

## Prologue

285AE

Campfire smoke drifted through the crisp morning air, and the livestock began to stir in their pens. Soon, the village would be bustling, marking the start of another day that would meld into the next, until it was no longer worth keeping track.

Usually, I craved the predawn quiet, but with every briny breeze and wave crashing beyond the forest cliffs, I thought of *them*. It felt like a lifetime ago, and if I let the sound of the distant waterfalls fill my ears, I thought of her and of *us*. This was the life she'd wanted, simple and hidden away with nothing but the Old California coast stretching out for miles each way. Even if the memories felt hazier as the years continued to pass, I still ached every time I remembered life from . . . *before*.

With a reluctant sigh, I pushed the memories away and peered through the ferns and redwoods, deeper into the forest. These people were my concern now—my promise—not the ghosts of the past, and the longer the forest remained silent around me, the tighter the tension coiled in my gut.

The hunting party was two days late returning, and while Fin and Beast were the best hunters we had, Fin was also only nineteen, and he was our most impulsive and stubborn hunter, too. I hoped he hadn't decided to go off course. Like most of the villagers, he lived a sheltered life in the thick of the trees, where the Pacific Ocean met the towering redwoods jutting from the cliffs.

To Fin and everyone else who lived in the village, Herodson, the dangers of nearby Corvo City, and even the Corvo queen were little more than watered-down cautionary tales that

spanned the centuries—musings of power-hungry manipulators that shaped the decaying world into the rural, lonely, and haunted place it had become.

Fin hadn't lived through war and famine, and his heart wasn't hardened by the loss of everyone he held dear. Even his parents were less than a dull memory, dead too soon after he was born. While he and the others of the village were eager to learn and they welcomed my teachings, Fin had no idea how important our history would be one day. To him. To his sister. To his people.

The cabin door opened, and Autumn poked her head out. Her blonde hair hung long and curly around her shoulders, mussed from sleep. Her green eyes shone brightly in the overcast sunlight, and I looked at the glowing embers of the fire to avert my gaze.

A rooster crowed somewhere down the lane, and Autumn came over to warm her hands to the flames across from me. "You never came in last night," she said quietly, her tone almost careful. We had many unspoken agreements, and not talking about *us*, whatever we were, was one of them. "You're worried about Fin," she added. "But you've taught him well, J. He's okay—"

"How do you know?" My gaze cut to hers, and the knot in my gut tightened.

Autumn's expression, always a little reserved when it came to me, softened. "I can feel it."

"Then where the hell are they?" I grumbled.

Her shoulders straightened at my tone, and I stared back into the morning fire.

"Sorry," I said and tossed another log onto the flames. "You didn't deserve that."

Autumn deserved a lot more than anything I could ever give her.

I pulled the kettle off the rack and poured her a cup of hot water for her tea. With a tight-lipped smile, she reached for the mug and held it in her hands to warm them.

My frown slid back into place, and I scrubbed my hands over my face, exhaling an anxious breath.

*“Promise me you’ll keep them safe.”* Words from another life echoed like a distant heartbeat, always present and everlasting. I couldn’t fail them. I couldn’t fail *her*.

“You should go,” Autumn whispered. “You know you won’t feel better until you do, and if anyone can track them, it’s you.” I didn’t deserve the patience in her voice. She nodded toward the cabin. “I readied your pack last night, just in case,” she added, and this time I met her gaze. I didn’t deserve her kindness, either. Despite the carefully constructed walls between us, it felt like she knew me better than I knew myself sometimes.

Wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders, Autumn turned for the cabin, her mug clutched in one hand, and I rose to my feet. She was right, she was always right. I needed to find Fin and the hunting party because, after a lifetime of running, all I could ever do was worry.

I met her at the door as she stepped out again with my pack hanging at her side. “I put in some meat and bread for you,” she said, handing it to me, her muscles straining.

With a nod of thanks, I slung the pack over my shoulder, then reached for my bow and quiver resting beside the door.

“Your pack should have everything you need for tracking and in case it rains,” she added a bit uneasily; her eyes were fixed on my pack as she licked her lips. “You have water, and I even put some—”

“Autumn.” Her name was nearly a whisper as I willed her to meet my gaze. I wanted her to see what I couldn’t bring myself to say. *You deserve a whole man who can love you the way you should be loved.*

Finally, her green eyes that held too much hope and too much forgiveness shifted to mine.

“Thank you,” I said instead.

She blinked and dipped her chin with a steadying sigh. “You’re welcome.” Despite the dozens of reasons why I could never give her what she wanted or deserved, she was always there, unbearably gracious and understanding. She cleared her throat. “You should go before the winds pick up again and compromise their trail more than it already is.” With a forced smile, she turned to the door. “Be safe—”

“Hey.” I reached for her arm.

Autumn’s eyes shimmered in the overcast morning as her gaze trailed from my hand up to my face.

I leaned in and pressed a kiss to her lips, offering her all that I could. “Take care of everyone for me until I get back.”

Slowly, her eyes flitted open and she inhaled a steadying breath. “Just bring my little brother back to me, Jake.”

With a nod and a final glance at the village, I turned and headed into the forest, determined to find Fin.

#

The pack grew heavier on my back as I weaved around the redwoods that towered over me, following the path of broken ferns toward Fallen Wood, where the trees were upturned and their roots were exposed and outreaching, like giant witch fingers in a foggy forest. It was a graveyard of giants and provided ample places to hide if Fin and the hunters had needed to do so.

But a nagging voice told me that if they were still alive, I would know for certain. Beast would've returned home, at least, or Claire would have sent a telepathic message letting us know they would be gone longer. Then again, she would've warned us if something had gone wrong, too.

I often wondered if I would regret establishing the descendant community here. In my heart, it was the only place I'd ever considered home—the only place that felt right. And as the Corvo kingdom continued to expand, it was easy enough to ignore the possible dangers because I'd convinced myself that the vast, Feral-ridden, ancient woods would protect us and that the descendants' strong, multifaceted Abilities would keep them safe. Now, I worried I had made a grave mistake.

For four hours I'd been tracking Fin's carefully covered steps, only identifiable by the occasional broken fern or matted leaves. Gripping my bow tightly in one hand, I crouched down to inspect the tracks more closely. There were no footprints or discarded debris. They'd done as they were taught, and as far as I could tell, I'd been the only one to follow after them. From this direction, at least.

