

## Chapter Eight

*"This was fire, nothing more."*

The bronze disc did not start speaking to Manon—or if it did, not in any way she could comprehend.

She had cast aside the foolish notion that the disc might suddenly cease to be a mystery the moment she awoke among the simple comforts of the Livian outpost and Luca told her Alexandre de Minos had ridden east to Arconia. Let such nonsense ride with him. She had no wish to indulge in it.

Or so she thought.

But somewhere between her bed within the sturdy walls of the outpost and the moment she put her foot in the stirrup as she and Luca prepared to leave, Manon had caught herself wondering if she, in fact, *could* use the disc to supplement her Carrier abilities.

The fact that she had done such an about face within the span of time it took her to spoon a bowl of porridge down her throat and tie her pack to her saddle once more—well, she certainly hadn't been about to admit to Luca that such considerations had entered her mind.

And yet, she had reasoned, if a little forcefully, while she and Luca bid farewell to Captain Senecal, her father had not left the bronze disc in Victor's sarcophagus by accident. Julian Barca had sent her to the mausoleum. Left her—somehow—the tools to break open the marble housing her brother's corpse. Though the gold was the obvious end—the Barca fortunes being in such tatters—her father would have expected Manon to make a thorough search of it. It's what he himself would have done, after all. Manon had seen it more than once. Despite his habit of diving into an excavation without so much as a plan—dig, search, it was that simple—Julian Barca never rushed the second half of that equation and never left a stone unturned, a pot unsearched, a tomb unsealed.

With Alexandre de Minos's words and memories of her father assailing her mind, Manon had failed to notice Luca's silence that morning until they had spent hours searching for some sign of Perrin. They had backtracked to the place

Alexandre de Minos was attacked, found nothing, gone north—they had, since Elysium, moved steadily northward, never in a straight line, but with enough consistency that Manon had thought it prudent to continue in such a fashion—and only when they dug cheese and bread and meat out of their packs and passed the food between their saddles did Manon realize that Luca had not spoken more than ten words.

Rather than ask him if there was a reason for his reticence, as a reasonable person might do, Manon had proceeded to turn inward on herself, taking refuge in her own silence and the thoughts that swirled there. The end result of this was predictable, if only Manon had bothered to see it: they argued over where to make camp that night, argued over where to turn with the light of the new day, and argued over, of all things, the best means of lighting a fire, a thing they had managed to do many times without a fuss.

Thus, by the time they reached the small coastal town of Verdienne three days later, famous for the gold running in the veins of the worn ridge of mountains overlooking the Anerrean, and used some of the Archduke's funds to take rooms at an inn, Manon had half a mind to vanish in the middle of the night, rainstorm or no, and she suspected Luca was considering the same.

He wasn't, of course, but Manon wouldn't realize that until it was too late.

"We ought to go back."

Luca's voice came to Manon from across the hall. Their rooms were odd-shaped things crammed under the eaves of the inn's third floor. Manon's door was incapable of closing all the way. From where she sat in a rickety chair with her feet propped on the iron bedframe, she could see Luca's shadow against the far wall. A nebulous shape sharpening a knife.

She knew the hunter didn't mean back to the outpost or backtrack again in search of Perrin.

"The Archduke can go look for Alescuan reliquaries himself if he's so desperate," Manon said. The bronze disc between her fingers was becoming familiar, the markings traced more than once in the past three days when she thought no one was looking.

“You gave him your word.” A brief silence. “And he has resources at his disposal. He might be able to help your brother.”

Manon grimaced. “What makes you so loyal to him?” She would not speak of Perrin. Could not.

Another silence. “Will defying him now make you free of him?”

Free. The word settled on Manon’s chest. Both a burden and a promise. Or perhaps there was no difference. Once before, with her father in prison, her mother gone, her brother dead, Manon had cast off the burden of hope. When exactly it had come slinking back, worked its way, undetected, into her mind, she did not know.

“None of us are free, Luca,” Manon said. “We are all bound to something, even if we do not see it.”

She looked up. Luca loomed in her doorway, one shoulder against the frame. She had not heard him come close.

