

THE ASH-BORN BOY

By

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“Once, long ago, there was a man and a woman, and a boy,
and a village full of people. And then the village burned
down. And then there was nothing.”

“How did you survive?”

“The fire was my fault.”

ONE

The market coiled like a colored snake through the streets of Dale, patterned with the brown of the stalls, and the yellows and greens and reds of the things they sold.

People chattered, and children laughed beneath the rare blue stretch of sky, cloudless and perfect, and, bolstered by the sun, they darted between parents and booths, making up games as they went. A group played a messy kind of tag that involved weaving and racing, everyone both a target and a pursuer. A boy grabbed for a girl, who dodged desperately, clipping the edge of a fruit stand as she went. She recovered and ran on with a high laugh, but the stand, heaped high with apples, started to tip. The vendor turned, but lunged too late. The apples were already rolling, and the table was already falling, and he cringed away from the inevitable crash.

But it never came.

A hand caught the table's edge and steadied it. The apples settled, all but a small green one, which escaped, rolled to the lip, over, and into the rescuer's other hand. The vendor let out a sigh of relief.

"Master Dale," he said. "Good day, and thank you."

The rescuer, a boy of sixteen, brushed the apple along the sleeve of his cloak. It was a velvety black, just like his hair. “Please, Peter,” he said. “That is my father, not me.”

The vendor bowed his head. “Pardon, but I thought the son went by Master and the father by Lord. Have customs changed since I went to bed?”

“No.” He bit into the apple. “But only my father's name is Dale.”

The vendor cast a nervous glance around the market, unsure of what to do. All royals had two names, the one they were born with, and the one they took if they became a member of the ruling family. The first name could be anything, but the second was always Dale. It was the name of the city itself, and it was an honor. Peter knew that to call the boy anything else was a punishable offense, but he also knew of his temper, and even if he didn't believe the rumors—deals with gods or devils, or worse, witches—he didn't want trouble.

“Apologies, Master...Hart.” He cast another glance around when he said the name, and this time swore he saw two people turn, an eyebrow lift, a word or two whispered beneath the din of the market.

The boy brightened. It was his mother's name, and it gave him some small pleasure to defy Robert by using it.

“Thank you,” he said with a genuine smile. “And William's fine, really. Now, how much do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

He frowned, digging in his pocket. “Peter—”

“Don’t matter what name you want to go by, William, I can’t take money from you.”

Will took another bite of the apple, and set three white disks on the table with an audible *click*. “Then I will simply forget a few coins here. A harmless mistake.” He drew a hand through the air above the market. “So many customers here today, you couldn’t know whose coins they were.”

He turned to go, and when the vendor opened his mouth to protest, Will cut him off with a backward glance, a smile, and a “Good day, Peter,” before vanishing into the market crowd.

It was a hard thing, to vanish, especially when the people parted for him. Most of them didn’t stare. No, in fact, they did the opposite of staring, averting their eyes and granting him too wide a berth for such a crowded place. It only drew more attention. Still, Will did his best to enjoy the apple and the blue-sky day and the fresh air as he made his way to the steps of the Great House.

The town of Dale grew more up than out, a tangle of streets and houses, squares and gardens, all piled on a hill in the middle of the moors. In a land of valleys, Dale was the tallest thing in sight, and the Great House was the tallest thing in Dale. The steps were wide and stone, and swept from the looming structure to the streets, a shallow landing halfway between. The house belonged to Dale, not to the town but to those that held the name and title. But the steps belonged to the people, and on blue-sky days when the sun warmed the stones, the steps were the most popular spot in the town. From them you could see the streets running down from the great house like roots, tapering into the fields below. Dale sat on a large hill, and it sloped away to every side. The valleys at its base

were dotted with lakes, each reflecting up a bit of sky. Usually the lakes were gray, but today they were pools of brilliant blue.

Will found a spot on the steps and sat, his black cloak trailing over the stones like a shadow. The sun warmed the chain around his neck, the pendant safe beneath the collar of his shirt. He closed his eyes and listened to the thrum of people, and ran his fingers absently over a set of cuts on his right forearm. One was nearly faded, another was still faintly red, and the third was fresh, only a few days old.

“What’s this? The prince sitting among commoners?”

Will’s eyes drifted open, and he drew his sleeve down over the marks. “Are you calling yourself common, Phillip?”

The boy’s face reddened. He was standing on the path at the foot of the steps, his blonde hair nearly white in the sun. Another boy stood behind him, and two girls stood out of the way, but clearly watching.

“Watch your words, *Master Dale*.”

Will stood, and descended the steps to the path. Phillip was a year older, but no taller than him, and a bit stockier. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?” spat Phillip, drawing closer. The air that day was still, which was dangerous, because any unusual breeze, any gust, would be noticeable. “It’s your name.”

Will thought of the scars, of the pendant around his neck, of the dire need to keep calm, especially here. Anger seeped through him, but he kept his gray eyes level, intensely aware of the market’s attention bending toward them.

“Your mother earned it,” pressed Phillip, “when she climbed into bed with my uncle.”

The air picked up around them now, rippling just enough for Phillip's smile to sharpen. Will's knuckles were white, but he didn't blink, didn't speak, didn't move. He didn't dare.

Phillip finally shook his head, and laughed. "What? Nothing to say? You really are callous, Will. I'd have slit your throat for talking that way about *my* mother."

At that, Will managed a grim smile. "I don't need to talk about her. Everyone else already does."

Phillip lunged, but Will had always been faster, and he dodged, and watched his cousin stumble forward against the steps. By the time Phillip found his feet, the eyes of the market were turning, the idle chatter dying as the crowd watched. Even Phillip knew better than to carry on now, but he let his friend, Ian, make a show of holding him back, while the girls stood and watched. One of them, Beth, was snickering, but the other, Sarah, looked sad. Will seized the chance, and turned away, letting Phillip curse him under his breath.

"You're nothing, Hart," growled Phillip, and those who could hear drew in a breath at the insult of the name. It was one thing for Will to insist on it. It was quite another for it to be hurled at him.

Will kept walking. His anger cooled as he climbed the steps, his fists unclenching and the blood flooding back into his knuckles. The sound of the market ebbed as he ascended. He brought a hand to the chain around his neck, and drew the pendant from beneath his collar as he made his way up, rubbing a thumb over the smooth metal face. Instantly he felt better.

"Master Dale."

His grip on control was thin, so he kept walking.

“Please wait.”

He reached the top step.

“William.”