As their trail led me closer to the felled giants in the clearing, I heard the caw of ravens and saw a flutter through the trees, then a familiar gray and red tunic. Lifting my bow with unease, I moved closer, eyeing the muddy footprints and listening to the rustling conifers above.

The ravens dispersed as I stepped through the ferns. I spotted Timmons' body in a bloody heap first. His eyes were open, and his mouth was agape. He'd been dead for a handful of hours, at least.

Heart racing, I scoured the forest floor, noticing four more bodies spread out between the trees. I ran to each of them, checking their pulses out of desperation, though it was clear they'd been dead through the night.

Claire. Bud. Chuck. Dallace. All of them had a hole seared through their chests. Not the result of a Feral ambush with knives and spears. The wounds were too sophisticated, too precise for a horde of Crazies, and the footprints in the moist earth were thick-soled and uniform, every tread matching the next. These innocent hunters were killed by well-trained, Ability-wielding soldiers that were too far from Corvo City to have been here for any reason other than one: they were looking for something.

I suppressed the urge to call for Fin as I rose to my feet, my gaze darting through the trees. A predatory yowl echoed, and I spun around. A cougar stood on the top of a boulder, his tail lashing anxiously behind him.

"Beast," I rasped, and another wave of dread washed over me. "Where is he?"

The cougar's ears laid back and he lifted his muzzle to the air, as if he were sniffing for danger, and yowled again. Eventually, he turned for me to follow him.

My footsteps were heavy, crunching over twigs as I hurried around the upturned roots toward the mass of boulders at the clearing's edge. Beast jumped down from one boulder to the next, until he landed on the ground with a thud, and trotted toward a thicket that butted up to the boulder's base.

Fin was crumpled in the brush. His tan tunic was dirty and torn, but unlike the others, he wasn't covered in blood, and there was no hole in his chest. Only cuts and bruises darkened his face and hands, and I dropped to my knees beside him.

“Fin,” I choked. My pack fell to the ground with a thunk. He was unconscious, but he was alive. “Fin,” I snapped more urgently.

Beast paced behind me, his tail still lashing through the air as he growled with unease.

“Fin,” I bit out and shook him awake. “Wake up, damn it.”

Slowly, his eyelids flitted open, and my breath caught in my throat. His eyes were the same brilliant green as his sister's, and I allowed myself a sigh of relief.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice low and calmer as the panic subsided a little.

He blinked. “What—” His eyes rounded as his memories fell back into place, and he nearly shot to his feet. “They were here—the rangers.” Horror filled Fin's eyes. “They had a Null with them, stronger than me. I couldn't detect their Abilities until . . .” He shook his head in disbelief. “They surrounded us. They got Dallace first, and then—”

“Slow down, Fin,” I told him. “Take a breath.”

But Fin was running toward Claire's body before I could stop him. “No,” he murmured, stumbling the last few steps. “We weren't doing anything wrong.” His voice cracked as he knelt beside his best friend's body. “They didn't have to hurt us. We were just hunting, we were on the trail like you said. I was going to go a different way, but you told me not to . . . I just—”

“I know, kid,” I said, crouching down beside him. I gripped his shoulder and made him look at me. “This is what they do. It's what they've *always* done.” But not for sport. There was always a reason for the queen's rangers to seek us out, rational or not. “What did they want, Fin? What were they looking for?” The village, a hundred people strong, was in danger.

His eyes welled with tears as he glanced from one fallen friend to the next. “Who.”

The crease in my brow deepened. “What?”

Fin blinked at me, bleary-eyed. “Not *what* they were looking for,” he said more forcefully. “*Who*.”

I leaned back as his words sank in. I knew the answer before he said it.

“You, Jake . . . They were looking for *you*.”

Blood-boiling hatred and white-knuckled fear flooded through me at once. “And you’re alive because they have a message,” I finished for him.

Fin nodded as a vacant expression filled his face, like he was still trying to catch up to all that had happened. Or maybe he was finally starting to understand everything I’d been trying to explain all of these years.

Finally, Fin rose to his feet and stared down at me with uncertainty. “They want you to go to Corvo City, or they’ll return and kill us all.”

It was only a matter of time before something like this happened again. Jaw set, I rose to my feet. I’d become too complacent; I should’ve been prepared for this.

“They know where the village is,” Fin continued. “They know we’re the descendants of their *Patrons*, and they know who you are and that you’re here. This was only a warning.”

I stared at him as my breath seized in my lungs and her familiar, haunting voice filled my head again. “*Promise me you’ll keep them safe.*” I glanced from Claire’s body to the bodies of Dallace and Timmons, imagining the look on their families’ faces when Fin returned with the news.

We’d been able to live in peace for years, on the periphery of a world I barely recognized anymore, but our years of feeling a false sense of security near the outskirts of a

corrupt kingdom were gone. The Corvo queen had found us, and I knew all too well that her soldiers would keep to their word if I didn't give her what she wanted.

"Run back to the village, Fin," I told him as my legs moved with deadly purpose. I gathered Claire's body into my arms and carried her over to the protection of the brush around the boulder where their remains would be safe there until Autumn and Fin could return for them. "I'll hide their bodies for now. Tell your sister what's happened, and be quick and quiet about it—I don't want everyone seeing them like this."

Fin listened with rapt attention. His fingers ticked at his sides, and I could see the whirlwind of questions and fear in his eyes. But he pushed the questions away, along with his tears, and nodded.

"Beast stays here to keep the animals away until you return. Bring the wagon to collect their bodies, then take them home to their families. Go on, now," I commanded, and strode over to Dallace.

Fin turned to leave, then froze, and his head snapped to me. "What are you going to do?"

I didn't look at him as I lugged Dallace's muscular frame into the brush to lay beside Claire.

"What I have to do."

Fin stomped over to me. "What's that mean, Jake?" he demanded. The authority in his voice was admirable, and I was proud, even.

"It means, I'm turning myself in," I admitted.

"They'll just keep coming for us, whether you turn yourself in or not."

"No, they won't," I told him with certainty.

“You said yourself, we can’t trust them.” I could hear his frantic footsteps behind me as I headed toward Timmons’ cold, dead body.

“They want me. Not you.” If nothing else, I could learn what exactly it was they wanted. They knew the location of our village, but they hadn’t attacked and killed us all in our sleep. There had to be a reason.