“I was bound to the Principe of Licenza, but I made a choice,” he said. “A choice to honor the things I learned as a child. A choice to place the needs of another over my own.”

“You may have broken one chain, but you have forged another in its stead,” Manon said. She kept her gaze fixed on Luca’s torso. “And do not think for a moment the Archduke will not use it to his advantage.”

Luca straightened and, unbidden, Manon’s gaze flickered to his face. She looked away just as quickly.

“You think me simple, Manon,” he said, his voice quiet but firm. “You think I cannot grasp the fact that men and women like your Archduke are like storms, liable to loose a bolt of lightning at any moment. You think that if I had any sense, I would disappear into the wilderness, where the only predators are those I can hunt with my bow.” He paused. “Because that’s what you want to do.”

Manon’s chair clattered against the floorboards as she stood. No longer did she avoid his gaze. Her vision pressed in around her.

“Do not presume to know me.”

Luca made no move, either to advance or in retreat. After a moment, he sighed and spoke again. “What you see as chains, and none of your making, I see as

choices, Manon. Perhaps some of those choices were poor, perhaps some were forced upon me and my options were limited. But I refuse to live as though I am a leaf buffeted about by the wind." He waited, his gaze intent. "I chose to help you, Manon, and, yes," he nodded, "that puts me, and the secret I carry, within your Archduke's grasp. But why would I see that choice, that bond, even a shared fate, as something to resent?"

Manon shook her head and worked to bring saliva into her mouth. "You speak as though bonds were a thing of strength. I have only known them to destroy." Her father's face drifted before her.

To her surprise, Luca smiled. She did not think she could bear the tender compassion in his eyes, the way he looked at her as though she were a wounded animal in his forest.

"I am sorry that is all you have known. I am sorry you have taught yourself that being alone is the only way to live."

"No, no, you don't get to do that," Manon muttered. She stepped forward, to do what, she didn't know, but Luca's face had changed, his eyes no longer on hers, one hand frozen as he reached for the doorframe.

"Manon." His voice was hardly more than a whisper.

She looked down, following the new line of his gaze—and promptly dropped the bronze disc to the floor. It spun on one edge, a neat pirouette, and then rattled to a halt as it fell flat.

It was glowing.

As was Manon's hand.

A thin film of fire coated Manon's left hand, pulsing slightly, tinged with blue. And then the disc winked out, the bronze dull once more, and the flames vanished, leaving behind a cold chill on Manon's skin, a chill that was not just the sudden absence of warmth. Tentatively, Manon touched her palm with the fingers of her other hand. Ice.

"Luca," Manon began—but then she looked up and the words fled. The hunter was framed in a soft orange haze, but not because of Manon's fire, no. Manon raised a shaky hand, trying to point, trying to speak. Frowning, Luca turned.

A warm light suffused his room. The thick pane of glass on the single window muted and muddied the sunset hues, but even so, there was no mistaking, despite Manon's fervent wish otherwise, that beyond the glass, the night was alive with fire.

Verdienne was burning.

Manon remembered to collect the disc from where it had fallen—just—and then she was reaching for her pack. As her mind built bridges between the cold fire that had embraced her hand, the light emanating from the disc, and the savage fire that roared in the night around them, she could not calm it for long enough to recall if she had removed anything from her pack.

Luca's voice came to her, a senseless shout. He grabbed her sleeve, his other hand gripping his pack, his holster of knives, and his bow, pulled her from her room. Together they careened down the staircase, the smell of smoke growing stronger. Other patrons of the inn stumbled from their rooms in their nightclothes, asking questions Manon didn't dare answer.

"Fire!"

The cry rose up from the ground floor, and with it came screams and shouts from the night, battering against the inn. Panic set in, a man with a child in his arms pushed past Luca, breaking his grip on Manon. A woman tripped, her flailing arms catching at Manon as she went down—they both went down together, Manon tumbling on the stairs until she came to a painful stop against the wall of the landing.

Feet pounded past. Manon felt the back of her head. No blood. Smoke in the air now.