He paused, and glanced back. Sarah was standing several steps below, breathless, her dress bunched in her hands. Her hair escaped in wisps around her face.

“Sarah,” he said, softening. “What is it?”

She climbed the last few stairs and stepped up onto the path beside him. “It’s just...I’m sorry...Phillip was being...” She brought her hand to rest against his arm and he tensed. Most people went out of their way to avoid touching him. “Phillip was being an ass.” She bit her lip. “Phillip *is* an ass,” she amended.

“You climbed the steps just to tell me that?”

Sarah blushed. “I wasn’t sure if you knew.”

Will *almost* smiled. “Alas, I did. But it never hurts to hear it again.”

Sarah let out an easy laugh. Her gaze drifted up over his head to the Great House that rose behind him, and the sound caught in her throat. “Oh.” She looked around at the path and the arching trees—brought into Dale as seedling from the far-off forests—and the gardens that flanked the house, and the veil of low clouds, and woven through it all, the quiet.

“I shouldn’t be here,” she whispered. Her hand fell away from his arm, and Will was sad to feel it go. She twirled back toward the steps, but he reached out, and took her hand.

“Stay,” he said.

“Are you certain?” Will nodded, and Sarah’s smile was radiant. She wove her arm through his. “Would you show me the gardens?”

He led her through a vine-wrapped arch into his mother’s pride and joy, the Great House gardens. They were not groomed, but wild, tangled and free as they might be on the moors, beyond the reach of Dale, where buildings gave way to valley and grass and, beyond the far rise, who knew what else. The sun was sinking now, the day losing half its light, hedges and trees blotting out even more to cast the gardens in shadows. Sarah pulled free and wandered a few steps ahead, turning in slow circles to take it in.

He liked that she liked it. These places where nature ate up everything, they were the only ones where he felt...

Sarah gasped, gleefully. “Is that...?”

“Shush,” he whispered, even as his lips curled up.

“A smile, I see it!” she said in a dramatic whisper. “You know what I think, Will? I think you’re not callous, or cold.”

He forced his mouth back into a thin, grim line. “I fear you’re wrong,” he said. “I’m quite heartless.” But even as he said it, the smile flickered back to life.

Sarah stepped forward, closing the gap between them. “I mean it. Why do you put on this act?”

His smile slipped. “I...”

Sarah didn’t wait for him to think up a lie. Instead, she kissed him. And whatever lie he would have given, it died on his lips as they met hers.

A breeze caught up the loose strands of her hair.

“Stop,” he said softly.

Sarah smiled and leaned in to him, pressing her body flush with his. The air rustled the leaves and flowers around them, a low sound thread through the breeze. She tangled her fingers in the metal chain of his pendant and kissed him deeper, and while he kissed her back, Will slid his hands up her arms, over the bare skin until he reached her shoulders. There he stopped, curled his fingers, and guided her body back, carving a space between them.

“Stop,” he said, breathless but insistent.

She stopped, but the wind didn't. It was still picking up around them.

Fear crossed his face like a shadow, and he tried to calm down, but it was too late. Control danced out of his grip, and the wind blew through the garden. His touch on her shoulders lightened as his body wavered faintly.

“It's true,” said Sarah in a hushed voice. “I'd heard rumors, but...”

He tightened his grip, despite his thinning form. “Which rumors?” He asked coldly. “That I sold my heart for this? That I made a deal with a monster? That *I* am a monster? A demon?”

“Or a god,” whispered Sarah, and Will laughed bitterly.

“You only think that because you don't know...” He stopped himself. The people knew of witches in Dale, but only as the stuff of stories, and only as those who dealt in earth and stone and petty charms. Not wind. If any witches fool enough to actually live here, he had never met them. His father made sure of that. As for Will...the sky was the realm of gods and godthings. And the boy whose temper seemed tethered to the air itself...they didn't know what to make of him.

“Don't know what?” pressed Sarah.

Will swallowed hard, and kissed her forehead. “I’m not anything but me.”

She pulled back enough to look him in the eyes, and then drew his mouth to hers. The wind whistled around them, and he tensed.

“Just let go,” she said against his mouth.

He knew better. But the fight with Phillip had weakened his resolve and the strange glee in Sarah’s eyes broke it, and so, even though his arm still burned from the last cut, he gave in. He guided her back against a hedge, and kissed her breathless. The wind sang through the garden, tangling in her dress and his cloak, whipping around them both as his hands, more smoke than skin, wrapped around her waist and her hands, flesh and bone, wrapped around his back and—

“William.”

The moment broke.

He pulled back, and the wind wobbled and fell apart at his mother’s voice. She was standing on her balcony—the garden was hers, and her rooms overlooked it—and even though she couldn’t possibly see Sarah from this angle, she said, “Miss Lowe, I think you best be getting home.”

Sarah blushed, and ducked under Will’s arm—which was solid again— brushing leaves from her skirts as she stepped into his mother’s line of sight.

“I’ll walk you—“ started Will.

“I’m sure Miss Lowe can find her way to the steps,” cut in his mother. Her words were harsh but her tone was warm, and Sarah gave a small nod.

“Of course, Lady Dale,” she said brightly, as though she’d been given a reward instead of a reprimand. William often thought his mother had a kind of magic in her, too,

not a talent for stone or water or air, but the things that flow *in* people. Sarah gave him a quick smile, and made her way out.

Lady Dale plucked a leaf from the lemon tree she kept on her balcony, and dropped it over the stone rail. The wind was nothing more than a faint breeze now, and it floated toward the ground by Will's feet. He watched it land, and felt tired, drained, half by the slip and half by the look in his mother's eyes when he finally met them.

“Inside,” she said. “Now.”

TWO

His mother was still on the balcony when he reached the room.

Her back was to him as she stood, watching the day bleed into night, her hands resting delicately on the banister. She looked regal. Lady Katherine Dale belonged in the Great House. She always belonged. He was lucky, he knew, to take after his mother, from her black hair—though hers coiled and his fell straight—to her slim build, his real father only showing in his eyes, which were a much darker gray than hers. That mattered little, though, since he rarely met people’s gaze.

He crossed the room now, and came out onto the balcony beside her.

“I heard about what happened in the market,” she said without looking at him.

“Word travels so fast,” said Will, leaning his elbows against the rail.

“Why do you do this?”

“It’s a foolish tradition. And it’s not my name. It’s not anyone’s name.”

“I won you that name, William,” she said, sternly. “You will take it.”

Your mother earned it, when she climbed in bed with my uncle.

