sisters from the feeling of not being understood.

Her father wouldn't need to see their tears; Sigrid could keep their secrets locked up tight, in exactly the same place she kept her own. Sigrid kept her own tears, which came less often now, between herself and the oak tree outside the city wall. It had been a long time since Sigrid had needed to go to the oak, a longer time since she'd screamed at the sky and tantrumed until there was no sound left in her little body. Now, she was much better about funneling her energy into action.

But her sisters still needed to cry, and they still needed someone to cry to. And Sigrid would be there.

So, when she awoke and heard sniffles, there was no hesitation. Sigrid hopped into Fiora's bed with her and wrapped her arms around her sister's shoulders, much easier now that Sigrid had continued to grow and grow, like an oak tree herself.

She waited. Tilly liked to be asked questions, liked to be listened to, but Fiora would only share when she wanted to. Sigrid knew she just wanted to know she wasn't alone.

They lay there as the sun rose through the thin linen curtains. They lay there until it was too hot to be sharing such close space, until their limbs sweat together, until Fiora's tears dried, and she rolled over to face Sigrid.

Her arms were bunched together in front of her, leaving little space for both girls to fit onto the mattress. Sigrid braced one foot against the floor, the stone shooting a ray of cold relief through the ball of her foot.

Fiora's eyes were bleary dry of emotion. She had passed from sadness into a well of nothingness.

Sigrid swore that she would find whatever had made her sister feel this way, and she would kick the life out of it.

Fiora opened her cupped hands, and the soft brown body of her rat fell lifeless to the mattress. Its mouth was stained pewter, its eyes crusted shut.

Agnes.

Next door to the young girls' house, Merle had been the first one awake that morning. He'd creaked out of bed, joints crunching. He stood in front of the only window in his house, the weak morning sun throwing gold light through the pane. Merle had unfortunate teeth. The front four looked like they'd been filed down short, and the ones past those looked like dice that had been thrown haphazardly into his mouth. Lifting a cup, he'd paused before the lukewarm water could reach his lips, his mouth agape. All his crooked teeth winked dully in the sunlight as his mouth gawked open.

Merle wasn't quite sure what he was looking at.

The dust road in front of his house was scrawled with black boils.

No, stones.

No, *rats*.

The shudder began somewhere deep in his belly and worked its way through each limb. The rats had joined forces, he thought, they'd decided to take over the town, they were done with the shadows and the library, he would be rat food before the morning was out.

It was another moment before Merle realized the rats were dead, and the shudder started all over again. He set his cup down on the windowsill and made his way into the street, morbid curiosity driving him out to see what happened.

The procession of rats started at the wide-open doors to the library in the town square and led downhill, on the main road. The rats were clumped together so thickly that one couldn't walk in the road without stepping on bodies or tails. Merle kept expecting them to squeak, or to wake up or bite his ankles, but they stayed dead.

He waded through the rat bodies, crunching delicate rat bones under his feet as he went. It was as though they'd been compelled. A dense cluster around Marta's inn finished the procession.

Every rat in Aurells was dead.

Ameline couldn't believe it. She ran out of the inn wearing nothing but her borrowed sleeping chemise. The rats, all dead, had followed her right up to the door.

It had worked.

No, the poison had more than worked, it had created a *spectacle*. It was a true parlour trick; a false miracle. There was no way anyone could ignore the dead rodents, or how they

created a perfect trail from Rat Library to the girl who had been all over town, proclaiming herself a saint.

She nudged one with her bare toe. Definitely dead. It had the same stiff, curled little rat hands as the one in the field that day, with Elyse and Madwen. The same frozen, open-mouthed scream. Ameline kicked it again so she couldn't see its face.

People were emerging from their homes, following the trail of vermin to Marta's inn. Ameline slammed the door shut and ran upstairs, her wrecked body protesting the speed. She rooted around in the empty rooms next to hers until she found another dress that had been left behind. It was a crinkly orange linen and still several sizes too big, but was better than either the ratty, ruined green one from the night before, or her disintegrating dress from Domare.

When she left the inn, stepping over the rats as gracefully as possible without breaking an ankle, a larger crowd had formed. She didn't meet anyone's eyes, she just walked against the tide of dead rats towards the library.

Elion must have slept at the cathedral; he emerged, yawning, from the grand front door just as Ameline passed by. His dandelion-yellow robes and rich shock of hair were equally rumped. For once, Rodge wasn't at his heels. Ameline realized, quite suddenly, that she didn't know where Elion lived.

He raised a hand to wave at her, and then stopped, his jaw falling open as he saw the rats on the ground, the crowd gathering behind Ameline. He scrubbed a hand over his eyes, looking between her and the Rat Library with wild eyes, before leaping down the front steps

in excitement. He bounded over the rodents and spun Ameline into a hug that lifted her feet right off the ground.

“You did it!”

Ameline was too caught up in her own joy and relief to have a smart comeback. At least, that’s what she told herself; it certainly had nothing to do with his arms—*strong*, for a novice—wrapped around her waist, or the solid feeling of his shoulders under her hands. Just as quickly as he picked her up, he put her back down, and surveyed the ground again. He knelt, right there in the middle of the stream of stiff, stinking rats.

“Saint Ameline,” his voice boomed across the square. Ameline was confused for a moment; *won’t his robes get dirty?* she thought, and then, *why is he talking so loudly? I’m right here.*

Then she remembered the crowd.

The townsfolk, who believed that her presence alone had killed the rats.

There in the first beats of morning sun, wading in rat corpses, she became their saint.

They buried the rats in a mass grave, tossing body after limp body into a shallow pit. The softest ground had been in the rapidly drying salt lakebed, so that’s where Ameline had directed the grave to be dug. Ameline rode on the cart, to the lake, perched on the back with the rats. They jiggled a little, reverberating from the pony’s stilted gait on the unused road. The shuddering of the cart rattled her bones around in her body, and occasionally one of the rats would plop right off the side of the cart and bounce into the ditch. Their bald tails whipped a final lasso goodbye as they tumbled. Ameline couldn’t look away. The cart hit a particularly large bump and her hip pounded into the wood frame of the cart. Five rats fell

into the road. She left them there, brown lumps oozing red into the dirt. She swore one of them looked back at her with eyes of green glass.

She stood over the grave, the wind stronger out there on the salty plain, and said a prayer for the rats. Her hands were blistering where they'd gripped too hard at the wooden shovel's handle. Her back ached from her fall the night before, and her legs were slowly turning leaden. Everything smelled faintly of the rotting musk of decomposing rats and sweat. Thick drops of sweat clung to her upper lip and dribbled down between her shoulder blades, slicking her hair to her cheeks and the back of her neck.

She wanted to ask for help, but that wouldn't look very saintly. So, she shovelled alone, and she thanked the rats for dying. She thanked them for eating Madwen's memory. She shovelled, and she grieved the chance to bury her friend properly. If she'd had a choice, Ameline would have poured Madwen's ashes into their river, at the place where the willow leaned over to drink from the water. In Ameline's memory, Madwen was there still, hiding from the sun. Ameline hoped that was where Elyse would scatter her portion of the ashes. She supposed anything was better than ending up rat food.

But no, this was destined, god-guided. Ameline would save this city for Madwen, *because* of her.

While Saint Ameline cleaned up the rat corpses and made sure that people saw her working and praying, real and with them, Elion gathered the curious in the town square. He set up on a little wooden platform that he usually used as a step stool, to clean the displays in the cathedral.

The story he told them was this:

Ameline was a saint. She was sent to protect them from a curse.

This much was true.

He did not say that the curse was the vengeance of the very god that Aurells had killed five hundred years ago. Elion didn't regret this omission. It wasn't directly a lie, and so he didn't need to repent. He was sure that he'd have words with Saint Ameline about it later, but she'd see sense. It was merely a calculated truth. No one remembered the name of the gods that had been killed those hundreds of years ago, anyways, so there was no one to call his bluff except the saint. He claimed it was another god, some faraway Gallian city's patron god that had an inexplicable grudge against Aurells and was sending an army to destroy what was left of them.

But look! Elion cried; we have a saint on our side! She is no god; she is one of us! She blisters, she bleeds, she cleans up rats! Believe in her, believe in us, believe in Aurells. Look at the miracle she brought and ask yourself the last time you've heard of such magic. The stories are true, and it is time for Aurells to stand up to a god once more.

When Ameline returned, sweaty and tired and somehow glowing, she spoke to the still-gathered crowd.

“Aurells, what do you say? Will you have me as your saint?”

An interminable moment followed. Elion squinted against the rising sun and prayed hard and fast to the saints who'd had good lives; Saint Rocte, Saint Lina, Saint Biatrix. *Let her have a good life, let them believe her. She's one of the good ones.*

Slowly, in true Aurells fashion, everyone started to nod. A chorus of “*all right then*” blew through the crowd.

“All right then!” Ameline shouted. “Let's have a party!”

Only the wind whistled faintly, in response.

Chapter 25

Ameline had decided—sometime between shovelling sun-baked rats into a massive hole and realizing that once she was sainted, she could never be *unsainted*—that if she had to live a lie, at least she could live as herself. And so, she would do what Ameline would do: she would find a way to celebrate.

She issued an open invitation to come to the inn that night for a celebration.

“Is the cake good, your, uh, your saintliness?” Merle said. As the first one to announce the news of the massacred rats, Merle seemed particularly keen to believe in her divinity, and to prove it to everyone else, too. He was still working on the language—and on the rat-shaped cake that he was eating. A gunk of wet pastry clung to one of his yellow teeth.

“It’s delicious,” Ameline said, her mouth full. This was her fifth one, so hungry she was unphased by the uncanny and all-too-familiar shape of the cakes before her.

“We haven’t had cause for buns for a long while. Parties, neither. I thought maybe Marta forgot how to bake, maybe she bunged up the recipe.”

Ameline glanced at Marta who was standing on her other side. Marta’s jaw clicked. Marta knew she had not messed up the recipe. Even if she had—which she *badn’t*—it seemed like the sort of thing where everyone would have to keep their opinions to themselves. They were in *her* inn, after all.

“The treats are perfect, truly, Marta. And the shape is a nice touch. I was just thinking about the rats again, how you all lived with them for so long.”

Merle shook his head slowly, the glob of pastry weaving back and forth.

“I can’t believe they’re all gone. Dead. Just like that. You show up and the rats roll over and die. That’s a true miracle.”

Ameline forced a smile. She forced herself not to tell them about the mad dash across the cathedral roof, about making the poison. She wasn’t good at keeping secrets. She stuffed another bite of rat pastry in her mouth and surveyed the room. Maybe fifteen people had come to the inn already. It wasn’t a great turnout, but it was better than no one showing up. The old walls leaked heat and held cool air, providing some relief from the hot weather outside. Sigrid and her sisters had come, dragging their father in tow. Elion had stayed behind to start exploring the now-ratless library.

There were many rules to a Marta party. She had argued with Ameline that it was a sensible number of rules. Nothing was to be moved out of place, no volume pitch that might upset anyone else talking. Certainly, no alcohol. These seemed to be reasonable requests to Marta, hardly able to be called demands. But Ameline chafed at the limitations.

It had been over an hour since the pastries had been served. Ameline stood in a corner, stuffed with bread, and watched the conversation in the common space of the inn come to a lull. There were only so many times people could talk circles about a saint and her rats.

Ameline rubbed her forehead with her wrist. The movement left a slick of grease on her arm. The day wasn’t as hot as it had been, but it was more than she was used to.