“You don’t know that for sure,” Fin argued. “What if they come back for us anyway?”

There were three more hunter’s bodies to find; eight innocent people to bury because of me, and they would be the last. I would make damn sure of that.

“Jake—”

“It has to be done, kid,” I barked out.

“But if you give them what they want, we’ll have no leverage against them.”

I whipped around to face him. “And if I do nothing, they will kill all of you for certain. Sorry, Fin, but I won’t have that on my conscience. No more death, not because of me.”

“But . . . what about Autumn? What about your life here—we might never see you again.”

“Your sister wants you safe,” I told him. “And this is the only way that’s going to happen. She’ll agree with this decision. Now get the hell out of here so your friends can be laid to rest. Go, Fin.”

“Jake—”

“Now!” I shouted. My chest heaved and my heart ached as I realized he was right about one thing—this might be the last time I ever saw him. It would likely be the last time I ever stepped foot in this forest again.

Fin's eyes narrowed, and he lifted his chin defiantly. He was a good kid—a good man—great even, but he was stubborn, and I saw the wheels turning behind those expressive eyes of his.

“It's the only option,” I told him more calmly. “I'm not watching all of you die because of me. No more will be said about it.”

Fin's nostrils flared and he squared his shoulders, his hands balling into fists at his sides. Then, finally, he forced himself to walk away.

“Fin,” I growled.

He paused but didn't look back at me. “Take care of your sister for me.”

My heart was a sledgehammer in my chest as I waited for him to say something, something that meant he didn't hate me, or at least that he wouldn't hate me forever. The last thing I wanted was to leave him, the way so many of the people in his life had, but I had no choice.

I worried his acknowledgment wouldn't come until, finally, he said, “I will.” He stalked into the trees without bothering to look back.

Nerves fluttering, I held my breath as I pulled the heavy door to the vault open on silent hinges. I exhaled my relief, grateful I hadn't disturbed the quiet of the sleeping castle with my midnight sneaking. It probably wouldn't look good for the crown princess to be caught snooping around her mother's vault in the middle of the night.

The whispers I had been hearing for months grew louder as the door opened, convincing me that I was on the right track, and renewed determination overrode any nervousness about being here. Mother had long ago forbidden me from entering this vault, but I couldn't resist any longer. Not when I could sense she was hiding something from me—something terrible. And certainly not with the whispers interfering with my daily life. Much longer, and I feared they would drive me insane.

As I moved into the open doorway, the soft orange light emanating from the electric torch in my hand spilled into the vault, illuminating a cluttered space filled with a hodgepodge of crates, chests, and other storage containers. The stone walls and floor appeared golden in the warm light, and the air had a dank, musty quality that made me wrinkle my nose.

Sid stirred on my shoulder, the raven anxiously ruffling his feathers.

“Go on, look around,” I said, glancing at him sidelong. “I know you want to.”

With a muted caw and another ruffle of feathers, Sid launched himself into the air, his talons digging into the leather lining the shoulder of my robe before releasing. I tilted my head away from him, but it was never truly possible to avoid the brush of his onyx wings. I watched him soar around the vault, appreciating the graceful swerve and sway of his flight.

Obsidian—Sid, as I called him—and I couldn't actually speak to one another, at least, not in the same way some Telepaths could communicate with non-human creatures, but we understood each other well enough. As a raven, he was one of the few types of birds that could mimic human speech, which helped. He had been my companion since birth, when he was little more than a fledgling; such was the tradition in my family, established nearly two centuries ago, with the dawn of the Corvo dynasty. Over the eighteen years that Sid and I had been together, we had developed our own form of communication.

I supposed my Ability helped. I belonged in the Empath Class, as had all crown princesses and queens of the Corvo dynasty before me. Whereas Mother was a strong but common Direct Empath, her gifts allowing her to glean thoughts and memories from any human within her sight, I was a rarer Resonant Empath, my gifts triggered by touch and centered around memories, though I could sense another's surface thoughts and emotions as well, so long as my skin was touching theirs. The only upside to the way my Ability had manifested was that it wasn't limited to humans; I could pick up memories—or *resonances*—from both non-human creatures and from certain objects. It didn't enable me to communicate with Sid telepathically, but it did allow me to see the world as he saw it, through his memories. It helped me understand him and come up with new ways to help him understand me.

I watched Sid make one more circuit around the vault before landing on a stack of crates near the center of the room. He fluffed his feathers as he settled his wings, and then he started preening.

Smirking, I shook my head and turned away from him. Silly bird. I reached for the door handle and pulled it toward me, easing the heavy door shut. Electric torch held out in front of me, I cautiously wound through the room, following the lure of the whispers. They stemmed

from a resonance—the strongest I had ever felt. It lingered longer than any had before, almost seeming to have a mind of its own.

The vault wasn't nearly as grand or mysterious as I had imagined, more like a glorified storage room than the trove of treasures I had constructed in my mind. I walked past stacks of wooden crates, mixed with chests and trunks of every imaginable style, from antique to modern, from leather to wood to metal. Steamer trunks had been stored beside hope chests, museum crates beside rusted footlockers, the only similarity shared between them the thick layer of dust coating their lids.

The whispers led me to the back corner of the vault, to where a carved wooden chest, thick with dust and dings born of countless years of use, lay buried under three smaller crates. I touched each crate in turn, then brushed my fingertips along the top of the chest.

Instantly, the whispers increased in volume and fervor, excited by the contact. This was it—what they wanted me to find.

I pulled my hand away and eyed the crates resting atop the chest. They weren't large. I only hoped that translated into them not being heavy, either.

I set the electric torch on a nearby steamer trunk, then reached up to the top crate and pulled it from the stack to set it on the floor beside the wooden chest. I moved the middle crate just as easily, but the bottom one proved to be too heavy to lift, so I slid it to the edge of the chest and, groaning with effort, lowered it to the floor. My grip slipped at the last second, and the crate hit the floor with a resounding thud and the crack of wood.

I crouched there for long seconds, staring at the crate. The wood panel on one side had split, and the frame at the base had popped free.

“Uh oh!” Sid exclaimed, his croaking voice ripping through the stillness of the room.

I cringed, glancing back at the raven who was watching me with one beady, black eye. “Hopefully nobody will notice that,” I muttered, biting my bottom lip.