Will pushed off the banister and went inside. He was Lord Robert’s son, and heir to Dale, but not by blood. His mother had arrived in the city pregnant, and wed Lord Dale within a month. And yet, the people of Dale seemed willfully blind to the question of his

descent. Perhaps they thought the two had met before, beyond the town's edge, and William, conceived before rings, was still Robert's flesh. Perhaps they didn't care. Perhaps his mother had enchanted them, charmed them into forgetting. Only Phillip seemed intent on pressing the issue. The fact was, William was born in Dale, and was its heir, and to most, the legitimacy of his birth was far less scandalous than his power. That they whispered about in taverns and alleys, and sometimes even on the steps.

"One day, you will be *Lord Dale*," pressed his mother, following him inside.

"I do not want it. And I do not think the people want it either. They call me cold, heartless, empty," he said, feeding a stick to the fire that burned despite the season in her chambers. "Callous."

He stared into the flames.

"Let them think you callous, then."

"But I am not."

"But you *are* different. Whatever word they put to it, it's there. Inescapable. Let them think you callous and cold. Let them think you a monster or a godthing."

"They think me all those things, and yet they think me Robert's son. How is that?" he asked, archly.

His mother ignored the question, as she always did whenever he suggested her influence over people.

"Let them think you a demon or a god," she said. "Let them fear you. It does not matter."

"It matters a great deal to me," he snapped.

His mother sighed, sliding into a chair beside the fire. “The market is one thing...” And she didn’t even know of the fight with Phillip, he thought. “...and then the girl in the garden. Sarah. Really, William? Showing off with magic?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Surely there are other ways to woo a girl than to put on such displays,” she continued. “And besides, Sarah belongs to Phillip. Is that what prompted this? To provoke your cousin?”

“Sarah might disagree, and believe it or not, I do not court my cousin’s hatred.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” said his mother, quietly. “You do not think like a royal.”

“I will never apologize for that. And Sarah simply asked to see the gardens.”

His mother brought her hand to his cheek. “It’s a game, Will. You know that, right? Getting a rise out of you. Goaded you to slip. Phillip with fists and Sarah with kisses, but that’s the only difference. You can’t think she actually feels anything.”

Anger hummed beneath his skin, but he knew it wouldn’t take shape, not here. His mother’s perpetual calm kept his power smothered. In its absence, he simply felt tired.

“This is the fourth slip this month, Will, and it’s not half over.”

Will thought grimly of the three marks already on his skin. Robert’s calm, controlled voice filled his head—*the cut has to be deep, William, it has to hurt, you have to learn*—as his eyes dragged over the mantle, past books and trinkets to his mother’s knife. His stomach turned as he reached for it, and took it up, his fingers shaking as he

ran his hand absently over the flat of the blade. It was warm from the fire. He rolled his sleeve, studying the scars on his arm.

“Wait,” said his mother. “Robert doesn’t need to know. It can be our secret. This once.”

Will brought the edge to rest against his skin.

“He’ll find out,” he said, holding her gaze. “He always does.”

With that, he drew the knife across his skin, cutting deep. Blood welled instantly, ribboning down over his wrist. He clenched his teeth as pain burned up his arm, but he relished it, because in that moment, he felt everything. Anger and sadness and fear and frustration and want, all of it simple and mortal and human. There had been a time when he loved his power, a time when he had clung to it instead of trying to slice it out. That time was gone.

He felt his mother’s hand, guiding the knife from his grip. She produced a rag, wiping the blade clean before returning it to the mantle. By the time Will staunched the blood and she drew a length of cloth from the drawer of a side table and bound the cut, the pain was fading to a dull ache. He watched the red seep through the cloth.

“You’ll learn,” she said softly.

Learn what? He wondered, eyes trained on the drops of blood that made it to the floor. Learn to control? Or learn to hide? Learn to lie? Learn to be the callous prince? What scared him most was that, in the wake of the wound, he did feel strangely empty. Hollow. His mother ran her fingertips over the pendant chain against his shirt.

“Dinner’s soon,” she said. “Go get cleaned up.”

Will nodded, and left.

* * *

Will rounded the corner too fast, and nearly collided with a man coming the opposite way. He drew up short just in time. The man stopped, too, and straightened.

“This is a foul habit you have, of walking with your head down.”

Will forced his gaze up from the man’s throat to his chin, his nose, and finally the lower edge of his eyes. “I’m sorry, father.”

Robert Dale, broad-shouldered and severe, looked down at his son, resting his own gaze just above the boy’s. The two hardly ever looked each other in the eyes, Will out of a sense of respect—enforced as opposed to earned—and Robert out of a sense of distaste, the boy’s dark eyes being the most offensive part of him. Now Robert’s attention drifted down to the bloodstained length of cloth on the boy’s forearm.

“What happened?” he asked.

Will hesitated. He knew Robert did not mean the cut, but rather its reason.

“Phillip. He spoke ill of our family. It provoked me.” It wasn’t a lie, not entirely. Sarah had been the one to push him over the edge, but the slip had started in the market. And besides, Robert disliked his brother’s son.

“Let me see,” said Robert, gesturing to the bandage.

Will held out his arm, and Robert took it, undoing the cloth wrapped tightly around the newest cut. The bloody swatch of fabric drifted to the floor.

“It was foolish,” added Will. “A minor slip. My temper got the better of—”

Pain exploded up his arm, cutting off his words. Blood ran between Robert's knuckles as he tightened his grip on Will's arm, the force reopening the cut.

"A minor slip is still a slip," said Robert calmly. "And you know better."

Will dropped to a knee, gasping. The air in the hall began to stir and he clutched his pendant with his free hand, desperate to hold onto control. If he slipped here, with Robert, a few cuts would be the least of his problems. Last time he was bound to his rooms for a week, the windows nailed shut as if the magic could be stifled out. And that was *after* Robert carved the line himself, cutting nearly to bone. His guards had broken Will's wrist while holding him down.

Robert's fingers dug in. "I will bleed this temper out of you one cut at a time if I have to. Do you understand?"

Will thought he might be sick. He nodded. "I do."

Robert let go, wiping his bloodied palm on his black pants. Will stayed on his knees, very still, as the breeze in the hall leveled, and died.

"Clean yourself up," said Robert, turning away, "and come to dinner."