There were three rat cakes left on the low table in the centre of the room. Marta hadn’t lit any candles yet, hoping that people would filter out before she needed to light the room, so faces were dim, shadows growing. It wasn’t entirely bleak, but it was one of the worst parties Ameline had been to, and this was supposedly in her honour.

Panic built in her throat. She looked around the room again, tired sagging walls, tired sagging people. Hot lights and sweat stains.

What if this town wasn't worth saving?

What if it didn't matter if these people were worth saving? She had rallied them, directed them towards hope, but—what if there was no reason to have hope? What could these people do against the might of a king's army? Against a *god*?

Perhaps, Ameline supposed, this is where faith would have come in handy. If she *were* a saint, or if she believed in herself, then she wouldn't need to worry so much. She supposed that she might be able to trust Hinge, but even that was pitting one god's plan against another. And even if it worked, if she saved Aurells, what would she do then? Be a living saint, forever?

Ameline spotted two of the girls, sitting on the floor, the sisters she'd met the other day. Sigrid and—the middle one, she couldn't remember her name. The one with the pet rat. They sat leaned up against the wall, underneath a tarnished mirror, out of the light. Sigrid had a rat cake in her hand, which she ripped tidily in half: rat head in one hand, tail end in the other. Ameline watched as Sigrid playacted a scene of the rat face realizing it was no longer attached to its lower half, shaking the pastry, and sending crumbs showering into her younger sister's lap. The younger sister tentatively took the face half. She kissed it on the nose before Sigrid snatched it out of her hand and took a gargantuan bite, eating it all in one go. Sigrid laughed, her mouth spilling chewed dough. The other sister buried her face in her hands.

For them, Ameline realized.

This town was worth saving for them. They had lived all their lives with the rats, with the heat and the dust and the empty houses, and they hadn't lost hope yet. She could lie for them. She didn't see the silent rage, the gaping sadness—she wasn't looking for it, she was looking for herself in them. Ameline saw only two sisters. She did not see their disapproval of the saint.

“Does anyone play music?” Ameline heard her own voice cut through the mellow chatter. “Any instrument, doesn't matter.”

After a moment of slow reaction time, finally Garrick, who owned the largest eyebrows Ameline had ever seen, said he had a lute at home.

The wait for Garrick to return was agony. No one spoke. Subtle glances were thrown at the saint. Sigrid and her sister giggled from the floor. Tilly, the third sister, was falling asleep on the low table beside Marta, who fumed silently. Even though she was dozing, Tilly wouldn't leave if there were still things going on, she didn't want to be left out.

Ameline moved so she could see her reflection in the mirror; she swore it grinned at her, though her own face didn't move. Garrick returned.

Ameline lit three candles.

The only songs Ameline had committed to memory were drinking songs. But there was one that she used to sing with Elyse and Madwen, before Elyse had decided that she wouldn't sing with Ameline anymore. It was an argument they'd never had, never given voice to, but one they probably should've.

“It's a simple melody. I'll start singing and you play once you catch on,” Ameline said to Garrick.

She had everyone's full attention now.

The first notes were tenuous. It was a song that truly did sound better with harmonies. Maybe she'd be laughed out of town; they'd forsake her as their saint just after she'd committed to the role, thrown out on her ear because of a natural inclination towards poor pitch. But the room stayed silent, waiting.

Ameline sang the first and second verses.

It was a simple reel about home. Finding home, staying there.

Thinking back on it, maybe Ameline was the one who'd refused to sing anymore.

On her second pass through the chorus, Garrick joined her with the lute. Then, after the third turn of the verses, which were fairly structured, Sigrid started to hum along. Then Merle patted his hands on the table, making a dull drum. Ameline's voice came stronger: she filled the room with the tale, now that she knew they were listening. Marta keened a high, only slightly pitchy harmony, warbling above the tune. Elion slipped in through the front door and came to stand behind his saint.

Something happened, in the collective singing. By the fourth chorus, the pattern was evident, and everyone could join in. There was a lifting, an opening of the chest and a part of the heart they forgot needed to be filled. They sang, they drummed, they hummed.

It was the only song Ameline knew that wasn't filthy, and it was perfect. It was another small miracle.

For these people who had chosen to stay in Aurells, even after all of Gallia had written it off, after it had forsaken the gods, a song about *home* was exactly what they were missing.

If her miracle with the rats had opened people up to the idea of having Ameline as their living saint, it was this moment, charged with music and meaning and togetherness, that engraved it in stone.

For them—for this—Ameline could lie.

She could be a saint forever for moments like this.

Chapter 26

Seeing Elion's face when he entered the library was worth everything: the nighttime climb, the fall into a net of rats, the loss of sleep, all of the sainthood, really, it all became worth it for his unfiltered joy at seeing a simple room full of books. She tried not to admire the strength of his jaw nor the subtle softening of his eyes as he ran his calloused fingers over the tomes. Someone else, thankfully, had set up a guard at the library doors to ensure that only serious scholars and cleanup helpers were entering. None of the books were to be touched until Saint Ameline and the newly minted Full-Priest Elion could find out everything they could about the curse.

The morning they went into the library dawned much cooler than the day before. Ameline hoped it was a good sign; there had been grumblings for days about the river and lake water receding more and more. She'd planned to go for a swim before meeting Elion, but when she'd arrived at the lake, it had entirely dried up overnight. Even more-so than it had been three days ago, when the rat burial had started.

The change in her plans had meant she started her day mildly grumpy, but that was cured as soon as they stepped into the library. Elion's face lit up. He'd been in every day since the opening of the doors, but it still took his breath away to see just how many books could fit in the cavernous space.

Sweeping staircases, statues of gods and saints that had kept their heads, piles and stacks and shelves of books on books on books. There was a section for scrolls, a section for maps. Tapestries collected dust, and stained-glass skylights poured rainbow shafts of light over everything. It was magnificent, even covered in a layer of murid grime.

Ameline's mouth fell gently open, but she was too engrossed by the scale of everything she could see in the light to be disgusted by the lingering hot rat smell. She'd thought that by now she'd be mostly immune to it, after shovelling all those cooked rat bodies out of the streets, but the entrenched scent of a room that had been plagued with rats for five-hundred years was still something fierce.

"What do you think?" Elion asked, grinning.

"What do *you* think," she returned.

"I think... Well, I think you're marvellous," Elion said. "You made this happen. I can't even do the math on how many books might be in here." He tilted his head back to look up the slowly spiralling staircase in the centre of the room. His hands came up to his heart as he spun slowly, taking in the vaulted ceilings, the walls of books.

She didn't know what to say to that.

"I want to show you something," was all she said. She snagged her fingers in his mustard yellow sleeve and pulled him up the stairs. The smell got worse the further into the library they got, droppings sticking to the bottoms of their boots.

The rat king was still there when they got to the third floor. A team of dedicated rat-removers had managed to clear the dead rodents entirely from the first floor and were working on the second, but they still needed to start on the top level.

The king was surrounded by shards of orange and blue glass, directly under the broken window Ameline had tumbled through not long ago.

It was an even uglier sight in the daylight. Crusted a general mud brown, the rat king was a single entity solidified, it would have been impossible to separate out where one rat started and another entwined.

“It looks like a sunburst, shape-wise,” Elion said, cranking his head at an extreme angle, as though to look the rats in the face. “I hope they didn’t struggle too much.”

He was surprisingly unfazed. Ameline wasn’t sure what reaction she thought she might get from him; she just knew she didn’t want to be the only one to have seen the conglomeration. Elion crouched down to get a better look, Ameline stood back awkwardly.

“It’s quite gross, Ameline,” he said, and she laughed.

“If that’s what it takes to shock you into using my name, I’ll have to keep finding new gross things to show you.”

Elion blushed.

“*Saint* Ameline,” he corrected, and she rolled her eyes.

“How did you know this was here?” he asked. “I didn’t think you’d been in yet.”

“I have my saintly ways, priest. As you have yours.” And she spun away, unable to look at the pile of rats any longer.

“I’m sorry about Rodge,” she said. The dog had gotten sick, suddenly. The old priest was caring for him, feeding him tonics and medicines in his home. It was weird to see Elion without his tan and black shadow trailing after him.

Elion’s voice was tight. “He’ll pull through.”

Ameline’s heart contracted. She hoped against hope that it wasn’t her poison that had harmed the dog. It felt too much like her responsibility for Madwen’s goats. Always catching things people loved in the crossfire. No, she would be a saint now. She would do better. She changed the subject.

“Have you found anything useful yet? For the curse?”

Elion was bent sideways, craning his neck to read the spines along a lower shelf.

“I hadn’t made it to this floor yet,” he said. “I didn’t think I’d be able to breathe through the fumes, but it’s not so bad. Let’s poke around.”

It was so bad, but Ameline was the one who’d led them up here, so she didn’t complain. Yet.

Most of the books were maintained in some state of rat ruination, protected by hard covers and shelves too tight for even rats to bother slithering around. Unfortunately, this meant that all of the titles that had once been artfully displayed were completely chewed up.

“Well, that’s no help,” Ameline said, running her fingers over a completely shredded book. Crumbling wisps of chewed-and-spat-up-again papers littered the floor in the god’s section.

Elion had already moved on. He was in a back alcove, looking at a narrow shelf. He picked all three volumes off the shelf and tucked them into the bag at his hip, already clunking full of books on miracles, saints, and Aurells history.

Ameline came over to Elion’s little shelf, a destroyed book in her hands. “What does that say?” She pointed at the shelf descriptor.

“It’s the section for rhetoric and translations.”

“Rhetoric? You had better not be embellishing this story of mine you plan to tell.” She was wary. A lie in her control was one thing, a written story told by someone else was something she still wasn’t entirely settled with. They’d discussed it briefly, that Elion would record her miracles and story to put in the library after the battle. A book about her. He would ensure her legacy as a saint while simultaneously getting to do what he’d always wanted: tell a saint’s story in his words and be a part of divine history.

Ameline did not like that her lie would outlive her, but it was apparently a necessary step in both keeping Elion on board and maintaining the by-the-book rules of becoming a saint. That didn't mean she had to like it, and it didn't mean she could let him write whatever he wished; it had to be as close to true as she could make it. She had to be herself.

"No, no, not at all," Elion said. "It's mainly for decoding the curse. But rhetorical devices aren't all bad—it's just language. I'm not about to write your story using *boring* words."

"As long as they're true words." It almost hurt to say, knowing it was all a lie, but she was adamant.

"True *and* beautiful, that's the way, Saint." Elion said and winked at her.

She loosed a breath and hoped he would stick to it, and that for both their sakes, so would she.

Elion's step was light as he walked to the priest's house to retrieve Rodge. Though it had been a wonderfully productive day in the library with Ameline, he felt unbalanced without the dog tripping him at his heels at every turn. Under the priest's care, Elion was sure Rodge would be strong enough to come home with him today. Elion entered without knocking.

The priests' face was grave.

"Where is he?" Elion asked, still hopeful.

The priest ambled to the small cot at the back of the room. Wrapped in a tawny old robe, breathing small canine wheezes, was Rodge. Elion sat carefully beside him on the cot,

scared at first to even to touch him. Rodge looked up at him through squinty, pained eyes, and Elion's heart squeezed. He brushed a tender thumb over the dog's nose.

Rodge's mouth was blackened and crusted with dried blood.

"He won't make it through the night," the priest said.

Elion cradled Rodge's head in his hand.