Sid cawed, then extended his wings and hopped off his perch, gliding down to the damaged crate. His talons clacked on the wooden top as he strutted around, adjusting his wings.

The whispers drew my attention back to the chest. Two small patches on the edge of the lid had been cleared of dust, as though someone had recently been here and opened it.

That *someone* was Mother. It had to be. The whispers had started when I not-so-accidentally brushed my hand against hers in an attempt to figure out exactly what she was hiding from me. She may have been able to shield her mind from me, but with that brief contact, she had unintentionally passed on the remnants of something ancient. A resonance she couldn’t sense.

I knelt on the floor in front of the chest and pressed the heels of my hands against the edge of the lid. It barely budged with my first attempt to lift it, and I wondered if the humid bay air had warped the wood over the years. There was no saying just how old the chest was—just that it looked ancient.

Pressing my lips together, I pushed the lid up with all my might, a sharp grunt escaping from my throat. The lid creaked and groaned, slowly inching upward.

And then, suddenly, it was free. I coughed and waved away a cloud of dust as the whispers grew louder, beckoning me onward.

Sid hopped closer, then jumped from the crate to the rim of the open chest.

I reached for the electric torch and angled the warm, orange light into the chest, revealing a wide assortment of items, all worn by age. I pulled out a cloth bundle, layers of fragile, soft fabric wound around something hard, and carefully started to unwrap whatever was within. I

thought the cloth may have been a beautiful scarf, once upon a time, but the fine fabric was littered with tears and moth-holes, and it had been so discolored by age that the pattern was indiscernible. Images flitted through my mind, resonances too wispy and indistinct to make out.

When I reached the hardness at the center of the bundle, I unveiled a tiny cat curled in sleep, carved from wood and polished until it was smooth as silk. I held the figurine on my palm and closed my eyes, waiting for a resonance that never came. Like the scarf, the figurine wasn't the source of the beckoning whispers. I set both aside on the floor and reached into the chest for the next item.

An intricately carved wooden box, square, all four sides about the length of my forearm, but half as tall. Something shifted within the box, rustling softly, as though it contained pieces of paper. I lifted the hinged lid, revealing a mass of faded, crumbling photographs, their images indiscernible.

Sid crept closer along the rim of the chest, and I leaned in over the smaller box, wondering if the photographs could be salvaged and their images revealed. But opening the box hadn't excited the whispers, and only the ghosts of memories danced around the edges of my mind as I peered down at the photographs. This wasn't the source of the resonance, either, which meant I needed to move on.

I shut the box and set it aside, then reached into the chest, pulling out a pocket knife, the worn wooden handle cracked and darkened by age. When the knife didn't trigger any memories, I set it aside, too, before returning to the chest.

The next item was a book, the brown, leather cover pressed with a symbol I knew all too well. A knot that had always reminded me of a tangled heart. It was the symbol stamped onto the cover of *The Book*, printed and distributed on Mother's orders to every household within the

kingdom's borders. The Book was broken into two parts. The second half, called *The World After*, chronicled the history of the Corvo kingdom and the world that had existed before the chaos that birthed the order that now ruled our daily lives. The first part, called *The World Before*, read less like a history book and more like a novel, describing the lives and times of the Patrons—originals who, according to legend, had risen to an elite, idolized status because of their notable actions during the Turn—and imparting the Patrons' wisdom to the reader through shorter parables.

What did it mean that this symbol was here, on *this* book? Was it possible that this was the original source of *The World Before*?

I reached for the aged book, and the instant my fingertips touched the soft leather, the whispers stopped. I closed my eyes, bowed my head, and took long, soothing deep breaths, basking in the sudden silence. The quiet felt foreign and exotic. It had been so long since I'd been alone in my head—so very long—and I felt slightly unbalanced in the absence of the hum.

When I opened my eyes, a small smile curved my lips. This was it—the thing I had come here for. The thing I had defied Mother's orders for. The thing that had nearly driven me insane.

Gingerly, almost reverently, I traced the depression carved by the symbol on the cover of the book with my fingertip. This was hers. Zoe's. I could feel it.

Zoe was the Patron of my Ability Class, the original Empath. The Telepaths had Dani. The Gauges had Jason. The Elementals, Carlos. The Supers, Mase. The Oracles, Becca. The Sensors, Sam. The Movers, Camille. The Healers had Jake, but their Class was so rare that it was believed to be nearly extinct. And then there was the one whose name we never uttered, save for in hushed tones behind closed doors. Herodson, the demon Patron of the forbidden Class: the Controllers. The ones who were doomed at birth, by no fault of their own other than the

unfortunate appearance of recessive genes. The ones who were too dangerous to let live. It was the truth the Corvo kingdom had been founded upon—Controllers must die.

Sid hopped along the rim of the chest, his head cocking this way and that as he looked from me to the book and back. “Story time!” he croaked, hopping in place and fluffing his feathers. The silly raven loved it when I read out loud to him.

I laughed under my breath and shook my head. “Yeah, yeah,” I told Sid as my fingers curled around the spine of the book. “I’ll read you a story.” I gently picked the book up, turning to sit with my back resting against the front of the chest.

The leather spine creaked as I lifted the cover. The first page was blank, but when I turned to the next, I was greeted by two lines of handwriting that made my heart beat faster.

*Stories from the World Before*

*by Zoe Cartwright*

There it was—confirmation that this book really was hers. It really was *Zoe’s—the Zoe*. And not just her belonging, but her creation.

Mother had long claimed that the contents of *The World Before* had been pulled from an ancient text composed by the originals. I had never asked her for proof, but part of me always suspected her claim was merely a clever bit of propaganda. Mother was nothing if not clever. She had to be to hold the kingdom together for so long.

Heart racing, I turned the page, admiring the compact lines of neat handwriting. *Zoe’s* handwriting. I inhaled deeply, cleared my throat, and started to read the words of my Patron, written over two and a half centuries ago.

*Looking backward at the past and then forward to the future, I think about how changeable life is. How two years ago I feared such trivial things, like being unable to pay my rent on time or make a car payment. Now, along with hoping for the future, I fear what I don't know—there's still so much left to learn about this new world we're living in. In many ways, I fear my Ability because there's still so much to learn about the people around me, too . . .*

The words faded away as I continued to read, and flashes of memories filled my mind. Page after page, those flashes stretched out into moments. Into scenes. Into lifetimes.