* * *

Will made it back to his room, one hand on the silver under his shirt and the other hanging at his side, leaving a bloody trail. He made it across the threshold before the air arced around him, his whole form wavering as the wind slammed the doors and shutters, swept a pair of unlit candles from the shelves and a set of books from the table beside his bed. He'd long since learned not to keep fragile things. The gust had spared a wooden

cup, and Will swept it from the table with his hand, and sent it clattering to the floor. He threw open the window shutters—he was not afforded a balcony; his father probably saw that as too much fresh air—and leaned out, drawing several long breaths. His arm throbbed. One line for each time he lost control. He looked around at the room, the floor now cluttered with debris, and knew this probably counted too, but his arm ached and his head hurt, and as he examined the space, he concluded that this had been an act of control rather than a lapse of it. He'd wanted the doors closed, and closed them. Wanted to ruin the order, and ruined it.

He stepped over the books, reached a basin in the corner of the room, and began to wash the blood from his arm, drawing water from the large bowl into a second, smaller one. It was a ritual he knew too well. He cleaned the wound and dried it, drew a fresh bandage tight around the cut and then tied it off. He flexed his fingers, making sure he hadn't cut deep enough to damage the tendons, and while his fingers ached with the movement, he knew he would heal. He always did. When he leaned forward to wash his face, his pendant knocked against the lip of the basin. He straightened, and took the silver piece between his fingers, turning it so he could see its face. A *W* was carved into the metal, half-worn away from the years he'd rubbed his thumb over the letter.

He'd worn it as long as he could remember, not just a trinket, but a charm, a piece of petty craft, meant to calm him. Will didn't know if it really worked, or if he only believe it worked, or if those things were any different, but when he touched the metal, the power beneath his skin quieted. According to his mother, the pendant had belonged to his real father, the man that given him his gray eyes, and his power, and his name. Not that Robert knew of Will's namesake, of course.

Of his real father, Will knew little, and wished he knew less. The man was a shadow, a ghost, a witch, sweeping through only long enough to seduce Lady Katherine, and vanish. His mother never spoke ill of the man, but Will couldn't help but hate him. If he hadn't left, his mother never would have wandered into Dale. Into Lord Robert's bed.

He rubbed his thumb over the *W*, and let the pendant fall back against his shirt.

The only things protecting Will were his resemblance to his mother and Lord Dale's pride. It wasn't simply that Robert Dale thought his nephew, Phillip, too weak to rule. Denying Will would mean admitting he was not flesh and blood, and that would mean acknowledging that his wife, Lady Dale, was not his. Had not always been his.

Will pulled the sleeve down over his bandaged arm. Robert saw magic as a sickness, and meant to bleed it from him. If it were that easy, thought Will, straightening his cloak, he would have emptied his veins for his father long ago.

But the wind did not run in William Hart's veins. It ran deeper, through his bones and between his muscles, rooting somewhere beneath his heart, or between his lungs, a place he could feel but never find. Wherever it came from, it couldn't be cut out, and that scared him more than anything. It was getting stronger—*he* was getting stronger—and the pendant, and the cuts, and the fear of Robert's wrath, none of it seemed enough to silence the magic.

He tucked the pendant back beneath his collar, felt his heart slow as it settled against his skin, and went to dinner.

THREE

Will was standing in the middle of the crowded market, and he couldn't move. His arm was still bleeding, a trickle of red running over his wrist and falling from his fingertips into the dirt. It dripped one, two, three times, and then the wind started. At first, only a tiny swirl of air, right around the red drops. Panic rippled through him, and with it, the wind picked up, whipping around his body.

And then, the people in the market stopped. All at once, every one of them fell silent and turned to look at him. He tried to warn them to get back, but his teeth were sealed together and they just stood and stared as the wind grew. It ripped through the streets, singing as it toppled stalls and broke windows and buckled doors and tore at the people. The wind howled and spun faster and faster around him until the world beyond it blurred.

He was alone inside the tunnel of air, ears filled with the sound of the wind. And then the air turned sharp, and sliced at his skin, carving line after line until the wind itself ran red around him, and the howl became a scream and the scream was his.

* * *

William sat up, clutching his chest.

The wind in the room was gusting, tugging at his hair and the sheets, and he tore up from the bed and pulled on his clothes in the dark. A couple of rectangles of fresh air wouldn't be enough. He needed more.

He fastened his cloak, and set one foot on the windowsill. Judging by the sky beyond, there was still some time until dawn. His mother's rooms overlooked the gardens, but his were at the back of the Great House, with a view of the town's spine, a steep set of narrow paths and alleys cutting all the way down to the valley of lakes that stretched at the base of Dale, and the fields beyond. He climbed through, down three stories of vine and stone, his boots hitting the path at the bottom with a hushed thud.

Will pulled the hood up over his head, and wove his way through the darkened streets to the base of Dale. The buildings changed, growing shorter and older and farther apart, and the ground beneath his boots changed, too, went from rock to dirt, and then to grass. He hurried across a narrow band of green between two lakes, and did not slow until he reached the moors beyond. Vast expanses of grass, high as his knees. A breath of relief escaped as he waded through the fields. He was safe here. A breeze swayed the field, and he didn't know if it was his wind or the world's, and it didn't matter. The nightmare clung to him, but this wind was soft, gentle, soothing. Calm spread through his limbs, as tangible as anger had been the night before.

He turned and looked up at the outline of Dale, a shadow against the deeper dark of night, a mass flecked here and there with torchlight. From here, it seemed quiet, small. All his life he'd lived there, and still the moors felt more like home. His mother said that

it was the wild in him, the open space calling. She said it was part of him, as much as blood or bone. Why couldn't she tell Robert that?

His arm felt tight, and he undid the bandages with slow precision. The cold air ran over the freshest cut, and the pain seemed to lessen. Will ran his fingers absently up his forearm, each mark less noticeable, tapering away to calm skin close to his elbow. How many marks had he made over the years? A hundred? More? None of them scarred.

Will redid the bandage, wincing as he cinched it, and looked off in the direction of the un-risen sun. Light was just beginning to prick the edges of the sky. He had time, and so he sank to the grass, the blades swaying as he stretched and tucked his hand behind his head, and took a long breath.

For his thirteenth birthday, he'd been given a tutor named Nicholas Stone. Nicholas was an older man with a close-cropped beard and a faint but perpetual smile. He'd been hired to teach Will history and politics and logic, but a year ago, after Will's temper had slipped over a tricky concept and he'd emptied half the library shelves in a single terrifying wind, Nicholas added an element to their lessons. He set aside an hour every day to teach Will stillness. The two would sit on the library floor, or the floor of his room or sometimes, when the weather was nice, in the gardens, and Nicholas would show Will how to breathe, how to stay calm.