"Luca!" Manon shouted back up the stairs. No response. She tried again as she rose to her feet, one hand against the wall in search of support. A figure loomed through the smoke. A man. Not Luca. He barreled into her, his arms shoving her back against the wall as he hurtled down the last steps. Manon gasped at the pain in her chest, blinked back sudden tears. "Luca!" Her voice caught in her throat. Manon took a step, felt a restraint on her calf. She looked down. The woman stared back at her, one hand clutching at Manon's boot, her body twisted at an awkward angle

where she had fallen. Blood trickled from her nose and her other arm was tucked beneath her torso in a way that ought not to be possible.

“Please,” the woman whispered. “Don’t leave me.”

Manon took a breath, couldn’t. The smoke was thick, pouring down the stairs. She tore her gaze from the woman’s face, looked up—no sign of Luca. Coughing now, Manon shifted the strap of her pack on her shoulder, then bent and grabbed the woman’s hand, one arm snaking around her waist as she tried to lift her to her feet. A crash from above sent them both ducking for cover that wasn’t to be found, but the beam from the ceiling landed above them—singed, smoking, riddled with pockets of embers—on the stairs.

Manon rose up again, tried to scream for Luca, choked, took a step toward the burning beam, but the woman’s hand held her back and together they lurched down the stairs. Below, the inn’s common room was empty save for smoke. Halfway to the door, the woman collapsed against Manon, sending them both to their knees. Manon, eyes burning, lungs screaming, her pack slipping from her shoulder, tried to drag the woman to her feet, saw her eyes roll back, saw she was nothing but dead weight. One last pull, Manon’s boots sliding out from under her, the woman’s fingers slipping from her grip—and then Manon was crawling away, the smoke crushing her from above, her limbs dragging beneath her.

Later, she did not remember the moment her hand found the door, did not remember how she opened it, or if it had been open already. She remembered only the way the air rushed down into her lungs, how one hand dug into the cool dirt, how a pair of arms scooped her up and carried her from danger.

And she remembered Luca, of course. Remembered the determination she had seen on his face in the moment they were separated, remembered the pity she had seen in his eyes just moments before. She remembered, too, the venom in her voice and the words she had spoken.

As the night air cooled her face, Manon understood that she was crying. She brushed at the tears, felt rough sand scrape her face. Heard a quiet voice soothing a whimpering child. Heard the gentle rhythm of waves. Saw she had been brought to a sandy shore.

Around Manon, two dozen or so refugees from Verdienne huddled in a cluster. In the distance, the city blazed. Gouts of flame stretched from rooftops, threatening the very stars. The night sky above was red and thick clouds of smoke billowed and drifted out to sea.

Luca.

Manon pushed herself to her feet, her lungs still aching, the desire to retch overwhelming. Bending at the waist, she sucked in air, willing the sensation to pass. When she straightened, she caught sight of two men a short distance from the group of survivors. They were speaking in hushed tones, one gesturing back at the city while the other pointed at the refugees. They went silent at Manon's approach.

"Where are the rest?" Manon asked. She could feel the tear tracks on her face. Could feel how her hair hung in disarray. Knew her eyes were rimmed red from smoke. But she made her voice strong. Insistent. That much, at least, she could do.

"The rest?"

Manon flung one arm back toward the group. "The rest of the people. This can't be all." It couldn't be. That was impossible. Verdienne was no fishing village.

"We don't know," the taller of the two men said, his voice quiet. "We made it out the western gate. Others could have gone east or south."

"Did you see them?" Manon pressed, fear gripping her throat.

The man shook his head. "I don't know." He glanced back at the burning city. "I might have," he said, his voice growing frantic. "There was no time."

"He was busy carrying you from the inn," the other man said, shouldering between them, his gaze narrowed, though his eyes still reflected the red glow in the night. "A stranger." The man spat at Manon's feet. "Maybe he should have left you sprawled in the dirt."

He thought, of course, that the fire was behind him, that there was no danger of being burned there on that foam-flecked shore. He did not know that the fire was close, that it surged within Manon's ribs, that she had but to let go, as easy as an exhale, and he would know its heat.