I was a teenage boy, experiencing the prolonged illness and death of a much-beloved sister. I was a middle-aged man, a teacher, taking a chance on love after a heartbreaking loss. I was a young man making the difficult decision to leave my family behind and join the military. I was a mother, forced into servitude, and made to do terrible things in order to protect my family. I was a young woman, trying—and failing—to save her abused mother. I was a fierce mother of twins, experiencing the greatest heartbreak known to mankind—the death of my children. I was a couple of teenage girls, taking one last road trip together before saying goodbye and going our separate ways. I was a young man, struggling to tell the girl I loved how I felt.

In a flash, I was me again, reading Zoe's words from the aged pages of the book. Sid was perched on my shoulder, his head tucked against his wing, and his eyes were closed. Not wanting to disturb his slumber, I read on in silence.

*I've seen the terrifying secret Becca has been keeping from us. I can barely fathom it, let alone find the words to describe it.*

*Things are changing. The future of humankind is so uncertain, tears burn my eyes. I have to write it down—get it out of me, somehow—even if I can't tell anyone. I need to find Becca so she can explain what it is I saw. I need her to explain the insanity I witnessed.*

*In the dream, I saw—*

The sentence cut off prematurely. Brow furrowing, I turned the page, expecting to find more writing or at least an explanation for the abrupt ending to the previous section. But there was nothing. A quick search of the remaining pages revealed that the rest of the book was blank. I returned to the final entry, studying the last line.

*In the dream, I saw—*

Rereading Zoe's final words sent a chill cascading down my spine. I raised my eyes from the page, staring past the crates to the stone wall beyond, like it might reveal the secrets Zoe was hiding. What had she been about to write? What had she seen? *What* insanity?

I couldn't help but wonder if she had caught a glimpse of this world, as it was now. Of my world. It was so different from hers; just as her world was so different from what I had been told. I could see the similarities between Zoe's account of the world *before* and the stories in The Book. The resemblance was close enough to tell me Mother had pulled them from Zoe's journal,

but she had warped the words, twisted the stories, molding the truth into something that would serve her purposes. That would promote her purist ideals and keep her people docile. That would keep her kingdom strong, the iron fist with which she ruled—unbreakable.

The Patrons weren't saints. They weren't perfect beings who foresaw a world different—better—than their own. They were just like us. They were people. Human beings. They had fears and memories and so many secrets. They were just trying to survive.

Just like me.

What would they think of us now, worshipping them like gods?

Reading about events I thought I knew so well, but in Zoe's own words, shed an entirely different light on the world during the Turn, changing my perception of the world around me. Of *my* world. A world built upon lies. Curiosity far from sated, I was more desperate than ever to uncover the truth. Why had Mother been lying to us—to me, her heir—for so long? And what else was she hiding?

Because of Zoe—of her words—I was more determined than ever to find out.

I shut the book and shifted, stretching out my legs. Sid roused, ruffling his feathers as he cawed softly. “What is Mother up to?” I murmured.

Sid angled his head away from mine and snapped his beak. The raven was none-too-fond of Mother, and a hostile beak snap was his usual response whenever I mentioned her.

I smiled, peering at him out of the corner of my eye. “At least I know I can trust you,” I told him and raised a hand to tickle his fluffed up chest, earning a contented chitter.

Turning my attention back to the leather-bound book, I leafed through the pages, settling on one in the middle of the first story, filled with a sketch rather than handwriting. Zoe had drawn a burly looking man sitting at a table, his forearms resting on the surface and his eyes

filled with sympathy. How she had managed to imbue so much emotion into the sketch was beyond me. It was so lifelike, almost more realistic than a photograph.

My gift told me this was Jake, Zoe's husband, the original Healer.

Ever so lightly, I traced the lines of his face with the tip of my pointer finger. Flashes of more memories flitted through my mind's eye, resonances of moments from Zoe and Jake's life together. Happy moments. Tender moments. Painful moments. And as quickly as it started, the shuffle of memories faded away, and I was back to staring at the sketch of a man I now felt like I knew.

I had never experienced a resonance from anything so ancient as this book. I wondered if these memories were able to span the centuries because of Zoe's Ability—because she had been an Empath, like me.

A gentle chime rang out from the pendant watch hanging on a silver chain around my neck. It chimed five times, and my shoulders drooped.

"Time's up!" Sid croaked, bobbing his head like he was encouraging me to get moving.

He was right. I had set the timepiece to alert me at five in the morning. It was just under two hours until sunrise, which meant less than an hour until the servants entered my room to relight the fire in the hearth before I woke. While they probably wouldn't examine my bed closely enough to realize that the slumbering lump was really just a few pillows stuffed strategically under the covers, I wasn't willing to risk it. Not when I was finally making progress in my search for the truth.

I bent my knees and, groaning, stood up. Sid launched himself from my shoulder, flapping his onyx wings once to give himself some lift, then coasted to land atop a low stack of

trunks nearby. I quickly returned the items I had removed from the chest but hesitated in returning the book.

“Surely nobody will notice this is missing,” I murmured as I held the book over the open chest.

Making up my mind, I tucked the leather-bound book under my arm and reached out with my free hand to lower the lid of the chest. When the two lighter crates were stacked atop it once more, I turned my attention to the damaged one. With a few grunts, I nudged the offending crate partway behind the chest, turning it slightly to hide the damage from view.

I took a step back, brushing off my hands and assessing my work. Not perfect, but good enough. I retrieved the book from the chest and headed for the door.

Sid cawed, then croaked, “Finders keepers!” It was his way of saying I had left something behind.

I turned around in time to see him gliding down to land beside the electric torch, sitting on top of a steamer trunk. I hurried back, snatched up the electric torch, and headed for the door, skimming my fingertips over a few of the storage containers as I passed to see if I could pick up any residual resonances. Everything was too benign or insignificant, and my mind’s eye remained dark.

Until my fingertips made contact with a newer looking metal case sitting on top of a short stack of crates near the door.

*I had a bird’s-eye view of a room filled with stretchers, each holding a person. Some struggled against their restraints, while others were passed out cold. IVs drained blood from their arms, and red-robed individuals moved among the stretchers, changing out*

*full blood bags for empties and depositing the full bags in a large bin of ice at the center of the room.*

I jerked my hand away from the case, hissing as though I had been burned. I had no idea what I had just seen. All I knew was how it had made me feel: horrified. Who were those people, and why were they there—wherever *there* was—being held against their will as they were drained of their life's blood?