"Energy's like a knot," he'd say. "The more you force it, the worse it gets. You have to untangle it. Close your eyes, and breathe. Picture the knot untangling a little with every breath."

And it had worked. Will had laughed, amazed, and Nicholas had told him to remember the feeling. Memorize it. For the first time in years, he didn't slip. He went more than a month without earning a new mark.

And then, three months ago, Robert Dale had walked in on a breathing lesson. He accused Nicholas of encouraging witchcraft, and dismissed him on the spot. When Will defended his tutor, Robert struck him, hard, and Will struck back, not with his fists but with the wind. That was the day they broke Will's wrist, the day his father carved a line bone-deep into his arm, and that was last time he made the mistake of slipping in Robert Dale's presence.

Will never saw Nicholas again.

He stretched in the grass as the sky grew lighter. *This is calm*, he thought, as his chest untangled. Remember this. Memorize this. But even as he thought the words, the ease began to bleed away.

These days, breathing didn't seem to be enough.

He took hold of the pendant.

This is calm, he thought, clinging to it.

This is calm.

Be this.

Be this.

* * *

The sun was too bright.

Will rubbed his eyes, squinting up at it for several moments before he realized—the *sun*. He sat up. It was full morning. He scrambled to his feet, grass clinging to his black cloak, and spun to face Dale. The lakes that circled the town’s base were dappled with clouds and morning light, and the town itself was alive with movement.

Will cursed, and ran. He ran out of the field and along the stretch of land between two lakes, and up the paths and the alleys that led toward the Great House. It was too late and too bright to climb the vines back into the house. He’d have to take the front steps. He smoothed his hair and skidded out of an alley, slowing his pace to blend in—as much as he could—and was one road shy of the great stairs when a body blocked his way.

Phillip stood, arms crossed, half his face in the shadow of a house. For once, he didn’t have an entourage.

“I was wrong about you,” he said.

“Get out of my way,” said Will, trying to gauge the time by the sun.

“You’re not callous. You’re a coward.”

“What are you on about?” snapped Will.

Phillip stepped forward. A bruise was blossoming beneath his eye. “You can’t even fight your own battles. You run to your father. Who runs to *my* father.” He gestured to his face.

“So you come whining to me?” Will clenched his fist, and his arm ached. “And you *did* provoke me...”

“It’s not my fault you can’t control your power.” Phillip shoved him. The wind rustled through the alley.

“Don’t,” warned Will.

“I don’t fear you, cousin,” said Phillip, shoving him again. “I don’t think you’re a god or a godthing or even a monster. You’re nothing but a pathetic boy hiding behind his magi—“

Phillip’s face snapped sideways as Will’s fist connected with his jaw. He stumbled back to the dirt.

“I’m not hiding behind anything,” said Will.

Phillip wiped a line of blood from his lip, and grimaced through reddened teeth. Will turned to go.

“Running away, as always,” growled Phillip.

Will spun back to face him. “You didn’t push me over the edge...” he said, coldly. “But I couldn’t exactly tell my father the truth.”

Phillip got to his feet.

“It was Sarah,” said Will, forcing a cold shrug. “She just couldn’t keep her hands off me—”

Phillip swung again, but Will spun easily aside, and caught his cousin in the chest with his knee. Phillip collapsed forward to the ground, coughing. And Will felt...calm. Not the calm he’d felt in the field but hollow. Empty. He wanted to relish it, but the path to the stairs was finally clear, and he was late.

“I warned you, *cousin*,” he said, striding from the alley. “Stay out of my way.”

And to his surprise, Phillip did.

FOUR

Will passed through the main doors of the Great House, rubbing his hand. Three men lounged in the foyer, all wearing the Dale insignia on their white cloaks. The royals wore black and their guards wore white, and the rest of Dale wore whatever it pleased. One of the guards, a broad-shouldered man named Eric, looked up as Will passed, quirking a brow as he took in Will's grass-brushed clothes and his messy hair and his reddened knuckles, but then he turned back to the others and resumed whatever story he'd been telling.

Will was very late. As he made his way to the dining room, he tried to rub the red from his hand and decide on a lie, a line, a defense. Through the doors, he could hear his mother's voice, soft and pleasant, and he was about to step through, when her tone changed.

"About William," she said, and he paused, fingers pressed against the wood.
"He's trying. He really is."

"You're too easy on him, Katherine," said Robert.

"And you're too hard."

"Not hard enough. I'm doing this for him. For his future."

“I believe you,” said his mother. Will didn’t. “But,” she added gently, “he looks up to you. He wants to please you.” Will didn’t care about pleasing his father, only avoiding his wrath. “You show him only your might. But you have other strengths. Show him those, too. Believe in him, my dear. One day he will make a wonderful—”

Will didn’t want to hear more. He pushed open the door. His mother’s eyes lit up, and his father’s narrowed.

“There you are,” said his mother.

“Where have you been?” snapped his father. But then her hand found his arm, and Robert...*softened* was the wrong word, but a few of his edges smoothed. Will stood very straight and very still as Robert’s gaze tracked from his bandaged arm down to his bruised knuckles. But when he spoke, all he said was, “Sit.”

“I’m sorry I’m late,” said Will, coming forward.

He kissed his mother’s cheek and took his seat across from Robert, Katherine Dale between them like a bridge. Blissfully, his parents both ignored his bedraggled state, and began to talk of mundane things like weather and markets and a spring festival. Will picked at his food, and watched more than listened.

One thing was clear. Lord Robert Dale loved his wife. It showed in the way he held her hand, fingers tangled on the table. It showed in the way he kissed her temple, in the way he served her food. Will hated it, hated that one person could be two people, hated being constantly reminded that Robert didn’t hate everyone the way he hated him. Worst of all was that, despite Robert’s infamous pride, he didn’t seem to love his wife the way he loved *power* and *trinkets*, owning simply to own. Lord Dale seemed to genuinely

love her. Or maybe, Will consoled himself, he only *believed* he loved her. Will knew from his pendant that belief was a powerful thing. As was his mother's kind of magic.

Will took up his knife, and winced, forgetting his arm. He nearly fumbled the utensil, and the chatter around him died.

"How are you feeling?" asked his mother, the way she might if he had a headache, not a piece carved out of his skin. The care showed in her eyes, though, if not her tone.

"Quite well," he said, but set the knife aside, and soothed his arm beneath the table.