The thought filled Manon with a cold satisfaction, enough to smother the spark in her chest—for the moment.

There was also, a part of her was aware, the fact that revealing her abilities with fire was not likely to earn her any friends at the moment.

The taller man put a hand on the spitter's shoulder, his gaze on Manon. "He does not mean that," he said. "No one deserved to be left to die in that fire." Manon felt those words like a fist to her stomach, the face of the injured woman swimming before her. To her relief, the man looked back at the city once more. A roof near the wall collapsed in a rush of sound, hungry flames billowing skyward in search of more fuel. A moan rose up from the huddled survivors. No one saw Manon suck in a breath of air, saw her clench her fist against the torrent of guilt rising within, saw her walk away and disappear into the dark where she could hear only the rush of the sea.

She did not grieve for the woman, not really. The choice had been clear to Manon and remained so—leave her and live, and Manon intended to live. But as Manon crouched in the sand, each wave cresting over the toes of her boots, her head hanging between her knees, she was conscious only of the way the disc had shone with the light of the sun and the way her hand had burned with a fire hotter than any she could summon. That the two were connected, she had no doubt. It seemed Alexandre de Minos had not been wrong after all.

That the former had caused the latter was a certainty she was trying to understand. Because Manon could not remember one instance when she had produced flames without summoning them intentionally. Not as a child, when her skills were unruly and unpredictable. Not even in the hunting manor when her gift had come roaring back to her body after Luca had stripped it away. Even then, she had been seeking it, calling for it—desperately. But in that moment in the attic of an inn in Verdienne, she had not been reaching for it. This she knew with every fiber of her being.

Manon lifted her head and watched the small waves roll toward her. Each nearly identical to the one before, each cresting in a surge of white, and each vanishing, subsumed by the one that followed.

Manon understood something of water. Tides, currents, waves. All working in tandem, none existing without the other.



The same was true of fire. One spark could set another. One ember could give birth to an inferno.

No, she did not feel guilty over the woman she had left behind. But Manon Barca, as she trailed her fingers—fingers that had burned with blue fire—in the sea, asked herself if the fire that blazed in Verdienne was of her making.

The Manon Barca who had needed a Carrier substance to even contemplate sending her fire across the Toridium harbor, the Manon Barca who could not hold her fire without concentrating, she would have laughed at the notion. Laughed, and perhaps felt a touch of jealous longing for such strength.

But the Manon Barca who knew the disc had summoned her fire without her consent asked this question—and did not know the answer.

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Dawn came under a haze of ash and smoke.

Unable to sleep, Manon had watched the night fade, the red glow slowly dissipating as the fire inside the walls of Verdienne burned low. She had resigned herself to the fact that any attempt to search out other survivors would have to wait until burning debris no longer rained down from the sky around the city. And there would certainly be no venturing within the walls until the flames had burned themselves away and only smoldering ruins remained. Even so, Manon had tried to reason with the tall man who had carried her to safety, arguing that they ought to prepare a search party. He had been more concerned with moving the small group of men, women, and children off the beach and finding shelter and fresh water. And so Manon had taken her pack and spent the night farther down the beach, before her anger erupted.

The bronze disc lay against her chest that night. Where once she had nearly forgotten she had tucked it into that pocket, now she seemed attuned to its weight and the way it shifted in the silk lining with every movement she made. She had taken it from the pocket once, briefly, her fingers shaking, readying herself for the flames—but the disc was exactly as it had always been. Bronze, cold, unremarkable.

The moonlight giving it only the faintest sheen. Nor was there any change in Manon, at least none that she could feel. There was some relief in this, but not enough to allow her to sleep, and she had risen from her bed of sand more than once to pace her way through the night.

She was not the only one. She saw figures silhouetted in red staring at the city—their home. And when morning rolled in from the east, the sun marred by the cloud of smoke over Verdienne, the man from the night before approached her once more.

“We are moving inland,” he said. Weariness ate at his features. “You are welcome to join us. There is fresh water not far, and a farm just over that rise. From there we can begin our search.”

“I must look for someone.”

“So must we all. There will be time for that.” He swallowed. “It is burning still.”