I wasn't willing to bury my head in the sand, ignoring the evidence that was right in front of me. Not any longer. I had to know what Mother was up to.

Hand shaking, I reached for the case again, guarding my mind against the disturbing resonance. I needed to find out what else the case contained besides those mental horrors. I lifted the lid and leaned closer, peering inside.

The case was filled with narrow glass vials, each tucked into an individual slot.

Taking a deep breath and holding the air in my lungs, I pinched the top of one of the vials between my thumb and forefinger and pulled it free from the case. Through the clear glass, I could see the iridescent liquid filling the vial. I tilted it to the side, brow furrowing as I watched the viscous liquid slowly shift within.

Without warning, a resonance invaded my mind.

*A man was laid out on a stretcher, strapped down as an IV drained his blood. He screamed, his body writhing and pulling against the restraints. He was so tired of this never-ending torture. He wished it would all end. Every night, he dreamed of the sweet peace of death. A sweet peace he feared he would never know.*

The resonance ended in a blink, a mere flicker in my mind's eye, but it was enough to make my heart gallop and my blood run cold. The vial slipped from my grasp and smashed against the stone floor, glass shattering. I jumped backward to avoid the splatter.

“Uh oh!” Sid croaked unhelpfully, landing beside the metal case on the crate.

I gulped, my eyes widening, and licked my lips as I stared down at the mess. I had to clean it up. I couldn't leave such glaring evidence of my intrusion, but I had no idea what the liquid was. What if it was some kind of poison?

Thinking fast, I set the book and electric torch on the crate near Sid, then shrugged out of my robe and crouched near the mess. My robe was lined with a thin layer of leather to protect me from Sid's talons; I just hoped it would stand up against shards of glass and potential poison, as well.

Thankfully, I was able to clean up the spill, only a residual sheen of wetness indicating that anything had happened, but I figured that would dry. I placed my hand down on the floor beside me, intending to push up to stand, but sucked in a sharp breath when a searing pain stabbed into my palm.

As the blood drained from my face, I raised my hand and turned it over, looking down at my palm. A small shard of glass was embedded in the heel of my hand, just below the base of my thumb, and blood trickled down my wrist and forearm.

I swallowed, my mouth instantly dry. If the liquid was some kind of poison, I would know soon enough.

And then something shocking happened.

The glass was pushed out of my flesh like my body was rejecting it. My skin burned as the wound started to close up right before my eyes. The burning turned into an itching sensation that was almost worse than the pain.

But then it stopped, and all that remained of the wound was the blood.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed.

Eyes wide, I wiped my hand on the front of my nightgown, the black silk concealing the crimson blood. When I looked at my palm again, the skin was perfect. No hint of the wound, not even a scar.

The liquid in the vials was no poison. Quite the opposite, in fact. It seemed to be some sort of miracle elixir. But how could such a thing exist? As wondrous as it seemed, I couldn't shake the horror of the resonance. The elixir was a creation born of terrible pain and suffering, of that I had no doubt.

But where was this happening? And how? Why? There were still so many questions. Too many questions. I needed to find out more before I confronted Mother about the horrifying truth.

Flustered by my discovery, I picked up the stray piece of glass, tucked it into the safety of the bundled up robe, and stood. I held out my forearm for Sid, and as he climbed up to my shoulder, his talons digging painfully into my skin, I shut the metal case. After retrieving the leather-bound book and the electric torch, I rushed to the door. I gave the vault one final scan, making sure nothing looked overtly out of place, then pushed the heavy door open and slipped out into the dark hallway before turning to ease the door shut.

“Go, Sid,” I said, craning my neck to peer at the raven on my shoulder. “Scout ahead. Make sure the way is clear.” He didn't actually understand all of those words, but he knew the base commands: *go* and *scout*.

I hissed in pain as Sid launched himself from my shoulder, his sharp talons cutting deep, but the adrenaline coursing through my blood from the discovery insulated me from the worst of the pain. I watched him fly up the hallway, wings flapping silently, and vanish around the corner. If he snapped his beak when he returned to me, then the way wasn't clear.

I followed, steps slowed by the necessity for silence. Sid returned as I neared the corner, and I tilted my head to the side, gritting my teeth to brace myself for the pain his landing would bring.

Once Sid was settled—no snap of his beak—I made my way around the corner, heading for the floor-to-ceiling portrait of a red-haired woman posing regally with a German shepherd. It was supposed to be Dani—the Dani, Patron of the Telepaths—but thanks to the memories I'd seen while reading Zoe's book, I now knew the resemblance was weak, the hair not even the right shade of red. The ink sketches within Zoe's journal captured Dani's true likeness much better.

I reached for the side of the gilded frame, finding the trick notch and depressing it. After a quick, furtive glance first up the hallway, then back down the way we had come, I pulled the frame away from the wall and slipped into the hidden passage concealed behind it. Blowing out a breath, I pulled the painting back into place and took a moment to regain my bearings.

So much had happened over the course of the night. So much had changed. I had been suspicious of Mother for a while, but now I had hard evidence that she was involved in something truly vile. I couldn't imagine a single thing she could say to justify what I had seen in the resonance from the case, or worse yet, from the vial. No ends could justify those means.

The tears of pain that lingered on the brims of my eyelids transformed, bittering to tears of sorrow and anger. Of rage.

How could she do this? My own mother. *How?* We weren't close, and she was far from the loving, doting mother figure I so often read about in books, but she had done everything on her part to keep me safe all these years. I was her final surviving daughter of four. In my heart, that protectiveness had counted for something, but maybe I'd been deluding myself, clinging to that quality above all others. Blinding myself to her wicked truth.

Sid shifted on my shoulder, the influx of physical pain momentarily drowning out the emotional agony. I had to get back to my room. Whatever else needed to be done, that was first and foremost. I could keep Mother out of my head, but if some of the servants or guards found me sneaking about in the early morning, I would have a hard time explaining myself.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders and started down the passage hidden between the walls. I wasn't the only one who knew about the passages riddling the castle, but most people avoided them—too many rats and spiderwebs. It wasn't that I enjoyed the creepy crawlies, either, but I did like the secrecy. Especially in a castle where secrets were nearly impossible to keep.