"This probably isn't the time," the priest began, "But the timing, the coincidence of lots and lots of dead rats —

But Elion wasn't listening. He could only think about losing his lifelong friend.

Chapter 27

The stories circulated. Mythologized.

The rats had rushed towards the saint and died of proximity. The saint had cleared them from the streets with her own two hands. The saint sang to the people of Aurells with the voice of the gods. Slowly, everything she did was becoming miraculous.

No one knew about the ash. No one knew about the grief. No one knew about the salt and the sugar and the dead dog.

The lake wasn't entirely dry. Centuries of holding water meant that the bed still had a mucky bottom, even in all this heat. Ameline sat on the hollow curve of the shore and yanked her boots off, one by one. She left them sagging into each other, wilting and baking, the toes tucked towards each other, her stockings tucked into them.

Barefoot, she stepped onto the lakebed, and let the muck squelch between her toes, warm and silty. She sank up to her ankles in the untouched bottom. It was a comfortable warmth, cool under the top inches, different than the scorching fingers of the sun and the waves of heat fanned off the road. She stood in the empty lake, and she thought about the river she'd left behind. Verdant, green, teeming with bugs and fish and friends.

She thought about the time that she and Elyse had gone to the river and tried to make their hair stand straight up, leaning peaks of brunette and auburn. Elyse had discovered it was easier to make their hair retain volume when mud was packed in. So, they'd taken turns gently packing mud into each other's scalps, brushing it through, waiting impatiently for it to dry.

Ameline couldn't remember a day she'd laughed harder.

They'd been young and careless. Unworried. Ameline wished that she'd hugged Elyse one last time before she'd left, even if Elyse would likely sooner punch Ameline than hug her.

Saints always end up dead. That was something Elion had said to her the other day before he'd caught himself and tried to backtrack. It hadn't worried her too much; she knew she was a false saint. But it prickled at the back of her mind as more and more people came to Aurells.

But at home, the world was so small. There was nothing more than dying goats, and her father hammering away behind his closed door, and the Three Swords with its scummy, disgusting drinks. Ameline crouched down, she grabbed her ankles and tucked her head into her knees. No, she didn't think she could go back. Not unless she stripped herself of her sainthood, if she gave it all away. She didn't want to give it away.

Elyse would know what to say. She would laugh and say that Ameline never saw anything through, that she always thought too big, and needed Elyse around for the important details. It would be true, and it would be said with a smirk or a snide comment but then Elyse would help. They would be a team, like they used to be. When did it all go so sour?

A mosquito hovered near her ear; she shook her head. Her shorn hair smacked into her cheeks. Saint's hair.

She rocked to her knees, letting her dress sop up the inch of standing water. She thrust her hands into the salty mud, deep. It was more satisfying than the ooze between her toes. Equal-sized mounds of muck rose up where the salt had been pushed away by her

spread fingers. If only the lake would fill again. If only it was her river, the water that knew her, and loved her.

She missed her river. She missed Elyse.

She knelt in the salty lakebed and begged for rain. For water. For cold skies and thick clouds. For a sign she would still be okay at the end of it all.

She knew it was too much to ask for. But still, she asked the memory of her river for a sign.

Ameline and Elion held service in the cathedral each morning. On Ameline's part, it was much performative praying and waving her arms in a saintly manner while Elion spoke and made her look good.

Day by day, the cathedral filled. Once the rats were entirely cleared out from the library and carted through the street for everyone to see, people started to come to the cathedral to find out what the fuss was about. But they were still disbelieving, distrusting. Then, word spread about the singing saint, and the library was opened to a dedicated rat-eradication task force, and the cathedral seats started to fill in earnest. Elion delivered sermons about community, about uniting against outside forces, and always, *always*, the Saint Ameline in their midst.

The cathedral and the library came alive in those days of mounting faith. The cathedral with the pilgrims and the library with the scholars permitted inside to the still-recovering sanctuary there. New and old words about saints and gods were shared, along with a slow piecing-together of Aurell's own history. It had been Elion who'd found out it used to be called the City of Opening Doors.

And after just a week of steadily mounting belief within Aurells, people started to arrive from other cities. Doors opening to people from trustful towns, where they were already looking for something to believe in, chasing the idea of an actual, living saint. Then, as word spread, as it is wont to do, and belief spread over Gallia like wildfire. Everyone wanted to see, to touch, to hear the saint herself.

Aurells was filling once more. The empty houses, the lean years, it looked like they were ending. People brought culture with them: textiles, dances, traditions. The people came in and used everything at their disposal to jump-start the sleepy, beaten population of Aurells. And overwhelmingly, more than anyone else, strong young people made the journey. They were fit from travel and having grown up with enough to eat. They were bulky from the regular royal army drills that were enforced in every god-fearing town. The people that arrived to see the saint were soldierly; Ameline slowly saw what she thought must be Hinge's plan falling into place. She was populating Aurells with an army who—if Ameline failed to scare off the army with her holiness—could defend the city so much better than the disunited, hopeless city to which Ameline had arrived.

Ameline did still feel guilty that everyone had gathered to see her, and that she wouldn't have been able to spin their interest into belief without Elion. He took her rat-killing miracle from something putrid and vile into a heroic, selfless act. In his version, there was no ripped dress, no rat-cushion, no glass-crashing fall. It was a lie, but his story was as close to true as she could allow.

If everyone found her out now, she had no idea how she'd face them.

Elion had yet to crack the curse. He'd toyed with it, reading up on personification, door metaphors, disappearing bricks, hearts, curses, saints, warnings, god feuds, everything he could think of, everything Ameline had told him. His belief in Ameline was unwavering. He trusted her, almost because she seemed so unsure of herself at times. Open and fallible, she looked upon people with grace, as though she truly wanted to know every single person who approached her. She asked questions: where they had travelled from, how they were feeling, what it meant for them to have a saint. She cared for her followers and treated them as though she owed each one a personal debt of salvation. It was as though she had to prove herself to every person who approached her.

In the weeks since Ameline had opened the library, Elion could feel himself slowly falling past reverence into something more intimate, more personal. He tried to rein it in, but as he watched Ameline greet a family from the far side of the kingdom, as she squeezed a small child's cheeks between her palms, her hair caught the light. Swooping auburn curls flashed golden in the evening light, bouncing to a stop just below her jawbone. It had grown since she arrived in Aurells, by just an inch or two. He wanted to tuck it behind her ear; he wanted to hold her face like she held the child's, in both hands, close to his own. He turned back to his book.

He had yet to find another scribe's copy of any original saint's story. It irked him. There were simplified versions in handheld pocket-sized books which were really not simplified at all, they just used fewer words, the stories were the exact same. It was only Leck's story that had the alterations. It made him chafe against the rules even more now that he was delivering the services. He tried his best to stick to the written versions, but if someone yawned or looked confused, he felt it was his duty to make things interesting, if

only so that people would see, especially now, how these stories mattered day to day. If all the scribes in all the copies in the library had made minor changes to words or punctuation, why couldn't he do the same thing, just a little?

Thank the gods Ameline's story was interesting enough to tell truthfully. In his nightly prayers, whispered into his fingertips as he knelt beside the cot he'd set up in the secret room of the cathedral, he always ended his prayer for forgiveness in thanks.

They started with an easy book, or so Elion said. To Ameline, it just seemed like a boring book. It was about military strategy; learning the different parts of armour ranked on Ameline's list of "fun" somewhere just above shovelling rats. She would rather try it on and have someone name each piece as it was attached, but that would defeat the whole point, which was learning to read. It was a task made more enjoyable by the forced proximity with the new priest. Their heads bent together over a text, Ameline following his knobbly finger as it skated across the page. *Greaves, shield, gauntlets.*

He never laughed at her as she fumbled vowel combinations or tricky misshapen letters that looked like other letters. Still, she quickly grew frustrated.

"What is the point of learning to read if I don't care about the book?" Ameline laid her head down on the text, her head swimming. "Can't I just always have you around to read it for me? Summarize a little too, while you're at it. Make it snappier."

Ameline felt Elion's hand hover over her back. She wanted him to put it down, she wanted to feel the weight of it between her shoulder blades. The ghostly pressure faded and Ameline shifted her face to look at him, her head still planted in the book.

“It’s best to be able to read the words for yourself,” he said cautiously. His hand, which should have been on her back, had been diverted to run through his hair. Ameline glared at it.

“It’s just that when you can read something for yourself,” Elion rushed on, misinterpreting the glare, “Then you can be sure no one’s making things up that aren’t there.”

“Are you? Making things up?”

“No, no, no. Not me. No.”

It hung for a moment. Ameline thought he must be talking about the old priest. She knew that Elion was telling more saints’ tales than the old priest used to, she hadn’t asked yet how the different approach to stories had gone over with the old priest. She knew they were close. She guessed the priest had been hiding more than Elion had originally thought. Ameline reached up and flicked Elion on the forehead.

“Can we at least read something more interesting? Stories, at least?”

Elion sighed and narrowed his eyes at her. “Will you actually try, then?”

“No promises.”

But he was already standing up, easily swayed into bringing out saint’s stories. The writing in the new manuscript he’d chosen was slightly more cramped, very dense, and more than a little bit chewed around the edges.

Ameline plunked the military book on the floor and made grabby hands at the book in Elion’s hands, which he placed gently on the table in front of her. He sat back beside her on the bench.

“This is impossible!” Ameline cried when she saw the sea of cramped handwriting.

“There’s no way you can pick letters out of that!”

Elion huffed a laugh and pointed to a line in the text: ““Saint Biatrix had many friends before her death,”” he recited.

“Is there anything interesting that isn’t written like a bag of snakes upended on the page?” Ameline whined.

Elion relented, he reached under the table and picked up a scroll.

“Here,” he said, unrolling the scroll halfway. “These are my notes on the same story.”

Ameline admired his handwriting. It felt entirely intimate. She could see the precise lines, the sort of writing that knows the end of the sentence well before it gets there. She couldn’t tell what all the words said, exactly, but the sure, sweeping lines told her all about the writer. She frowned and pointed at a squiggly mark.

“What’s that?”

The squiggle hugged the end of a sentence that was underlined twice. Elion rubbed the back of his neck.

“It’s a question mark.”

Ameline raised an eyebrow, it looked like a pretty important question. “What’s the question?”

“It’s research about living saints. Most saints had to die before they were canonized.”

“Ah, yes,” Ameline drawled, “the canonization. I’m familiar.”

“Or, at least, most weren’t *called* saints until they died.”

“What were they called beforehand?”

“Lunatics, madmen, heretics, mostly.”

Ameline gulped. “Ah.”

Elion backedpedalled, “That’s why it’s so wonderful that you’re living.”

She raised another eyebrow at him, ignoring the tickle of guilt in her throat.

“Is that the only reason?”

He stammered for a moment, blushing a delicate scarlet into the folded neck of his robe.

Ameline bumped him with her shoulder. “I’m joking, tell me more. Go on.”

He recovered and told her about Saint Bietrix, about her good reputation and then her sainthood bestowed only after death, despite the proof of her miracle (four dozen roses sprouting from her head like hair). He told Ameline about a past flush with miracles and how the last saint had died over five hundred years ago.

“Well, of course, they’re all dead. Five hundred years is a long time to still be alive and sainting.”

Elion nodded, “But I can’t find one who was recognized in their lifetime. Or, I shouldn’t say that. There were a few saints canonized while they were alive, but they all died within days of being named.”

“So, saints are only saints when we’re dead.” She’d meant to say it more tactfully.