“I will not wait,” Manon said. She reached down for her pack and hefted it over her shoulder, but when she made to step around him, he moved with her, one hand coming up to hover in front of her chest as though he meant to restrain her.

“It is too dangerous to go alone. I will come with you.” He glanced at the group. “Marcurio can lead them.”

Manon stared at him for a moment, debating whether it was worth it to argue, half-hoping her glare might scare him off so she didn’t have to. In the end, she shrugged.

“Suit yourself. But I’m not waiting.”

And with that, Manon strode toward the city of ash.

She heard him hurry to catch up after a moment’s hesitation, his long legs striding evenly with hers. She hoped he would not feel the need to speak.

“I am Vincenzo,” he said.

It seemed this was not to be so.

Manon walked on, her gaze fixed on the gate set in the western-facing section of wall. She certainly did not intend to offer name in return.

“My father served on Verdienne’s council for years.”

Excellent, a life story.

“I am glad he is not here to see this day.” Four steps later: “May I ask where you’re from?”

“Arconia.” Manon pushed the syllables through a clenched jaw. She would rather say nothing at all, but excessive silence attracted just as much attention as an inordinate amount of talk. Victor had taught her that.

She felt Vincenzo’s gaze shift from the horizon. She risked a glance, buried the frown rising to her face. The man’s face had lit up. “Then you will have seen the Arch-Commander. Do you know him?”

Manon squinted into a sudden gust of smoky air, one hand raised to shield her eyes from sand, glad for the chance to delay her answer to this most unexpected question.

“Arconia is rather large,” she said, when the wind died down. “We don’t all know each other.” She didn’t bother to hide the derision from her voice. She would, however, hide the fact that she had spoken with the Arch-Commander of Arconia mere days before—saved his life, even.

“Of course, of course,” Vincenzo said, nodding as though he sincerely wished to detach his skull from his neck. “A foolish question. I ask only because the Arch-Commander is a hero in my city, honored each year with a day of celebration and thanksgiving.”

Vincenzo’s steps slowed with those words, and then he came to a stop. Sighing, Manon halted and turned back to face him. He stared over her head, seeing neither her, nor, she suspected, the black smoke blotting out the sun. He dropped his gaze, shoulders falling with his head.

“It seems even Alexandre de Minos could only forestall our fate, not save us from it entirely.”

And then Manon understood why they were speaking of Alexandre de Minos at all.

“Oh,” she said. Twisting, Manon looked over her shoulder.

“I remember the day he arrived like it was yesterday, though four years have passed,” Vincenzo said. “We had been fending off the raiders for six days, but we were no match for their numbers or their thirst for blood. I do not believe we

would have lasted another night. They would have stormed the walls, killed us all, and claimed the gold in those hills for themselves and their paymasters. And then Furio Andromachus, that cursed pirate, would have made good on his promise and burned Verdienne to the ground.” He looked up at Manon. She saw tears glimmering in his eyes and a lopsided smile on his face. “He came from the west, nothing more than a speck on the sands.” Manon understood this to be de Minos. “The sun falling into the sea behind him.” Vincenzo turned away from Manon and looked down the beach. “Those of us on the walls thought it an illusion, a shimmering hope that would vanish with the light. But on he rode, and behind him,” Vincenzo’s voice caught, “a wave of cavalry, their armor shining brilliantly in the sun, bright banners heralding Furio’s doom.”

Manon could see it. Against her will, Vincenzo’s words came alive. She could almost hear the pounding hooves of the charge, could almost feel the rush of air in the wake of the horses. She brushed at her forearm, calming the hairs that stood on end.

Vincenzo turned to face Manon once more. Tear tracks ran down his cheeks to his jaw. “They swept down on the raiders like avenging guardians, heedless of the fact that Andromachus outnumbered them four to one. Drove them into the sea or slaughtered them where they stood. Not a man escaped the Arch-Commander’s wrath.” The gentle smile returned. “And afterward, he had the grace to commend our efforts, our failing spirits. He told us we had defended our city with honor and never asked for anything in return.” Vincenzo’s shoulders rose and fell in heavy sigh. “And now we have failed him.”