I was making my way along the passage that bordered the entry hall when I heard muffled voices. I paused, eyes narrowing as I slowly backpedaled to the peephole hidden behind a two-way mirror.

A pair of guards were escorting a haggard-looking man through the castle, their oiled black leather armor giving them a sinister appearance. These weren't simple castle guards; these were rangers.

I couldn't tell much about their prisoner's clothing, other than that it was coated in layers of drying blood. Despite his gruesome appearance, he didn't seem wounded—no limp or hunch or favored arm. His wrists were bound together behind his back, and he walked between the

rangers, his head held high and his countenance giving the impression that he couldn't have cared less about being brought into the castle as a prisoner.

“My old man always said honesty is the best policy,” the nearer of the two rangers said. “At least, when dealing with Empaths . . .”

The other ranger, grip tight on the prisoner's arm, nodded slowly. “I just wish she'd stay out of my head,” he griped. “Can't a man get some privacy?”

The nearer ranger scoffed. “Maybe it's time to accept that the wench isn't worth the trouble.”

The two rangers exchanged a look, then chortled, amused by some joke I didn't understand.

The farther ranger stopped walking suddenly, jerking the prisoner up short beside him. “What was that?” He stared at the prisoner, his eyes narrowed into a glare.

I frowned, leaning in as close as I could get to the peephole. The prisoner must have mumbled something too low for me to hear.

The nearer ranger stopped as well, turning to look back at his buddy, then shifted his attention to the prisoner. “You got something to say, friend?”

When the prisoner didn't respond—didn't even look at him, the ranger drew his dagger and, without hesitation, stabbed the man in the gut.

I gasped, dropping the electric torch and covering my mouth with my hand. The torch landed on my slipper, then rolled a short way down the passage, though I hardly noticed, glued as I was to the peephole and the shocking scene below.

I knew the imperial guards could be cruel, especially in their handling of criminals and the like, but I had never witnessed that cruelty in action before. Even if such brutality was warranted, it was still hard to watch.

I told myself this man—this prisoner—deserved the punishment. I told myself he was a bad person, that he had done terrible things. I told myself these things because I needed to believe them. It was the only way to keep myself from screaming.

Eyes opened wide in horror, I watched as the ranger yanked the dagger free. The prisoner grunted and folded forward, blood dripping onto the floor at his feet.

But as I watched, the flow of blood slowed, then stopped altogether, and the prisoner straightened. He turned to face the man who had stabbed him, back straight and shoulders squared, no hint of pain or fear—or even hostility—on his grimy face.

I inhaled sharply, my eyes opening even wider. I recognized the prisoner. Not because I had seen him before, at least, not with my own eyes. But in resonance after resonance, I had seen him through Zoe's.

A name escaped from my lips, the ghost of a whisper. "Jake."

*“No more death, not because of me.”*

Jake’s words weighed heavily on me as I’d recounted to Autumn what happened in the woods and explained why Jake hadn’t returned with me. His words continued to loop through my mind as the families of Timmons, Claire, Dallace, and the others fell into despondency upon seeing their slain loved ones wrapped in linen, all of their lives brutally taken before their time. And Jake’s words still haunted me as I sat on top of the waterfall, staring into the cresting dawn beyond the ocean.

The boughs of the redwoods behind me creaked and rustled in the coastal breeze that whirred through the canopy, and with it came the salty scent of morning and the sweetness of the wild fuchsias that crept up the cliffs.

Beast eyed me from his curled up heap beside me, the tip of his tail flicking in time with the distant waves.

I’d never known any place other than the coast where the twenty-foot falls fell into the Pacific Ocean, and the woods separated two completely different worlds of equal but strangely different threats. Ferals stalked the woods and mountains. They were the last of a species left behind by the outbreak centuries ago. Their minds were too primal to let them die out now—they clung to life, just like we did, only the years of isolation had turned them nearly rabid.

But beyond the mountains and forest, beyond the tree belt, Corvo City bustled. It was a beacon of law and order and supposed safety, where the pure bloods and the poor—the ones who knew nothing but indenturehood to their “betters”—lived out their lives of naivety. Jake had

ensured we never saw such a fate, guiding us, generation after generation, in this life of seclusion. I finally understood why being hidden was so important. I'd seen firsthand what could come to pass for all of us.

When I was little, Jake had been a ghost, foretold to come and go throughout the years, visiting each generation in order to prepare them for what might one day come again. Another end. Another battle. Another time to flee. He'd taught us about our past and the importance of our future. He'd trained us every day he was here for war or resistance, equipping us with the knowledge we would need about the harsh world around us, and what ran through our blood. Or rather, *who* ran through our blood.

I glanced back at the cemetery, past the eight fresh mounds covering my fallen friends to the moss-covered headstones that were weather-worn but far from forgotten.

*Rebecca Vaughn - 28 AE - Revolutionary and savior. "Fear not the dark, for with it comes peace."*

*Tom Cartwright - 39 AE - Survivor and grandfather. May you rest in peace with Mom.*

*Jason Cartwright - 51 AE - Husband. Father. Brother. Hero.*

*Dani "Red" Cartwright - 52 AE - D, my soul sister, best friend, and an amazing mother. I miss you every day.*

My gaze continued down the row, wishing I'd known all of them, so I could remember my ancestors the way Jake still did—Harper, Sanchez, Chris, Carlos, Peter, Sam . . . But my eyes lingered on the next.

*Zoe Cartwright - 59 AE - My beloved.* The carved knot above her name matched the one on Dani's. I'd heard stories of the first years, about the world before and after the outbreak, the power-hungry fanatics who thought they were gods, and the eradication of the Re-gens. The

originals, my ancestors, had fought all their lives to keep us safe. Because our blood and our Abilities were from the purest, most notable people in our history. In a world built on fear and power, we would always be hunted because of that. I understood that now, more than ever.

We'd spent our lives in hiding because evil always seemed to find us. And for what?

I clenched my hands into fists at my sides. *"No more death, not because of me."*

My best friends were dead, Jake was gone, and the Corvo queen knew where we lived. Her rangers could come back, despite their promise not to, and Jake would've given himself up for nothing. He thought I was reckless and rash, and maybe I was sometimes, but Jake wasn't saving anyone by leaving. If anything, he had taken our greatest weapon away when he'd given himself to them.