“It’s just more about how miraculous you are, really, is what it is.”

“Hmm,” Ameline thought for a moment, then decided she’d rather not think about it. She wasn’t a saint, anyways, not really. What would it matter if she bent the rules a little more? She leaned into Elion’s shoulder, feeling the warmth of him even through the robes. She pointed at more letters, more words, and got him to tell her story after story, piecing together the history of saints, of which she was now a part.

As the day stretched on, the heat of the city rose to find them, tucked away in the library as they were. The heat meant that Ameline had to pick the hair up off the back of her neck, and she pretended not to notice how Elion noticed the curve of her neck. She kept sounding out words. The heat meant that at one point Elion had to wipe sweat from his brow, revealing strong forearms. The heat meant flushed cheeks and pulling at layers. The heat meant averting eyes—but not really. It meant Ameline looked at the strong loops of Elion's letters, the sturdy jab of his finger on the page next to her own curled hands. The heat meant that Ameline didn't learn all that much about reading that day.

Chapter 28

Ameline found herself coming to terms with being a false saint. She could say blessings without laughing, now. She could stand at the front of the service and not burn with shame or awkwardness. She didn't want to curl up and die at the thought of being found out, because enough people believed her now without her even needing to convince them—she couldn't be found out unless she ratted herself out, and she was in too deep to betray herself like that now.

Perhaps after the king came, after they turned him around with the force of the gathering militia... maybe she could stay here, in Aurells.

Ameline pictured her life in Aurells, long-term. It was so different from the gaping nothingness she'd assumed would be her future in Domare after Elyse and Madwen were married. Here, she had a job, a purpose, people who wanted to hear her speak and listen to what she wanted to say. She was making a difference. She'd seen people clap each other on the back after a long day polishing the library floors, Marta's inn was filled up with pilgrims come to see the saint, performers lined the square and played the song Ameline had sung at the inn that first night. Community was coming to Aurells. Most of all, she had Elion.

The library was open to the public, she'd continued her reading lessons with Elion in their limited spare time. She was beginning to understand his need for pretty words., but she blushed to think about how little reading actually got done.

Maybe a saint retires after the miracles are wrought. Maybe she could live like this forever, become familiar with the falseness and put it all to good use. She turned away from

the baby she had leaned down to kiss and looked over her shoulder at Elion, who was looking at her with wide, happy eyes.

Yes, she thought, I could do this forever.

Chapter 29

Over the next five days, five miracles appeared.

Miracle One: The downpour.

The sky swelled, pregnant, abundant, full of promise. Thick, nimbus clouds spat out globby droplets as big as rats. It was the kind of rain that blew under door frames and was so loud you couldn't hear yourself think. It was a rain that permeated to even the stubbornest roots, coaxing the driest tangles to grow again, strong, and green. It was rain that chewed into hard-packed earth and demanded hospitality; rain that signalled the end of the before times; rain that fattened the lake and shouted *Blessed! You are blessed!*

The false saint blinked disbelievingly at the water sluicing into the creek bed and pooling in the salt lake beyond.

And as an inkling of belief dribbled into her mind, far across an ocean channel, an enemy army wiped the sleep from its eyes, its king's gaze trained on the horizon. It was time.

Miracle Two: Fish were returning to the lake.

Fat trout, bug-eyed salmon, bony-shouldered carp. Lean, slippery, and flashing silver, the fish returned. The water swelled and thrashed against its banks; it was so thick with fish. Large, slow swimming, open-mouthed, begging to be eaten. Nets dipped in, with their delicate lattices, and popped out bursting with fish. No one in the Aurells had seen such bounty in all their lives; their bellies were filled with soft pink fish flesh.

The saint would save them, the saint had fed them. Three miracles! Rats and water and fish.

And the saint began to believe, as she watched the nets pulling, the basin refilling, the gorging, the refilling the pulling the gorging, as the saint began to believe that maybe, *maybe* she was not living a lie, the battalion across the water laced up its boots.

Miracle Three: Every pregnant cow dropped twins overnight.

The fields below the city on the hill were swimming with birth sacs and wet, knobby knees. Cows upon cows. Glassy eyes framed perfectly centred whorls; dolorous faces poured off moonlight. Each calf was born with a perfectly white face, each a perfect mirror of the other. Calf ears are soft, pliable things. Small enough to fit in one hand.

The slaughters began in earnest celebration of promised abundance, the town's hunger yawning after the first, fishy appetizer. *Eat now because we can eat later—and then eat the twin.*

The saint who used to be just a girl cut away her old self and buried the shears in the clay of the riverbank, and the island army marched out their front door without wishing its mother goodbye, its infantry quick-stepping *one-two-one-two-one-two*.

Miracle Four was dancing.

With the promise of abundance, joy returned, and with it came *dance*. Little Tilly felt the pull first. She put down the candied salmon she was chewing on and pirouetted in the main square, drawing patterns in the mud with her toes. Tilly tapped and stomped and clapped until she grabbed Marta and swung her into the dance as well. After that, people crawled out of their homes and joined the frenzied circle. Rounds and reels and farandoles went on and on as shadows stretched and yawned into night, and back into morning again.

And the false saint celebrated her power, drunk on her own miracles. She danced with them, and the army was rocked to sleep in its warship cradle, the galley packed with metal teeth, the rattling of swords their maritime lullaby.

The fifth miracle was the most astonishing.

The salted lake outside the city—the lake that the saint was known to frequent—that lake now glistened rose-petal pink. The shores crystallized, crunching saline underfoot. And strangest of all, flocks of birds as large as people with feathers as white as snow fell upon the lake. Some of the birds roosted in the trees nearby, but most of them glided on the surface of the lake, as though the pink water had bloomed feathers overnight.

And the army, well, it stepped directly onto Gallian soil.

Then, on the sixth day, as calves mewled in three-part harmony and fish filleted themselves onto plates, as water poured down from the sky and dancers grinned at each other, as the rain pounded down and the rats stayed dead, on the sixth day, Elyse arrived in Aurells.

part three: saint

Chapter 30

There are rules and patterns to miracles. The patterns are given in retrospect: miracles generally crop up in winter months, often travel in teams of two, and never seem to reach beyond the bounds of the town or city in which they're performed. The rules were stricter. Miracles, to be classified as such by gods and saints and scholars, had to be otherwise impossible, utterly irreversible, and traceably tied to the individual who commanded them. It was why the trick with the rats had worked so convincingly.

Hinge knew these rules. She knew that Elion had once known, or at least *suspected* these rules, but his eyes were too full of stars and saints to think logically. Hopefully, he would stay in the dark a while longer, even with the new wrench in Hinge's plan.

A rainfall, after a long period without rain, while spectacular, was not a miracle.

The "Cascade of Miracles." That's what she'd heard whispered reverentially while she listened from creaking door hinges. Only, these were not miracles. A cascade of coincidences, more like. Algae and favourable conditions and euphoria were not miracles if you looked closely. Hinge didn't mind, not really since it all aligned with her plan. So long as the saint didn't lose herself within the heady rush of the miraculous and began hurting those around her, intentionally or not. Hinge had sworn to protect the people of Aurells, above all.

Ador simmered somewhere at the edges of her consciousness with a rage that rightfully should have been directed at her but was instead directed at the people, the blameless. Rage was a familiar emotion for gods, volatile, velocitized. Guilt, however, was an odd emotion for an immortal and Hinge didn't like it. Her guilt was an interesting thing to

face, after so many years without it. She watched Aurells prepare itself for the canonization of its saint, she watched how they believed her. Generally, regret was a fairly useless emotion for gods, and Hinge didn't like how it was sitting in her chest, like a stone jambed between her lungs. She would right her wrongs, she would protect Aurells. The anti-curse—the blessing—would hold. Technically, the plan would still work: the heart, the deadbolt, and the key were all in place. But that didn't make it any more comfortable to sit with.

Chapter 31

Once the miracle tap had been turned on, Ameline did nothing to stop it from flowing.

A crying baby shushed and blessed, a miracle here. A door hefted back onto its hinges after years of rusty disuse, a miracle there. She radiated with her own divinity that week the miracles touched down. The cascade. All signs pointed to her sainthood. She could relax and sleep soundly, knowing that she was no longer a liar. Even if it had taken her shouldering a lie in order to see the truth, now the miracles showed her: she was a saint, and she always had been.

She heard nothing from Hinge, and figured the old god was still weakened. But Ameline wasn't, no, Ameline felt stronger than she ever had. She was entirely emboldened by her belief.

She would save Aurells.

Whatever the heart was, she was certain she could call down one final miracle and protect both this mysterious "heart" that could not burn, and the city. If she could turn a lake pink, if she could call the birds down from the sky, if she could *kill the rats*, surely, she could be blessed with one more miracle?

She didn't know what shape it would take, and when pilgrims and the local faithful asked her, grasping her arms, what she would do to protect them, she made up something more outlandish every time. She wasn't lying, not when *any* of it could come true, technically. Ameline was utterly certain that a wall of flame or carnivorous butterflies could erupt around the incoming army. She was convinced that the sky would shatter above the king, and a

monster would descend to swallow him whole. There was no hesitation in her words when she promised that her final miracle would be the grandest thing Gallia had ever seen.

A saint, a saint, a saint. It made her giddy. Beyond giddy, it wrapped a vise around her mind, and she could think of nothing else. All that time she had wasted, worrying. All those years spent fearing that she'd never find her purpose, her place in the world. All that time desperately trying to emulate Elyse and Madwen, all the time spent drinking herself away in the Three Swords. She cast the past out of her mind, she had found what she was meant to do, and it was to let people fawn over her greatness.

What a secret to stumble upon, that she really was the last true saint.

Ameline couldn't control the miracles that flowed from her, but she could name them, and everything she did became a marvel, a small miracle, from the candied fruits she ate to the glossy tears collected from worshippers. Wine poured without spilling a drop, a family cat returned home, the rain stopped, the rain started again. Marvel, marvel, marvel. She was the beating heart, the centre of everything that happened in Aurells. For the first time in five hundred years, prayers sat on tongues, and the cathedral was restored.

It had been her idea, to fill the great hole in the cathedral ceiling with a stained-glass monument to her first miracle. She'd worked with artists on the image of her, standing serenely with a golden halo, surrounded by spirals of dead rats. She would be resplendent forever.

But it was then, as she asked the artist for more vibrancy, more detail, more rats, yes, more glass rats, that doubt trickled into her mind. Had that been a miracle? This obsession that twisted and twined around every thought, refusing to let go, filling her with certainty. Ameline was a *saint*. Yes, she vaguely remembered using poison—had it been poison? —

surely it was still miraculous, *she* was miraculous. Elion didn't mention poison in his tale, The Rat Saint. She couldn't remember. Everything was blending together; surely it had been a miracle. Everything she did was a miracle. She was a saint, the last true saint.

It was her name they whispered as she floated through the streets of Aurells: *Saint Ameline*.

She was so glad she had kept her name.

Chapter 32

At twilight, dancing in the dark in the rain, Ameline had never felt more alive. The murky dancing bodies looked like entwining fish. Reflective teeth and eyes pasted on shadow bodies, flashing silver, flashing skin. Now, well into the small hours, the dancers were less than human, just a shoal of dark minnows darting together. Green marble eyes reflected oblivion in the dark.

And one figure, a swimmer between them all, intent on forward motion, gliding through the twirling mess. At first, she wore Madwen's face, then just her dress, the blue catching the light from a fire. Indigo and orange. The saint shook her head to clear the images, the memories. She twirled into another dance, but the memories held fast, shaken into her mind by the vision of someone familiar in the crowd.