"It's a lovely day," she said. "You should get some fresh air."

"Judging by his state," said Robert, "he's already had quite a bit of fresh air." But if he disapproved of Will fighting, he didn't show it, and Will himself was growing increasingly sure that Robert Dale *wanted* him to be a bully. Just not one who relied on magic. His gaze was almost, *almost* approving. "Still," he added, "I've got a errand you can run for me."

Will brightened a little. "Really?"

Robert nodded stiffly. "I would do it myself, but I'm leading a trip into the forests." The forests ran in a wall beyond the fields that ran beyond the lakes that circled Dale. "We'll need wood for the festival. As for the errand, I could have a guard handle it..."

"I'd be happy to run it for you," said Will, trying to stifle some of his excitement. He knew too well how Robert enjoyed crushing it.

"Good," said his father. "Eric will escort you."

Will stiffened. An escort? What if Phillip came back? A guard would make it look like he wished for—or needed—protection. “Father, I hardly think an escort—“

“After yesterday’s performance...” warned Robert, his fingers tightening on the knife in his hand. “...you can’t expect me to let you go unattended.”

“No,” said Will slowly. “Of course not.”

“I think it’s good,” said his mother. “You spending time in town.”

Will nodded. “A ruler,” he recited, “should be among the people, though not of them.”

“Who taught you that?” asked Robert.

“You did.” He watched his father’s brow crease. “Or rather, the book you assigned this week.”

Robert sat back in his chair. “Ah,” he said smugly. “And how are your studies going?”

Will resisted the urge to inform his father that they would be better, if he still had his tutor. He wouldn’t rise to the bait.

“Well enough,” he said, pushing up from the table. “I’ll go get ready.”

“Do you have to go?” asked his mother, and Will paused before realizing the question was not directed at him.

“It’s only for the day,” answered Robert. “I’ll be back tonight, I promise...”

Will rolled his eyes and closed the door behind him.

* * *

Will found Eric waiting for him by the front doors, a slip of paper in his hand. On it were the details of the errand. Will read through, and frowned. His father never would have done this for himself. He didn't really mind the mundane nature of it, since he enjoyed any excuse to be in town, but the way Robert had spoken of the chore, he'd hoped for something a bit more...

"It something wrong, Master Dale?"

"No," said Will, pocketing the note. He held his tongue against the usual *don't call me that*, remembering his mother's plea, and set off down the path to the great steps. Eric followed several strides behind, as if his crisp white cloak didn't set him off against the crowd. But there was nothing Will could do about his shadow, so he made his way through the streets toward the leather smith. His attention flicked around as he walked, watching for any signs of Phillip. His cousin's temper rivaled his own, and he wasn't one to suffer quietly. Now he was nowhere to be seen, and Will didn't trust it. He reached the leather smith's, and paused before the door. He wasn't used to paying visits, certainly not on his father's behalf, and wasn't sure quite how to go about it, so he simply knocked.

An old lady answered, gray hair fraying out of her bun, and when she saw Will, she gave a little croak, and nearly fumbled the fabric in her arms. A man appeared beside her, equally gray and equally surprised.

"Master Dale," he said, nudging the woman away. "I wasn't expecting a visit."

"I'm here on behalf of my father. I believe you have some of his things."

"Ah yes, yes, yes, of course," said the man nervously before vanishing, only to reappear a moment later with a bundle. He offered the package to Will, and fumbled for a

few moments, eyes down, before he gestured to his stomach and said, “Had to, you know, add a bit of fabric.”

Will surprised himself by laughing. It just kind of escaped. The man chuckled, too, but the woman, who’d reappeared behind him, cringed visibly when the sound left Will’s mouth. His laughter died, and he took the parcel from the leather smith’s arms.

“Yes, well,” he said, retreating into the street. “Thank you.”

“Would you like some tea before you go?” asked the man, but the woman’s eyes were still nervous and wide, laced with fear, and Will shook his head, said a quiet thanks, and left. He passed the bundle off to Eric, because if he had to have a guard, he might as well put him to use, and he was making his way back to steps, his spirits sinking, when someone touched his sleeve. He tensed, expecting Phillip, but before he could pull back, an arm linked itself with his.

“Sarah,” he said, startled. He drew back, but she didn’t.

“Walk with me?” she asked. He didn’t have much choice. Her arm was already threaded through his, the pale blue of her cloak flush with the black of his own, and the eyes of the town were on them. Refusing now would draw even more attention.

“What is it?” he asked as they made their way down the street. His tone bordered on rudeness, but she ignored it.

“Do you remember,” she asked, “when we were little, and you used to make things dance? My brother showed me how to make sculptures out of paper, ones with wings, and you would set them into flight.”

Will frowned. There had been a time when he loved his powers. When he hadn’t be afraid to show them. When he’d been too young for Robert to think him dangerous.

But that was a long, long time ago, and now, even mentioning them had consequences. He glanced back at Eric to make sure he hadn't heard.

"I miss your magic," she said. "You seemed happier back then."

He had been.

"Things change," he said.

"Will you show me again, sometime?"

The pain in his arm was too fresh. "If you knew what that meant, you wouldn't ask."

"It can be our secret," she pressed.

Will remembered his mother's warning. This wasn't just anyone on his arm, pushing him to use his powers. This was Sarah, who had hardly spoken to him for years. Sarah, who was Phillip's. Sarah, whose friend, he realized, was following them. Beth bobbed in and out of sight, clearly watching. Waiting.

"Tell me," he growled. "Is this a game to you? Getting me to slip?"

Sarah pulled back, as if struck. "What? No. I just thought..."

Will tugged his arm free. "And yet your friends are waiting for their show."

Sarah scanned the crowd, saw Beth, and scowled at her before turning back to Will, who was busy walking away. "I didn't know. I swear, Will." She touched his arm and he spun on her, the wind picking up.

"Just stop," he snapped. "Go toy with someone else."

Tears sprung to the edges of her eyes, and Sarah turned and fled down the busy street. Will watched her go. Had he been wrong? Had she meant no harm? How was he supposed to know? He rubbed his eyes, the wind beginning to ebb.

“That was cold,” said Eric, behind him.

Will spun on his guard. “You’re out of line,” he snapped, and all again the air whipped up.

“Careful, Master Dale,” said Eric, bringing his heavy hand down on Will’s shoulder. “Your father will be wanting a report.”