Manon felt her stomach twist, felt the cold blue fire in her hand once more.

“This was not of your doing. Nor was it the hand of some divine being. This was fire, nothing more,” she said, wondering if the words were as much for herself as for the man in front of her. “But there is no Arch-Commander coming to save Verdienne. We must see what we can save for ourselves. Come.”

Recounting the story of the savior of Verdienne—the Guardian, Manon realized, belatedly making the connection with the seemingly endless stream of titles

attributed to Alexandre de Minos—appeared to have taken the conversation from Vincenzo and they passed the rest of the distance to the gate without a word.

The smoke was thick in the air, but Manon was not the only one of the two of them to notice that the walls around the city were oddly unblemished by the telltale signs of fire. She glanced at Vincenzo as they stood at the gate. He was scanning the blocks of stone on either side of the gate, his brow furrowed, and when his gaze came to rest on the wooden timbers of the gate itself, his lips parted slightly in confusion.

“It’s not even charred,” he murmured. “The fire burned so hot and fast, and yet the gate is untouched.”

Manon let him speak for them both and watched with her arms crossed over chest as Vincenzo approached the doors of the gate. Tentatively, he reached out a hand and placed his palm against the wood. He jumped back, withdrawing his hand and cradling it against his chest

Hot, then. Perhaps the gate was yet burning from the inside.

“We’ll try the southern one,” Manon said. But Vincenzo didn’t move to follow. The look on his face as he stared at her was hollow.

“Touch it,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Please. Tell me I am not mad.”

Frowning, Manon stepped close to the timbers and stretched out her hand—and jerked it back just as Vincenzo had.

Ice. Ice cold.

Fear fled through Manon’s limbs. Without thinking, her eyes on the gate, she touched her chest pocket, felt the thin edge of the bronze disc, felt its weight, no heavier or lighter than it had ever been. Manon dropped her hand quickly as she saw Vincenzo’s gaze shift to her. She watched him for signs of suspicion, but his face was a mire of other things.

“What is this?” he breathed.

Manon had no answer. And another question was working its way into her mind.

“Vincenzo, when you carried me from the city, did you shut the gate? Did anyone shut the gate behind us?” Manon tried—did not think she succeeded—to keep the panic rising in her chest from showing in her voice.

Vincenzo was shaking his head. “Why would we shut it? There were people inside.” His voice was soft, his eyes unfocused.

Steeling herself against the cold, Manon put her shoulder into one half of the gate and pushed. It didn’t budge.

“Help me.”

Vincenzo braced himself next to her and together they put their weight into the gate. Nothing.

“Bared,” Manon muttered.

“But why?”

“And how.” It was with those words that Manon felt the disc in her pocket shift—imperceptibly, perhaps nothing more than a disturbance by the rise and fall of her chest as she inhaled. Perhaps. And yet Manon stiffened as though battered by a sudden gust of wind.

“Are you all right?” Vincenzo asked.

Manon swallowed hard, her palms warming, sure her pocket was radiating beams of light. But Vincenzo’s face was merely concerned, not filled with dread and accusation.

“Fine,” Manon said. She touched the back of her head, as though afflicted with pain. There *was* a convenient bump from where her skull had struck the wall of the inn the night before. A wince seemed appropriate.

“Are you injured? Perhaps we should go back.”

“No.” Manon brought an edge back into her voice. “We go to the southern gate.”

To her relief, Vincenzo accepted this with a nod and they began to follow the wall around the city, away from the sea. From time to time, as they walked, Manon reached out the fingers of her left hand and let them brush against the wall. It was cold. Not the frigid ice of the gate, but chilled, like stone under a low winter sun. But the day was warm already, the sun fierce behind the smoke above Verdienne—not

to mention the fact that the city itself was surely warm and smoldering, a great hoard of coals banked for the morning. Manon said nothing of this chill to Vincenzo.

The southern gate of Verdienne was the grandest, the twin gatehouse towers built up to survey the wall and the open stretch of land between the city and forested hills. A tattered remnant of a banner fluttered mournfully in the smoky air. Vincenzo stared up at it while Manon but her hand to the iron—no wooden timbers here—of the gate itself. Vincenzo looked at her, his eyes asking the question.