She had seemed at first like a dream, a mask, a haunting. Winding through the night towards the saint, a vision from the past and future: a pyre at dawn, an accusation, blades flashing silver.

The saint clapped her hands over her eyes to keep the ghosts away. Her face was wet under her palms. She was honouring her ghosts with her miracles, why would they stalk her like this? But when her hands were pulled away by bony fingers, the ghost stood in front of her.

The apparition said something, but the saint couldn't hear. The rain chattered on.

The wraith seemed so *real*. Elyse. She looked... older. Her piercing eyes and the gap between her front teeth were no less beautiful in the dark, but she seemed unfamiliar, as though someone had taken her face apart and reattached each piece just slightly differently

than before. Perhaps it was that the saint had never seen her old friend look sad before; maybe it was the distance between them now, as large and turbulent as a river. A river filled with ghosts and saints and liars. No, not liars, she *was* a saint. Everything felt murky. Elyse grasped one of the saint's wrists in her hand.

She kept repeating something, the syllables coming out clipped. It seemed important. The saint wished she could hear. She was glad she couldn't.

They were standing on the outskirts of the action. She was so insistent, this girl from the past, her face lit by flames, her hair studded with rain. The dance flickered out of tempo behind her and across the square, the momentum changed. A cheer—an outcry?—rioted from the far clump of shadows before the circle calmed itself and spun again.

A swell of something fell on the ground, maybe a tipped table? A whole roast of beef? A statue of the new saint? Whatever it was kept tripping up the circle, sending stumbling choreography down the line of hand-holders. The silhouette of a jester's cap was thrown into relief against a lantern light. Ameline felt compelled to dance.

“Look at me,” Elyse snapped. Her nails dug into the saint's slick skin. She clawed the saint's chin towards her and held fast.

The saint's eyes were unfocused, glazed. She was still seeing ghosts. She clung to what she knew.

“Elyse?” she asked, her voice scraped, rough, against her wrecked throat, “You made it.”

“What the hell happened to you?” Elyse asked. “What do you mean I made it? I'm here to bring you ho—” but a cheer erupted from the shadow dancers, interrupting her.

The saint was confused. Why did Elyse sound like something bad had happened? Look at the celebrations! Look at her bounty of miracles! Everything was good!

“Can you believe it, Elyse? I’m a saint! Did you bring,” the saint hunted in her foggy mind for the right name, “Madwen? Did she come too? Did I bring her back?”

The song ended. A new one began, this one spinning faster. The sound of bells jangled discordantly. The saint stomped her feet to the rhythm.

Elyse opened her mouth, but the saint cut her off. Leave the past in the past, leave the ghosts behind. Keep the demons busy so they wouldn’t have time to give chase.

“I’ll take you to the cathedral to help with the stained glass, you’ll be able to whip everyone into shape. You’ve made it in time for the last grand miracle! This is perfect. The army will be here within days, they say. Isn’t that amazing?”

Then the saint whirled away, back into the haze of the dance.

Elion had a firm hand in the reification of the saint in Aurells. He scurried through crowds, whispering that she was magic, that she was real, that she would save them. As the person closest to the saint, he was perceived as becoming holy, too. They flocked to him for advice and blessings. He held the hands of weeping parents snorting into each other’s shoulders, wayward daughters with new names, sons brought to their knees on the cobblestones. He did his best and sent them onward to the saint when he had no answers.

When he wasn’t preaching Ameline’s successes around the city he was here, in the cathedral and the library, watching as they filled every shattered window and hole in the wall with sparkling, shimmering works of stained glass, each one a new version of the Saint Ameline. Today, Elion watched as a woman in a complicated blue dress ordered people

around. She was arrestingly beautiful, with piercing blue eyes and a way of moving that made the dress snap in agreeable ways around her ankles, even as she made rude gestures at the rest of the glassworkers. Her anger made Elion uncomfortable, not just because he liked the fellows she was berating, but also because this was a place of worship. Did she not feel blessed to be creating images of a saint? Anger had no place within the church. Elion left the dais and moved towards the worktable that sat under the largest empty window. Rain pattered in softly through the open hole in the stone wall, staining the stone floors dark. Raindrops glittered where they fell in the young woman's hair.

She glared at him. "What?"

"Why are you so angry?" he asked gently. The other glass workers took the opportunity to scurry away, out of the line of fire. "Aren't you happy to be working on a project exalting the saint?"

The woman huffed.

"She's got you all wrapped around her fingers like ribbons, doesn't she?" She looked upwards at the place the glass would eventually go, the hole currently full of grey, blustering clouds. She lowered her gaze back down to look at the shards of glass on the table in front of her. A shockingly accurate image of Saint Ameline's face scowled up at them.

Elion waited. She would speak again if given the space, he was sure of it.

She drew her fingers over the glass saint's hair, which was long and flowing in the depiction, the only detail that stood out as strange with the image of Ameline in Elion's mind. Ameline's hair was growing back slowly, sure, but the choppy ends still only just brushed her collarbones. Her hair was nowhere near the length the girl in the glass wore, brushing just past her hips.

The woman in the blue dress picked up one of the shards of glass hair; out of the mosaic it looked innocuous, just a slim piece of orange glass. She held it up to the light, where the sun was trying to peek through the clouds. The edges of the piece were razor sharp, nearly biting into her fingertips, painting the saint's face on the table in shades of streaky, wavering orange, like flames.

"This isn't her," she said, not taking her eyes off the saint's face. "I mean, I'm glad she's not dead in a field somewhere, like I thought she might be, but this isn't *Ameline*. The look in her eyes... she's strung out on those *miracles*." She spat miracles as though it were a curse. *Those miracles*. Elion shifted uncomfortably. She turned the glass over in her hand. "She didn't know me, at first. She didn't even recognize me."

The woman looked Elion in the eye, gaze sharp. "I don't blame you," she said, in a way that made Elion feel like she did blame him, at least in part. "Ameline has never been someone who will let you just tell her what to do. But your saint was *my* friend first, and it's my job to protect her from herself. I can't let her be a liar."

Elion wasn't sure what to say.

Ameline had never talked about her life before this, before Aurells. He had heard her say once that she had grown up in a town called Domare; she must have had friends there. A family. It seemed selfish to think about it now, but he'd never thought about who she'd been before. To him, she'd always been a saint, someone hopeful and kind. This scowling image that the woman in blue had constructed was someone Elion didn't know. But what he did know was that Saint Ameline was not a liar, and he told the woman as much.

Her mouth twisted in a way he couldn't quite understand. "That's just it. We're saying the same thing."

And then she left the cathedral, walking out into the gentle fall of rain.

Elion watched the door swing closed behind her. He wanted the best for Ameline, the best for Aurells. A saint who proved that the gods had not abandoned them, who could protect them all from a curse and an incoming army, that was the best thing—wasn't it?

Chapter 33

There were several attempts to stop the saint. Several attempts to rein her in, attempts to get her to remember herself. The intention was all the same.

During the first attempt, Sigrid locked a door in the library. She thought the saint was sleeping on the other side of it, tangled up with her priest. If she'd been only minutes earlier, she would have been right. But all she trapped was a priest who slept on the threshold of understanding, his dreams unravelling curses and careless words for him.

The second attempt was Hinge's guilt-ridden attack. She'd slammed into Ameline in a dark corridor and screamed at her to remember, remember, *remember* herself. The god had conjured memories of a river and a purely unmagical day, plucked from Ameline's memories. But it was a last-ditch effort intended to ease Hinge's own guilt, and so it couldn't work. The girl's parting words had been, *I looked a god in the face, and it was me, actually*. And the god had faded back into the hinge.

The third attempt failed in the way that mattered most.

The fourth attempt, locked behind the heavy iron door as it was, came too late.

Chapter 34

Sigrid didn't want to stay home because sound still bled in through the thin walls, and home was where Fiora lay in bed, still mourning Agnes.

The saint had done that. Sigrid almost spit on the floor, just thinking about her.

It was after midnight, and Sigrid was trailing her fingers along the lined-up spines of books in the library just to feel the dry ridges when she heard a scraping sound. She wasn't meant to be in here, especially at night, but she hadn't checked specifically to see what the consequences would be before she'd snuck in. It was coming from the end of the row. She dropped to a crouch. She was not meant to be here, but she hadn't thought that anyone else would be in the library either and now there were footsteps! Coming towards her! She flailed her hands around to feel her way back the direction she'd come and found that the wall of shelving behind her had no books on the bottom shelf. So, Sigrid crawled in and curled tight around herself as the footsteps drew closer.

It turned out to be two pairs of feet, and one lantern casting a shaky ring of light. Sigrid leaned further back into the shelf, hoping she looked like books. Her heart was turning somersaults in her chest, like the acrobats she'd seen rehearsing outside the city wall.

Sigrid, like many children her age, was good at being in places she wasn't meant to be, and good at overhearing things that weren't for her ears. It wasn't curiosity that led her to the darkened stacks of the rat library after midnight—she couldn't read and had little interest in learning how—it was just the only place she could think of that would be empty.

There were so many people in her city, bringing their noise with them. Sigrid couldn't escape to the oak tree outside the city wall because that's where the travelling acrobats had

set up, in anticipation of the spectacle surrounding the final miracle. Even if it had been coincidental that the first miracle took out the rats, it was still Saint Ameline's fault that one of Sigrid's sisters was miserable, and that her other one was running feral in the festivities. Tilly hadn't been home in three days, and Sigrid had only seen snatches of her youngest sister in the crowds as she swung around a dance circle or had her fortune read or ate meat off a stick.

Silence. Time to corral her bouncing thoughts into some form of streamlined order. That's what Sigrid needed. So, she'd snuck in through the front door when the posted guard wasn't looking and crept between shelves of books that still smelled faintly of rodents. And now here she was, inches from getting caught.

"I still think you should be resting."

"I've never been more awake."

It was the priest and the saint! Of course, it was. Sigrid tried to shrink as small as possible on the shelf as they neared, the swinging halo of light nearly brushing the tips of her boots where they poked out. Sigrid stopped breathing as the priest and saint stopped walking right beside her.

"You do seem ... different this week," the priest said. Sigrid watched their two shadows where they were cast on the stone floor.

"It's the miracles. It's as though they're giving me energy. I feel invincible. I *am* invincible. Tomorrow I'll ride out on a great white warhorse in that glittering armour, and everyone will watch. Everyone will see."

The shadows blurred together into a single slash of ink on the floor in front of Sigrid.

“They’ll see the heart of Aurells,” the priest murmured, his voice muffled. “They will see that you cannot burn. Incombustible Saint Ameline.”

“They’ll see *me*.”

It was a moment of rustling sounds and quiet breaths before Sigrid realized that the saint and the priest might be kissing. She wrinkled her nose and gagged lightly.

The shadows pulled apart at the sound.

“Sometimes I think there are still rats, it’s like it’s haunted,” the priest sounded out of breath.

“No, I think I, I think I got them all,” if the priest sounded winded, the saint sounded downright dizzy. “The poison. Um. The miracle. Was thorough.”

The words hung in the air between the three. *Poison*.

“I misspoke,” the saint said, too loud. “I meant, in my head, I’ve been calling it the poison miracle. It was real—it was just I was caught up in the moment, distracted.” Sigrid, a champion of the backpedal lie, recognized the sound of one. Her world rocked a bit, everything snapping into a new focus. The saint had sought out the rats to poison them. She was a liar, and she’d devastated Fiora on purpose.