Will pulled free and stormed back to the steps, clutching his pendant as the mood coiled around him, inside him. *Untangle*, he begged as he climbed the steps. *Untangle. Untangle. Untangle. Untangle.* But as he reached the top, he felt the power choking him. He felt helpless, hopeless. He wanted to scream. He was sick of smothering the magic and himself. He wanted to let go, not as he had in the garden, or in his room, but really, truly let go. Was there no way to be free?

And then he turned and looked out over Dale, and saw it.

Hanging dark over the distant forest, inching forward across the fields toward the lakes and the hill. Will let out an amazed exhale, and sent up a word of thanks to the gods and godthings.

It was hope.

It was a chance.

It was a *storm*.

* * *

Will loved the storms.

Dale was most often a gray place, well acquainted with clouds, and rain, but only the pale and steady sort. Still storms, he called them, because they were nothing but falling water. The hill on which Dale sat rarely saw true storms. Not the kind with sound and color. Not the kind with *wind*. These storms were a gift to Will, a time when he could stretch and breathe and let go without the fear of a trail leading straight back to him. A time when he could be part of the wind, but not its center.

He spent the rest of the day watching the clouds spread, watching the sky darken, and waiting for the storm to come. Energy hummed beneath his skin, not anger, but excitement. He could feel the storm singing to his blood. By mid-afternoon the foul weather had reached the fields. The sky lit up, the air crackled, and no rain fell yet, but that was fine. He didn't need rain. Only wind. He imagined he could see the fields of grass, even from here, swaying with it, but Dale himself lay still around him, the storm hovering at its edges.

By late afternoon, Will was getting restless.

The forest parties were never back before dark, but at this rate, his father would reach Dale before the storm, and he'd lose his chance. Since the weather would not come to him, he'd have to go to it. And soon, if he stood any chance of making it home before Lord Dale. Will looked out the window and down, but Eric had taken up residence in the grass below, eyes trained on the distant storm.

He swore quietly and abandoned his room. He could hear his mother playing music below, in one of the rooms off the foyer, as she did whenever her hands grew restless, and Will made his way to her vacant rooms. There he checked the balcony, saw the gardens below empty of guards, and smiled. He had a leg over the rail, but hesitated.

Retreating back into the room, he found a loose paper on her desk and wrote a quick note—*Need air*.

With that, he closed the balcony doors, and climbed down an old, flowering vine, his boots hitting the ground with a quiet thud. He took an older, hidden set of stairs, avoiding the great steps, which, in the impending weather, were empty, but well-lit.

He hit the base of the stairs, and stopped. There had been a noise, an echo, like a second set of footsteps, but as he hovered in the dusk, he heard nothing but his own breath and the sounds of far-off thunder. Will picked up his pace, weaving through alleys toward the base of the hill. The promise of bad weather had driven the people of Dale inside, shutters fastened against the coming storm, and Will found himself alone as he hurried through the dying day toward the black clouds.

He was nearly there.

And then he heard it again, the sound of steps, and skidded to a stop.

The other set of feet didn't stop, and he spun around just as something very hard and very sharp caught his face. Light exploded across his vision, and then the world tipped violently, and went black.

FIVE

Will's eyes began to focus, and the first thing he saw was a coffin.

It was sitting in the strip of land between two of the lakes, the lid askew. Several poles driven into the ground held torchlight, which danced over the metal lining of the wooden box.

The ground beneath his body was cold but dry. The storm crackled overhead and to the side. It hadn't reached him yet. He tried to put the world together, remembered climbing through the window, hitting the ground, turning, and then...

Will tried to move, and pain tore through his head. Dried blood crusted the right side of his face, and coarse rope bound his wrists together. He got to his knees but had to stop when his vision blurred.

"When we were little," came a voice, "Uncle Robert had all the books on witches burned."

Will forced his vision to clear, and found a shape, silhouetted by torchlight. A hammer hung in the shape's hand.

"Phillip—" he said quietly.

"Only a few books survived, because Robert let them. The witches in those books were said to wield earth and stone. But what of air?"

Will could make out three other boys, circling him on the grass. Phillip set the hammer on the lip of the coffin, and came forward.

“You know what I think, cousin?” he said, kneeling in front of Will. “I think Robert had the books burned not just because he hated witches, but because he was trying to hide something about them.”

He straightened and turned away. Will struggled up, and one of the other boys kicked him hard, in ribs, sending him back to his hands and knees. He gasped, but the air around them barely wavered.

“*My* father has a book on witches,” said Phillip. “One of the oldest books. Do you want to know what it says?”

Will reached his bound hands for the pendant around his neck. It wasn't there. Phillip held the chain up to the torchlight.

“Give it back,” growled Will.

“The W,” he asked, “Does it stand for William? Or wind? Or *witch*?” He spat the word. “Because my father's book says there are as many kinds of witches as there are elements.”

Will got to his feet, but two of the boys were there, and they grabbed him, and held him still.

“Don't worry, cousin,” said Phillip. “I know what it does.” He closed the gap between them, and the others tightened their grip on Will's arms. “It weakens you. And for that, you can have it back.” He looped the chain over Will's head. And then he smiled, and punched him as hard as he could in the stomach. Will doubled over, and Phillip leaned in close.

“Haven’t you wondered about the coffin yet?” he hissed, drawing back. “It’s said that royals are given to the air, and commoners to the soil. And witches to the water.” He gestured to the box. “In the old days, the coffins were made entirely of metal, because metal was made by men, and the witches couldn’t use it. But it’s been so long since anyone buried a witch, and we’ll have to make do.”

“You’ve lost it.”

Phillip fetched the hammer from the lip of the coffin, and put his foot on the skewed lid. “I am the heir of Dale,” he said. “By blood. I must protect my people from the evils of witches.” His smile sharpened as he kicked off the lid. It fell to the ground with a heavy thud. “Load him in.”

“Stop this,” ordered Will as the boys dragged him toward the metal bed. “Phillip! Stop!”

He tore backwards from their grip, but lost his balance and went down. Before he could get to his feet, they were on top of him, kicking and punching and dragging him to the coffin. The ropes cut into his skin as he tried to force them back, first with fists and then with wind, but it wasn’t enough. Pain splintered his vision every time he moved. He could barely focus, and, for the first time in his life, the wind wasn’t listening. He fought and it didn’t. He screamed and it didn’t.

“Save your breath, cousin. You’ll need it.”

Will’s shoulder cracked against the metal lining of the box as they shoved him in. This couldn’t be happening. Phillip wouldn’t. But he was. Before Will could sit up, they’d hoisted the lid onto the coffin. The torchlight vanished, along with the world, and Will was plunged into a metal-heavy dark.