Manon shook her head. “The same.”

“I don’t understand.”

Manon didn’t answer. To answer was to invite further talk. Further talk was dangerous when one was considering the possibility that one might be responsible for both the fire and the ice.

She was about to suggest they continue on their increasingly futile circumnavigation of the city when a shout from the direction of the trees had them both turning to seek out the source. For a moment, Manon allowed herself to hope, but then Vincenzo was shouting and waving his arms, his face suffused with joy.

Not Luca, then.

Three figures approached. Vincenzo ran to meet them while Manon watched the reunion from a slight distance. Only when one of the two women, who sported a livid burn on her neck and wore a singed uniform Manon took to be city watch, turned her attention to Manon did Vincenzo attempt to make introductions, an immediately awkward affair given that he remained ignorant of Manon’s name.

“My friend and I have been trying to enter the city,” he said.

The woman with the burn turned her heavy gaze on Manon once more, then crossed the distance between them. She stuck out her hand, though neither the gesture nor her face were particularly welcoming.

“Gisella Lumero, second in command of the eighth cohort of the watch.” A slight hesitation, the stern countenance wavering. “Though I am afraid I am now acting captain of the eighth cohort.” Lumero bore herself up under Manon’s gaze.

“Manon.” No need for anything beyond that. But Manon did shake the woman’s hand.

Manon let Vincenzo relate their encounter with the western and southern gates, both the strange iciness and the fact that they were bared from the inside. Lumero vehemently denied the possibility of this, insisting that she had been the last to escape, helping others until it was nearly too late, and that the gate was open when last she saw it. She went so far as to march up to the iron and try her strength against it, even pounding a fist for good measure. Manon tried not to exhale too loudly.

“Impossible,” Gisella Lumero muttered.

“And yet, here we are,” Manon said. She tried to steer the conversation back to usefulness. “You said others. How many escaped from this gate? Where are they?”

The man, older, his clothing worn and not cut from fine material, his hair a grey tangle, spoke up. “I counted one hundred and sixty-four survivors this morning.”

“Sixty-two, Telemon,” Lumero cut in, hands on her hips.

The man sighed and went on as though she had not spoken. “We are just beyond the line of trees,” he said, pointing to where they had emerged.

“Did you see a man, a hunter?” Manon asked, her voice rushing through the words. “He had a bow. Just taller than I am. Unkempt hair. Luca. His name is Luca.”

The man called Telemon hesitated, then shook his head. Manon understood the delay did not indicate uncertainty, only that the man did not wish to be the bearer of bad news.

“And to the east?” she asked. “Do you know if anyone made it out the eastern gate?”

It was the second woman who answered. She was pregnant and clearly in some discomfort, but there was a dignity about her the others did not have, despite being clothed only in a long night dress. “We sent three to the east to search down the beach first thing this morning. They have not yet returned.”

Vincenzo took her hand, his forehead creased with concern. “Your husband?”

The woman offered a small smile. “I remain hopeful.” Manon could not help but think that both the words and the smile were for Vincenzo’s sake.

“He is within.”



The voice was both resonant and weightless and Manon had the sensation of it filling her senses, pouring into her ears and nose as a wave claims the drowned. Spinning, Manon tried to find the source, saw Vincenzo and the others do the same. She saw nothing but sand and boulders and burnt things.

“Look to the sun.”

This time Manon cringed as the voice plunged deep into her. She felt it rumble within her bones and staggered against the sudden onslaught, nearly dropping to one knee. The man called Telemon caught her elbow, his face a poor echo of her distress and Manon understood, as she looked from Vincenzo to Lumero to the pregnant woman, that they did not feel it as she did.

“Yes, that is right, look upon me. Look, and know my glory.”

Vincenzo’s face was slack, his mouth agape, his gaze fixed on the top of the wall.

Manon turned.

Gold and grinning.

Just as Alexandre de Minos had claimed.

Gold and grinning and crowned with dark silver.