The priest, a creature of faith, did not seem to recognize the cover-up the way the girl curled up on the bookshelf did.

“Of course,” he said. And the shadows converged again. “Still, I think we should go. It’s late. Rats or no rats, you need rest before tomorrow.”

“I don’t need that much rest, novitiate,” the saint’s voice was cheeky, low. “What do you say about a detour to the room under the stairs? The one on the first floor with the cot?”

Sigrid could hear the blush in the priest’s cheeks when he responded.

“Well, I wouldn’t say no to that.”

“Perfect, I already stashed a bottle of wine in there earlier.”

“You know, for a saint,” the priest said, “There’s something truly devious about you.”

Sigrid almost gagged again.

And they walked down the rest of the row, leaving Sigrid reeling on her own.

The saint was a liar.

Had any of the miracles been true? Sigrid didn’t see how any of the others could have been faked, but that didn’t matter to her, anyways. The saint had decided to poison the rats, and so, she’d decided to hurt Fiora.

Sigrid unfolded herself from the shelf and ran back into the night, unable to stand another moment anywhere near the so-called saint.

Chapter 35

Ameline's head began hurting while she was leading Elion toward the room under the stairs. It was something about the way she'd talked about the first miracle. She'd used the word poison. But she hadn't used poison, had she? It had been a miracle. She remembered collecting ash and salt and sugar, but surely the miracle would have worked without those things. Maybe they'd helped the miracle along, like a vehicle. Yes, that made sense. She'd simply used magic items that for some reason, she'd remembered as "poison" to help the first miracle along. She was still a saint. The final miracle tomorrow would come. But her headache didn't dissipate.

"Hey, slow down. These robes aren't made for going all that fast." Elion laughed from behind her on the stairs. She'd been rushing. She stopped and looked back up at him, descending in the dark towards her.

"Well, maybe it's time for the robes to come off then."

He joined her on the landing. Her heart fluttered like a butterfly was caught in her breastbone. The headache pulsed again.

She pulled Elion into her arms and thought about nothing else from then on.

Chapter 36

Sometimes, some rare times, dreams can be shared, delved into. Dreams that disobey the bounds of a single skull and ooze fantastically elsewhere. As he dozed comfortably in his saint's arms, Elion dreamt a dream that wasn't his.

A god was speaking to him. He knew it was a god because the god's knee was level with Elion's nose. Dream-Elion cranked his head back to see how high up the god's face would be; a wooden hand clapped him on the head and forced him to his knees.

"I know you are a king in your world, but you will kneel before me," the god said. This was the first clue that Elion knew was not in his own dream. Even in his wildest fantasies, he did not dream of being a king. Elion knelt. He knelt on clouds, misty drops wicking into the purple breeches the dreamer wore.

"Listen carefully. The curse comes to fruition tomorrow—I will have my revenge on Aurells. Remember this: the heart must burn. Find the heart and incinerate it. I cannot see inside the city, and cannot help you find it, but it should be obvious. It may be a person, it may be a place, it may be an object of worth. And then, only if you personally burn the heart of Aurells will the door to the kingdom open. If you fail, then this is all forfeit, do you understand?"

Elion felt his mouth open, he felt himself respond and this was how he knew for certain he had stumbled into someone else's dream.

He felt himself say, in a voice not his own, "Yes, Ador."

Chapter 37

Out in the night, Sigrid was met with unending festivities. She wanted to find Tilly, to bring her home. They could always think better when the three of them could put their heads together. Together the three sisters would think of a way to hold the so-called saint responsible for Agnes's death.

Sigrid ran through the dancers outside the library. She wove in and out of the circle, going against the current. She went into the cathedral, thinking Tilly might be among those holding a night vigil in preparation for the last miracle. She went to the West Wall, thinking that maybe Tilly would be with the happy pilgrims there. She looked for her sister among the campfires beyond the city wall, in the new pubs that would be open at this hour, and even to Marta's inn. She was nowhere.

Sigrid returned to the square outside the library, where the dancing was thickest. Maybe she had missed her there? She was looking for a dancer smaller than the rest, one with a wide grin and limbs that were screwed on too loosely. All Sigrid saw were faceless shadows that towered over her, bending impossibly. The rain had stopped, but the ground was slick with mud. She tripped over something and looked down.

It wasn't mud that had caught Sigrid's ankle. It was a large-dog-sized lump on the ground. No, it was a child-sized lump. A child. A pale hand glowed in the moonlight, splayed on the ground.

A scream pierced through Sigrid. The dancers around her thought it was a cheer and volleyed a joyful, whooping response.

Someone's foot crunched the small hand on the ground and then kept spinning onwards.

Sigrid sank to her knees in the mud.

She took a knee to the back as she maneuvered the shape on the ground until a face rolled towards the sky.

Tilly.

Sigrid screamed again, the high, shattering scream of a child. Her sister, who loved making bubbles and running games and the way snowflakes melted on her nose. Her sister, who only wanted to be like her, who didn't resemble the lifeless body at her knees. Sigrid passed through numbness and into blind precision. Her sister had been trampled. This was Saint Ameline's fault. Mechanically, she moved upward, her hands shaking with sorrow and rage and disbelief.

She would find the saint, and she would make her pay.

She dragged her sister's body to the relative safety of the chandler's threshold. The door was unlocked, rosy candles in the window proclaiming the shop open. The chandler was doing all-night business selling candles for the vigil. Sigrid stepped inside and grabbed what she needed, the candlemaker never noticing the small girl with the dead-eyed stare who had come into his shop. She kissed her sister's cold forehead one more time before turning back towards the library. She marched across the square, then up the library steps.

She repeated the same break-in as before, waiting for the guard to get distracted by some fire-eater or performative swordplay bout, and then she snuck in through the front doors. The walls and walls of books greeted her, the first tendrils of morning light seeping through the skylights. Sigrid walked with purpose, not sparing a glance for the cavernous room. She knew where the saint would be.

Sigrid went to the room on the first floor.

It was tucked under the stairs; the only place Sigrid had seen a door other than the front one while she'd been poking around earlier. It was a glossy door, polished since the reopening of the library. The top was rounded and sunken into the wall that held up the stairs. Most importantly, this door had a lock on the outside.

Sigrid put her ear to the crack where the door met the wall. She heard breathing. They were still in there, sleeping.

Sigrid stepped back and pulled the deadbolt closed. Then she walked up to the third floor and set the room on fire.

Chapter 38

Only, Ameline no longer slept behind the locked door in the library.

Elyse had finally found her. Fed up with being cast off and ignored, Elyse had also broken into the library right before the first tinges of grey cast themselves across the sky. She'd been less cautious than Sigrid and prowled through the shelves snarling for Ameline to come out and face her.

She'd found the glossy door under the stairs and yanked it open.

Saint and priest tangled together. *Reckless*, Elyse had time to think before she stalked in. Never one to mind propriety or shame, Elyse ripped the covers off Ameline and told her to get up. They needed to talk.

Bleary-eyed, Ameline rolled out of bed and retrieved her shift. A red stain still bloomed on the chest from where Elion had spilled wine on her the night before. Elyse didn't give Ameline time to put her kirtle on her overtop before grabbing her friend's wrist and dragging her out. The glossy door snicked shut behind them, then the proud front door to the library slammed after it.

"Good morning to you, too," Ameline grumbled. She sounded like her old self again, and Elyse felt a blossom of hope take the place where annoyance usually would have sat.

Elyse navigated them along the outside wall of the library, avoiding the tangle of dancers that still thrashed and flailed in the middle of the square, relentless. Ameline thought she saw Elyse's horse, a proud chestnut mare, tied up outside the library.

Elyse steered them towards the East Wall, through the narrow streets, avoiding anyone waking up or still awake. Elyse wished she'd brought a veil or cape or something to throw

over Ameline's head. She was too recognizable to move quickly, even at this hour. An older woman stopped them, she had crooked bones and wanted the saint to fix them before she performed her final miracle. She fell to the cobblestones in front of them, grasping at Ameline's thin chemise. The woman's hands were gnarled, her arms assembled asymmetrically. Her eyes were wild with want.

The saint bent down, and Elyse didn't hear the prayer Ameline murmured to the woman, but the contorted hands released her friends' skirts. The woman's tears sounded joyful as they left her behind in the street.

Elyse was disgusted, filled with righteous rage again, rage that was prickled with fear. They were almost there. Then she could say what she needed.

They reached a door in the East Wall, right where in the corner where it pivoted to become the North Wall. Elyse had found it several days ago while stomping around the city. It was the same door from the feast, all those months ago. She was sure of it. Painted a deep red, the two panels coming to a raised point in the middle, with heavy iron hinges wrapping towards the centre. Metal handles that sat in the mouths of weeping lions.

Elyse leaned her shoulder into the door and kicked it open. It banged open easily, sending a resounding echo into the stone stairwell beyond. The bag slung at her hip slammed into Ameline as they both tried to go through at the same time. It clanked ominously.

"By all means," Elyse said, sketching a mocking bow, "Saints first."

"Elyse, where are we going?"

Elyse didn't answer; she just gestured again for Ameline to enter. The door fell closed behind them, bouncing heavily against the frame. The interior of the wall was dark, immediately in front of the girls was a spiral staircase.

“Up we go,” Elyse said, quickly losing what little patience she’d had when she’d woken Ameline.

“You couldn’t have brought a lantern or torch?” Ameline asked.

“Magic one up for us, saint. Get on it or get hiking.” They climbed. Circling around and around, only the sound of footsteps on stone stairs and two girls running out of breath. Up and up and up until Ameline smacked her face into another door.

She wheezed a laugh and then nearly had to double over at the severity of the swear Ameline spit out in response. Elyse had missed her friend.

Ameline hesitantly felt around for the door handle and pushed it open. They were in a turret overlooking the lake and plain.

While they were walking up the stairs, dawn had risen to the surface of the morning. A sliver of red sun peeked over the horizon; the sky was a wash of orange clouds on fire. The pink lake was still studded with perfectly white birds, everything moving glacially slow, everything perfectly reflected in the lake surface. It was achingly beautiful.

The two women stood shoulder to shoulder and looked over the morning, their faces painted with awe and honey light.

“Ame, it’s time to come home.” Elyse said it quietly, as though to a wild bird that might launch itself off the turret at the slightest provocation. When Ameline didn’t move or make any sign that she’d heard the words, Elyse plunged onwards.

“Come home for me, selfishly. Because I want you to.” Her voice broke and Ameline looked at her. The slant of light on her face hid her eyes from Elyse, and she had to look away.

“I was ready to be happy for you, but this?” Elyse gestured vaguely at the veiled city behind them. She was gesturing at the falsely promised miracle to the crooked-boned woman in the street, she was gesturing to the endless debauchery that seemed to follow Saint Ameline through the streets, she was pointing to the larger-than-life stained-glass icon to be mounted in the cathedral. Elyse could understand vanity, but it was all too much.

Elyse was not good at apologies; they were strictly against her rules. Apologies implied imperfection, something she strived against. On the road here, she’d thought about ways to lie her way out of it. She’d considered telling Ameline there was an emergency back in Domare, that her father was sick or maybe that she’d come into a windfall on a bet at Three Swords. But Ameline had always been the only one to see her lies as she spun them—she’d—known her too well. Elyse knew that the only weapon she could use to bring her friend back to herself was the truth.