Beast's head shot up as I rose and began to pace. "Don't look at me like that," I told him. His ears went back and his tail twitched again. I saw myself through his eyes—a red mane of hair, hard, narrowed eyes, and determined strides, but I ignored him. "You don't understand," I grumbled.

Beast's tail lashed, and he growled at me.

Guilt swelled immediately. "I know," I said. "Sorry." I didn't need to use my animal telepathy to know that Beast felt Jake's absence as much as I did. Jake was the one who'd found him when he was a cub, injured in the woods with a broken leg. Like too many innocents, the Ferals had killed his mother and siblings and had left him to starve. Jake had brought Beast to me, an orphan cougar cub for the orphan boy child in need of a friend, and the three of us had shared a bond ever since.

But being angry was easier than the fear and uncertainty I felt imagining Jake's fate. It was easier than accepting the truth that we might never see him again—that *I* might never see him again.

I continued to pace.

"I knew I'd find you here."

I glanced over my shoulder as Autumn stepped around the gravestones.

A small smile curved her lips, though her face was sullen from all that had transpired in the past twelve hours. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

I shook my head because I wasn't okay. I was angry with Jake, and with myself. "I let him leave," I told her. Jake hadn't only been a teacher to me since the Ferals killed my parents, he'd been one of the few constants in my life.

I dragged my hand over my face, feeling the exhaustion of the past twenty-four hours behind my eyes and at the base of my neck. "I should've told him to screw off, or that I was going with him. I should've—"

"You wouldn't have said that," she countered.

I stopped mid-step and looked at her. "I could've helped him find a different way instead of just accepting it."

Autumn stepped closer, the breeze playing with the loose strands of her blonde hair, but I turned away. Despite her brave face, her eyes didn't lie, and I didn't want to see the pain or fear in them, no matter how much she tried to hide it.

"The rangers will come back for us," I told her. History had repeated itself too many times for it to be any different.

“Fin . . .” She rested her hand on my shoulder. “Look at me.” Autumn’s voice was adamant. I could hear the strain in it, and my chest tightened. “Finlay,” she snapped.

I forced myself to turn around and peered into her green eyes, the only part of us that was similar. “Do you remember them—Mom and Dad?” I asked, wondering about our parents because they were only a shadow in my memory after all these years.

“I was ten years older than you when they died,” she said. “Of course I do.”

“Father was a farmer and a predominate Telepath,” I said, repeating all I really knew about him.

She nodded. “And Mother’s strength was nulling.”

“And none of it helped protect them,” I ground out.

Autumn’s brow furrowed and her lips pursed. “This isn’t about them,” she said softly, and her hands fell back to her sides.

I began to pace again, more frantically this time. “You’re right. It’s about Jake, and the fact that I know far more about him than I do about my own parents.”

“Fin—”

“*He’s* been here all these years, not them.”

“Finlay.”

“No,” I said, ignoring the pain in her eyes. “Listen to me.” I had the desperate need to make her understand. “He drinks his tea every morning with the sunrise, before everyone wakes up. He helps Cyrus with his aim and grapples with him to make him feel like he’s not just a cripple, but that he has a purpose, just like the rest of us. He goes on hikes and hunting trips all the time because he’d rather be alone than in the company of the villagers, except for me; he takes me with him. And no matter where he goes when he gets in one of his moods, or what he

does while he's away, he always comes home to us. I know more about him than I know about my own parents, and now he's gone." I pointed toward the fog rolling in over the sea. "Now he's sitting in a cell somewhere or being experimented on, for all we know."

"I understand that you're upset, Fin, but there was nothing you could've done. Don't kid yourself." Her voice harshened a little. "J would've done exactly what he wanted, regardless of anything you said or did, even if that meant he had to tie you up to do it. He's predictable that way."

"How can you pretend to be so calm about this?" I asked, incredulous. "After all the stories he's told, and after all he's lived through—the guy you love is probably never coming back. You can just accept that?"

Her eyebrows narrowed ever so slightly before she could check herself, and then she peered out at the inky blue sea. "J and I are . . ." I expected her to say that they were only a convenience, which would've been a lie, no matter what she told herself. "Complicated," she continued. "Companionship is different from love, for him at least." She took a step closer, her eyes leveled on me. "Our people take priority over *everything* else to him."

"Yeah? And what if they kill him? He can't protect us if he's dead." I said, voicing the thought that had been haunting me since he sent me back to the village yesterday.

"They won't kill him," she said, more certain than I was. "They clearly need him for something." *Which could be much worse than death.* We both thought it; the gravity of her voice expressed as much, even if she didn't say it out loud.

But despite her reassurances and excuses, it didn't feel right to accept any of it. "After so many years of hiding and running, he can't just give in now."

“It’s not your call, Fin. He’s gone. The decision’s been made, and whatever happens, is what we have to live with.”

I shook my head, unwilling to accept that.

“You don’t get a choice in this, Fin.”

“Yes, I do,” I snapped. “He made his choice, now I’m making mine.”

Autumn grabbed my arm, her fingers clenching tightly. “Don’t be stupid—”

“I’m not going to be stupid, but I can’t sit here and do nothing either. You know I can’t, and if you didn’t have to set an example for everyone else, you’d be figuring out a way to get him back too.”

She straightened her shoulders. “We can’t fight against the Corvo army.”

“We don’t have to fight,” I said, realizing this is what Jake had been preparing us for. “But I can get intel. I’m the best tracker we have—Jake made sure of that.” My mind began to spin a mile a minute, and my thoughts tumbled from my lips. “I can sneak into the city and figure out where they took him. Maybe I can figure out what they want—I can come back with information so we know what’s going on. Maybe then we can at least *try* to come up with a plan. It’s better than sitting here doing nothing.”

Autumn stared at me, her chest heaving as she realized I wasn’t going to change my mind. I imagined she thought of every possible way I could get myself killed, and her features pinched.

After a few heartbeats, she ran her fingers through her hair. “For all that is holy,” she muttered and shook her head. “Fine.”

Beast leapt to his feet, his anticipation humming through me, amplifying my own.

Autumn took a deep, ragged breath then exhaled an exasperated, slightly hysterical laugh. “You’ll go, regardless of anything I say, anyway.” When her eyes met mine again, they were hard and earnest. “But you better come home, Finlay, or the gods damn you . . .” She shook her finger at me. “You just better come home.”

Beast and I exchanged a determined, victorious look, then I regarded my sister again, offering her a nod of agreement. “We promise.”