“Why would I do that? I have everything I’ve ever wanted right here. I am a saint. I am revered. The most you ever seemed to do was tolerate me. I never had anything like this in Domare.”

Elyse swallowed hard and then rummaged in her bag. She retrieved what she wanted and held her hands clasped in front of her.

“Look,” she said, “I know I’m not always nice. I’m working on it.”

Elyse presented three objects that morning. It’s a magic number, three.

The first thing she withdrew from the worn leather bag at her hip was a fistful of folded ribbons. They were dyed brilliant, expensive raspberry—Ameline’s favourite colour.

She placed the ribbons in Ameline’s hand with another gift.

“I’m sorry.”

Ameline lifted the ribbons to her eye level without saying a word. After a moment, Elyse reached and gently took the fabric from Ameline's cupped hand. She stepped behind Ameline and started braiding them into her friend's hair. The auburn hair she'd once coveted fell in choppy chunks, and it seemed such a small thing to envy, now.

She started on the left side, braiding the deep pink ribbon at the crown of Ameline's head, down into a stubby braid. Elyse didn't speak as her fingers wove deftly. She moved onto the second braid, coaxing the uneven strands into a semblance of order. The sun slipped over the hill and cast gold into their eyes.

Partway through the second braid, Elyse spoke again. She could only whisper, any louder and she couldn't trust her voice to hold.

"Do you remember doing this on the riverbank?"

Ameline's voice was barely audible, "You always braided mud into my hair."

Elyse's barked laugh turned into a sob.

Ameline said, "I can't go back."

"I'm not done," Elyse responded. Finished braiding, she rummaged again. This time she pulled out something larger. She got Ameline to close her eyes and hold out one hand at a time.

Onto each hand, she fastened an exquisitely fashioned steel gauntlet.

Ameline opened her eyes and flexed her fingers. They were a perfect fit.

"Your father," Elyse said by way of explanation. "Turns out he was making these the whole time. All those years."

The gauntlets were polished to a high shine and tooled with swirling designs. Each finger plate was reinforced and seamless.

“If you won’t come home for me, come home for your family who loves you—even if he isn’t great at saying it with words, everyone can tell how shattered he’s been since you left without saying goodbye.”

Ameline said nothing. She held her hands up to catch the rays of sunlight, twisting her wrists this way and that. That she did not immediately toss the gauntlets onto the floor was a good sign, and Elyse soldiered on. She had one last trick in her bag.

Elyse closed her hands around the smooth ceramic vessel she’d packed carefully into her bag weeks ago. She’d taken care to wrap it in cloth so it wouldn’t shatter on the long ride here, no matter how hard she pushed her horse. She knew that if this did not call Ameline back to herself, she would have lost them both.

Elyse pulled an urn of Madwen’s ashes from her bag, a ceramic vessel no wider around than her forearm.

“I’m sorry for all of it. I’m sorry for what I said, I lied. You were never to blame, and I shouldn’t have said it. You have nothing left to prove. Just come home. I can’t watch you die too.”

“I made a promise.”

“I don’t care. Make a *new* promise. To me.” But Ameline shook her head. Elyse felt her friend slipping away. “Make a promise to *me*. I was your friend first. Promise me you’ll walk away from the lies. I don’t care that you lied! I don’t care at all! Just come home before it’s too late.”

Ameline was shaking her head, “I didn’t lie. I’m a saint.”

Elyse felt some of her old frustration, its shape familiar and sturdy, “Ameline. You are not a saint. I know you.”

Ameline looked her in the eye.

“And I know you. I can see how your lies protected you—I understand now. But I am a saint.”

Elyse rolled her eyes. “You are going to be killed for your lies; it’s out of control. I don’t even care if you want to keep lying to yourself, but let’s go. Let’s leave before it’s too late, and they send you out there alone to face an entire army and a *god*.”

“I commanded the miracles. And I will do it one more time before I’m done. I’m sorry, Elyse, but I can’t. I won’t go with you.”

Ameline stood backlit against the full glory of dawn, the sun a rising circle of flame behind her, the lake shimmering. Her hands glistening silver, swept evenly from her face, her shoulders thrown back in defiance, her gauntleted hands clasped in front of her. Even in a stained shift dress, she looked like the hero of an epic story. Over her shoulder, the army’s first line blotted out the bottom of the sun, a dark bruise.

Ameline took the ashes from Elyse’s grip, the sharp cut of her metal-clad thumb catching the delicate skin on the inside of Elyse’s wrist on its way past. Blood welled.

Before she passed through the door, she turned back to her friend for a final time.

“I never would have done it without you. Thank you.”

And Elyse watched her friend walk through the door, into the darkness.

The morning of the last miracle blazed fully into dawn. Elyse stood in the tower as the orange sky streaked first with crimson, then pink. She watched her friend walk onto the field beside the lake.

As the sun continued to rise, a miracle of a different kind touched down in Aurells. Elyse stood in the glow of the oncoming curse with the wind wrapping a chilling arm around her shoulders and made a vow.

The sixth miracle was this:

Elyse swore she would never lie again.

Chapter 39

The miracles in the town below began to crumble.

Farthest out, the cows licked their calves, who'd only begun to stand hours prior. But livestock twins are weak; they rarely both survive. And if the mother is weakened from a razor-sharp summer, the chances of familial survival dwindle even more. Glossy baby eyes dimmed. Tiny newborn lungs collapsed on themselves. Bony knees tangled together, dead in the field.

Circling closer to Aurells, the river of fish. While the water seeped its banks and flooded ever closer to the town, the insides of the fish were striated with worms. Parasites. Bugs. The kinds of worms that eat at the brain, the kind that make one easy to catch if one is a fish and prone to uncontrollable dance, if one is a person. More and more shadowed dancing bodies fell like rats under the still-dancing feet. Convulsing. Exhausted. Tilly had been the first to fall. The first to have the pliable bones in her hands crushed under maddened feet, her lungs stamped with boot prints. The first to stop breathing in order to stop dancing. Her body lay where Sigrid had dragged it.

Everything Saint Ameline had taken credit for, everything she'd encouraged and pushed beyond, everything was crumbling.

Luckily, the rats that Ameline had buried still snuggled underground and stayed dead. They remained buried as they leaked death into the groundwater. The rodents were poisoning the lake and river, not with the poison they'd ingested, which is nothing to humans, but with everything else that had once made them rats. Leaking into the river water, making it undrinkable. But Ameline did not know any of this.

She only knew that she was miraculous. And that her friend did not believe in her.
Her god did not believe in her.

Blood and magic alone are not loud enough to call one back to themselves. So Ameline admired the gauntlets, gifted at the perfect time to accompany her onto the battlefield. She preened her braids, thankful that her hair would be out of her face. And she carried the ceramic urn, intent on using it same way she had for the first: to coerce a miracle into being. Madwen would help her again.

Ameline stepped onto the battlefield, intent on her final miracle.

She would will it into being.

She was a saint.

As Ameline stepped onto the plain, armed with nothing but her friend's ashes, Elion awoke to a room on fire.

Chapter 40

Elion woke up coughing.

The room was full of smoke. Everything was smoke. He hardly knew where he was; all he knew was that he was coughing. It was the kind of cough that halted anything else. Everything was coughing and burning eyes and a dark room filled with smoke. Something was on fire. He remembered snatches of a dream, a cloud, a hand, then it was lost to the immediacy of the danger around him.

Ameline was gone, and Elion was alone in the dark. He hoped, he *prayed*, that she was safely on her way to the final miracle.

Elion managed to suppress his coughing for a moment. He felt around for the door. The handle was hot. He lurched his shoulder into the flat wood of the door with a grunt. It wouldn't open. He coughed again, his lungs scraping. He was locked in. He realized that he would burn there in the room under the stairs.

He rubbed a hand over his eyes, trying to get the smoke out of them. He would die there in that room, and he would not see the final miracle. He would burn there. He slumped to the floor and prayed. The words came fast, spilling over each other, rhythmic. The decanted prayer of someone who had been waiting for the day they would need to pray.

His eyes were squinted shut, so he didn't see it at first. But the glowing light eventually blurred through his eyelids. He thought at first that the door was catching fire at the edges, and he began to pray even faster. His words muffled into his fingertips as everything grew hotter and hotter around him. Then, the door hinges burned a bright white

and shattered. The door fell off its hinges and Elion swore he heard the words *I'm sorry* as the door heaved to the floor.

His prayers swiftly answered, Elion rasped a shocked prayer of thanks to Hinge before crawling out into the main hall of the library.

The fire had started on the library's top floor and now roared its way down the second floor of the main staircase. The rat-chewed books were quick fodder for the flames, burning hot and burning fast. It felt like his heart was aflame, to watch it go up in smoke.

Elion had never seen a fire like this, at least, not of this magnitude. He knew what sparks felt like as they snaked their way out of the smithy fire and burrowed into his skin, but the wall of heat, the intense sweat that doused him from head to toe, that kind of power was a new experience. With the door out of the way, Elion could see better. He grabbed his robe off the floor and shoved it over his head and then, in a frenzy, he started grabbing and all manuscripts he could carry off the shelves of the first floor. He saw the fire scaling its way down the walls, but now that the door was within sight, he couldn't leave the books to burn.

He threw the library's front door open and began chucking books outside, down the front steps. He ran back and forth, pouring sweat. Trip after trip. He raced the flames, casting book after book outside.

Fresh air unfolded in his lungs as Elion stepped outside for a breath. He'd just tossed another armful of delicate manuscripts and illuminated texts on the ground and wondered why no one else was helping. *Has no one seen the smoke?* The guard had left his post by the door, there were no dancers in the town square, there was no one around to see the library burn except a dainty chestnut mare tied across the way. The horse looked at him as if to say, *Why bother with all that, anyway?*

And so, Elion ran back and forth and saved as many books as he could. He went until the flames devoured the first floor until he could no longer see or breathe, and heat crackled through him. Then, his heart breaking, he slammed the hefty door shut and hoped that that would be enough to contain the fire. He stepped back and looked at the books scattered at his feet. The spines were cracked open, pages tearing.

He retched, briefly. It helped clear some of the smoke from his lungs and the fog from his brain. When he was well enough to stand and breathe on his own again, Elion remembered two things. First, he remembered that everyone would be gathered for the spectacle of the last miracle. The showdown, the end. He had to get to Saint Ameline to see her enact her final blessing. A once in a hundred-lifetimes opportunity. The second thing he remembered was his dream, which had been lost in the immediate moments of waking in flames. *Burn the heart of Aurells, open the door to the Kingdom.*

Now that he had the full wording of the curse, it was easier to see that the “heart of Aurells” would be its Saint. And Ameline *would* have burned, had she still been in the library with him. Elion almost fell to his knees again. This meant that someone had tried to enact the curse before even arriving at the battlefield. The king probably had someone working on the inside. Elion had to warn Ameline so that she could tailor the miracle in her own defence. The king would try to burn her, as the Heart of Aurells. His only hope was in Hinge’s warning *the heart cannot burn*. He hoped that meant that Ameline truly was inflammable, that she could not burn, and not that the saint was the one thing Elion could not let burn.

Elion instantly forgot about the books and clattered his way across the square, littered as it was with broken cups and lone shoes, discarded clothing, and human waste. He

approached the horse, who was no less judgmental up close, and swung on up. He promised himself that he would return the mare to its proper owner afterwards.

The sky was yawning its way between orange and pink above him. He looked up and offered another prayer of thanks to Hinge, the goddess of the hinge who had saved his life. Then he cantered down the narrow leaning streets of Aurells, winding his way down towards the east wall. And he prayed that he would not be too late.

Ameline stepped onto the battlefield. It was the same field she'd walked across any time she wanted to swim in the salt lake. The brittle grass now slopped with rainfall that hadn't soaked into the dirt, but it was still familiar underfoot. The path she would take to the beach meandered beside the scraggly treeline.

The lake sat to her left, but she proceeded straight, towards the sun. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the lake, shimmering a dusky pink was now dotted with massive white birds. Not a single one moved. She padded silently forward, not wanting to disrupt the sleeping giants.

She walked towards the army who had long ago spotted her, but only now considered she might actually be approaching. The army stretched out, a dark line of noise and movement coming towards her, fast. The clangs and bloodthirsty roars of the mob advancing.

Ameline took a steadying breath. She was confident that she would call a miracle. Even if her friend did not believe in her, even if her *goddess* did not believe in her. Ameline was certain that she could *will* a miracle into being and prove that she was believing in the right thing: herself. The front line drew closer. Ameline tilted her face to the sun. She poured some of the ash into the palm of her steel gauntlet.

Blood and magic alone are not enough to call someone back to themselves. Ameline was a saint as the army descended upon her. And as a saint, she cast fistfuls of ashes into the air. The grit caught on the slight breeze cast across the open plain and glittered silver and charcoal as it fell upon polished breastplates and the grass below. The saint tossed and tossed, throwing ashes to the wind. Believing in a miracle.

Elion rode hard through the streets, careening around corners, asking the mare to go faster, *faster*. The mare, being the showy shiny thing she was, obeyed because she wanted to, and they flew towards the outside of the city. He didn't pull up as they approached the gate in the East Wall, because it was open. Such was the faith in the saint. They coursed through it—onto the battlefield.

The king looked upon the girl who stood alone in front of the city. She wore a simple white shift dress with a heart stained upon the chest. Her hands were gloved in silver. She glared at him, and he smiled. The god on his shoulder hummed with anticipation. She spoke, "I am the Saint of Aurells. My heart beats true."

The king only had to lift a finger. With a slight crook of his royal index, the saint was in chains.

A martyring, it turns out, does not take a great deal of time.

She didn't even have to move. Once the king had decided that she was the heart he sought to burn, a platform that was already constructed for this purpose was brought forth, and Ameline thrust upon it, ten paces from where they'd first apprehended her.

She had not turned back to face the city since leaving Elyse in the tower. Not the whole time she had stood surrounded at sword point facing the king, awaiting her miracle. She was still waiting when she stepped up onto the wooden platform. She was waiting still, fearless even as she was lashed to a railing. And then she opened her eyes to what was behind her.

First, she saw the lake, and the unmoving birds. Then she saw her audience: the people of Aurells. Gathered, waiting, placing bets on the form of the miracle, nervous acrobats and songstresses' intent on making this their shot. Poets already composing lays, painters memorizing the hue of excitement.

Ameline's gaze drifted upwards to the city wall, the tower with the slash of blue standing at the top. She cast her eyes on the whole picture. She saw Aurells bathed in new dawn light, a glowing city of stone.

At first, it looked like two spires on the cathedral, but then she saw it for what it was: a column of smoke. Rising thickly, darkly, chokingly above the library at the very top of the city. *Eliou*. But Ameline had only a moment to think of the priest in the library before the fire provoked another memory.

Madwen, shrouded—burning. Aldric, senseless and assured. Images she had not let herself think about in months, the grief she knew she hadn't honoured because she'd been so intent on absolving her own guilt. Blood and magic are not enough to bring someone back to themselves, it takes three. Blood. Magic. Movement. And in that moment, Ameline was moved to tears. The girl who was the Saint stood on the platform that would be her pyre and it occurred to her that perhaps a miracle wasn't coming after all.

Elion had only just cleared the back line of the gathered crowd. Everyone was part of a tangle, trying to get the best vantage point. There were people hawking meats and turning tricks, everyone had one eye trained on the saint and the other on the bustling festivities. Elion navigated the prissy mare through it all, carefully picking their way forward. He had only just managed to skirt the final frontier of those who had paid for the best seats, complete with shading umbrellas held over them, when Ameline turned and saw the city.

It was as Ameline came back to herself that Elion saw her surrounded by an enemy army, a small blot of white against the dark mass of armoured bodies. She looked so small.

Across the plain, they had locked eyes, and something clicked in Elion's mind. He should have been too far away to see her fear, but he read it all the same. The Saint was afraid. And that's when the final missing piece slid into place.

A cascade of Ameline's hesitations played in his mind, capped off with the reveal last night that she'd poisoned the rats. His mind caught up with his body, and he saw snatches of the city he'd just ridden past, the images gaining meaning only at that moment. A trail of trampled and exhausted, recuperating bodies ran through the street and out of the square, people lost to fevered dancing. A pen of dead calves, those that had keeled over from being born weak. He remembered cantering past the fish market, the bodies speckled with bugs in the sun, rotting. Floodwater turned the uncobbled streets at the edge of the city to mud.

Not a single miracle held.

He slid from the back of the horse into a heap on the ground. Ameline was not a saint. She was a liar.

Even as his vision blurred, his misplaced faith and trust shattering underfoot, he began to run. Ameline was in danger, and that's what mattered most.

Hinge watched. The priest sprinted onto the field, his sooty yellow robes flapping behind him. A confused cheer went up from the assembled crowd. This had always been how it was supposed to end, so why did it feel so awful? Everyone in the crowd waited and tittered, nerves building. *When would she act? When would she spring? What would the miracle look like, and why was she waiting so long?* They prayed harder.

The priest charged forward, indefatigable. Hinge knew that in no version of the story could he make it there in time, but the lovesick, those with hearts sewn into robe sleeves, they do not care. He ran. And Hinge twisted with shame.

Hinge had thought that Elion would know that the library was the heart. The library and cathedral, twin chambers of the Heart of Aurells. Then he'd gone and fallen in love with the false saint, and all he could see was her. This ending had always been her plan, but she hadn't meant to grow to care for them. She didn't want to. She hadn't known that performing a second betrayal could hurt more than your first.

Elion had almost reached the frontline of the enemy army when the kindling struck. "Ameline!" The word was out of his mouth before he knew he was going to yell. It came out raw, desperate; a bird launched from his throat across the dry grass. She looked at him and mouthed something, but he was stopped by a line of swords. He didn't catch her words. Elion fell to his knees, heaving for breath, and he looked up at the girl in the stained dress. Flames curled around her ankles. She looked back at him, and she was less afraid. The priest knelt and watched while the king burned a false heart.

The words that she'd mouthed were, "You are my heart."

Behind them all, the last of the calves keeled over; the fish floated belly up, the birds in the lake became crystalline salt statues. The last few people that danced even as they watched collapsed from exhaustion. The salt lake dried and dried in the rising heat.

There were no miracles left. They had never been miracles to begin with.

The moment it was over, truly over, after she had not cried out and had not erupted into a burst of starlings to defend them, the moment when it was over, the hush of disbelief tumbled into one of betrayal.

The saint was gone. Martyred without saving them. She had burned so easily.

The king's voice rolled over the plain, rumbling its way to every ear in Aurells.

“Your heart is ash, Aurells. I am indebted to you for opening the door to Gallia. I will not forget you in my new reign as Gallian King. The Heartless City, I thank you.”

No one said anything, no one moved, no one breathed. Then the king was aided onto his horse, and the army retreated towards the horizon, leaving the city untouched.

In the mud before a blackened patch of grass knelt the priest, still. They had not been careful with her, afterwards. The king had ordered three soldiers to hack what was left into charcoal shards. They'd taken everything with them. There could be no relics left behind.

Elion's ears buzzed. Only three people knew it was a false heart that had burned. The girl weeping in the tower, the priest who couldn't move, and the goddess who had orchestrated it all. The two who had loved her were the first to see the anti-curse. They were the first to see what happened when instead of a heart, the king had burned a placeholder. A

fake. He'd burned a girl who had lied her way to holiness; he had not burned the Heart of Aurells. But he did not know that until the entire army swallowed by the earth. Even then, there was little room to define the occurrence as a curse gone sour. It was as though the river that had once fed into the salt lake turned to quicksand, and every member of the army—from the infantry to the king's servants to the knights and squires—every single one was enveloped. And then there was nothing.

The anti-curse was complete. Aurells was saved.

A lone spark flit on the wind, the ember sputtering out near Elion's knee.

Where the army had stood moments before, three gods shimmered into existence. Only Elion was close enough to see. He was too far to hear their words. The first god had broad shoulders and a wooden war helm; the second wore a dress made of metal fragments; the third wore a jester's garb and stood apart from the other two. The one in the dress fell to her knees and grasped the calves of the broad-shouldered god. Her shoulders shook. Ador looked down at her. Even from far away, he radiated rage. He looked towards Aurells, then back down at the goddess in front of him. His shoulders slumped. He dissolved into a wall of smoke. He would need to think about the betrayal, but a grudge held between gods rusts more easily over time. The three would one day be three again.

The fool god moved towards the goddess on her knees. But Hinge looked up, right at Elion, her face a jumbled mirage of misery. She accepted the embrace of the third god, and then both deities flashed silver and disappeared, leaving Elion under the beating noon sun. He was alone. Without a saint, without a god, without his heart.

Epilogue

There is a swath of grass outside the city of Aurells. It is on the bank of the salt lake close to where the mouth of the river rushes by. Nothing will ever grow there. It remains a blackened flash of scorched earth. Pilgrims who visit swear it still smoulders occasionally. One claimed they found a tooth there, and they wear it strung around their neck. Another more entrepreneurial pilgrim has been selling the thumb bone of the Rat Saint for ten years.

The city filled with people and stayed full. No longer the God-Killing City or even the Heartless City, no, the City of the Last Saint flowed with people, riches and stories. People came wanting to see and touch and know where the last true saint had lived, where she'd breathed and danced. Marta's inn was always full. Merchants, artists, workers, farmers, and nobles flocked to and rebuilt Aurells.

Construction on the city wall was finally finished, the last brick placed. The houses were repaired. The library had been entirely gutted, save for the texts strewn on the stairs, and so scholars were commissioned to refill it. The library, that true ventricle of the city, had been badly singed but Sigrid had never wanted a kingdom, anyway—and so that door stayed closed. The half-heart was reconstructed and filled anew. It beat strongly, still.

The stained-glass icon was mounted in the hole in the cathedral ceiling. The Saint's face affixed in something more openly joyful, something more truthful to who she was before the balance had been tipped. At high noon every day, the window cast a blazing column of light into the cathedral, burning orange and red. Standing in the light is rumoured to cause euphoria.

The three gods, in the way of immortals, had disputed and found their form of divine peace that left Aurells out of the crossfire. And the city was fine with that.

There is a beautiful woman in another city far, far away. She has a gap-tooth smile and an unrelenting dedication to honesty. She tells a different story than the one that is exalted and whispered and shouted and cried under the glow of the stained-glass window she herself pieced together. The story told in that light is a beautiful lie. An ornate, exquisite, tidy lie. A story woven with the best of intentions by a priest in dandelion robes. A story about the last true saint and her blazing, miraculous heart.

The story that Elyse told, when asked—which wasn't often—was of a friend who was selfish until it was too late. She told a tale about girlhood, about mistakes, about stubbornness and lies. The story she told was about a river and the current that had pulled them apart.

the end