He banged his bound fists against the lid of the box as the hammer sounded, sealing the coffin shut.

“*No. No. No.*,” he hissed under his breath. It was a nightmare. It was all a nightmare. He squeezed his eyes closed and tried to believe that it was all a night—the coffin shifted over the ground. His heart lurched. They were dragging it.

Will couldn’t breathe. He could feel the wind pressing in against the coffin now, but it couldn’t reach him. Pain and panic and fear tore through him and something howled in his ears as he shoved his shaking hands against the coffin ceiling but it was metal, too, and he was going to die in a box all because of them and suddenly he wasn’t just afraid. He was angry. Furious. How could they? How could they do this after he had tried so hard not to hurt anyone, not to ruin other lives and they were ruining the sliver of his and—

The world shook.

The boards bent and wind rushed in through the cracks in the wood, whistled through the seams in the metal, and the whole coffin groaned around him, crumpling in for a breath before shattering outward. Wind that ripped the pendant from his neck, and heaved him to his feet, and curled around him like armor. His edges blurred into it. His skin wavered, and the ropes that had cut into his wrists now fell to the ground as Will’s hands thinned. The wind gutted the torches but he could still see the coffin shards and the shapes of the other boys as they struggled to their feet, only to be forced to the ground again. Will’s body rippled as he spun and saw his cousin on his hands and knees, and in that moment he wanted to crush him, crush the air from his lungs. The wind began to spin faster and faster around Phillip, and thunder crackled as the storm finally drew over them.

“What’s the matter?” Will shouted over the tearing wind as Phillip gasped and clawed at the grass. “Can’t catch your breath?”

Everything was blurring.

And then a light flickered in his vision. A torch. All the torches by the lake had gone out, but this one burned steady. Soon there half a dozen torches, and with them, men. Something clicked in Will’s head, sharp in the murk of anger. *The forest party*. The men were running now, down the strip of grass between the lakes, Robert Dale at the lead, and beside him, his brother, Ian. Phillip’s father. Will faltered and so did the wind storm, breaking into gusts and then into a strong breeze as his father strode over the coffin debris.

“*What is this?*” roared Robert. “What happened here?” And for once, maybe because Will’s face was bloody and his wrists were raw, his father turned his anger on the others. The three boys were still sitting, dazed, in the grass, but Phillip was getting to his feet, his own father half-dragging him up by an elbow. Lightning flashed overhead.

“It was a *coffin*...” growled Will.

“It was a *joke*,” spat Phillip, still breathless. “We weren’t going to put it in the water.”

Will lunged at Phillip, but before he could reach, Robert’s arm came around his shoulders, and held him back. When Lord Dale spoke, it was to his own brother.

“Take your boy home,” he said, “before I kill him.”

The man shoved Phillip in the direction of Dale.

“All of you,” ordered Robert, as the other boys got up. “Go now.” Most of the forest party went with them, leaving only three of the royal guard standing torchlit among

the coffin planks and curls of metal. Robert's arm slid from Will's shoulders. Will braced himself, but his father said nothing, only ushered him home with a nod and a look.

The two walked back toward the Great House in silence, Will waiting for his father's inevitable wrath. How much had he seen? The aftermath, of course, but what before? Behind his eyes, Will replayed the last time his father had witnessed his power. He rubbed his bandaged forearm, the newest cut hardly healed, and waited. But Robert still said nothing.

Halfway to the house, the storm finally broke over Dale. Between one breath and the next, the air went cold, an icy rain tumbling down over them. The wind picked up, but with no mind of its own, tugging at their cloaks and chilling the water on their skin. Will shivered, and quickened his pace. By the time they reached the great steps, Will was tired of waiting.

"I didn't have a choice," he said.

Robert didn't respond, and Will assumed that the rain had muffled the words until a few moments later his father said, "I believe you."

His tone was ice, but Will still wanted to crumple to the wet ground with relief. They kept climbing the steps.

"Where was your knife?" asked Robert.

He had given Will a blade two years before, but Will had never cared for weapons, and ever since he had started using it to carve lines in his skin, he'd grown infinitely less fond of the knife. He'd left it in his room as he always did.

Now, as they reached the top of the steps, he thought of the anger, the singular want in that moment, to crush Phillip. If he'd *had* his knife, would he have killed his

cousin? It would have been so easy, so fast. Then again, if he had not seen the torchlights coming, he still might have...

"I didn't—" He nearly said *bring it with me*, but caught himself, and at that moment Eric met them on the path, eyes alight with torchlight and panic.

"Is Lady Dale with you?" he asked.

"No," said Robert, the rain pounding cold and heavy around them. "Why would she be?"

Eric's gaze flicked to Will before he answered. "She went looking for Master Dale."

Panic rippled through Will's chest. "How long ago?" he asked.

Lightning cracked across the freezing sky.

"Is she alone?" demanded Robert over the storm.

"She took two of her guard," answered Eric. "But none have come back."

"Send two more," he ordered. "Everyone else, get inside."

Once within, Robert took to pacing. Will looked through the windows at the worsening storm. This was all wrong.

"When did she leave?" asked Robert.

"About an hour ago, when she found his note."

Will cringed, and Robert stopped mid-stride. "What note?"

Eric frowned, and produced a slip of paper. "He left a note when he snuck out."

The air in the room seemed to freeze as his father turned toward him. "How did you end up at to the lake?"

"They dragged me there," said Will.

“But not from here, so from where?”

He hesitated.

“I will ask you once,” warned Robert, “so answer well. Why did you leave this house this evening?”

Before Will could speak, someone else did.

“I heard the Lady say it was the storm.”

The voice came from an old woman in a crisp white cloak. One of his mother’s attendants. “He went for the storm,” she chirped again. “He wanted the storm.”

Robert stiffened, and spun on his son. “Is that true?”

Will took a step back.

“The Lady knew the Lord would be angry,” she prattled. “And so she went to find him first.”

Will took another step back, and vowed to smother the old lady in her sleep.

“*William.*” Robert’s knuckles went white on the grip of the knife at his belt. “Did you seek out the storm? To what end would you...” But he didn’t need to finish the question. He knew. It showed in the tensing of his jaw, and his grip on the knife. Will was too tired to lie, but knew better than to voice the truth. Still, Robert took his silence for confession.

“And I thought you’d learned,” he said quietly as he slid the knife free. “Roll up your sleeves.”

Will took a third step, and came up against a shelf.

“Hold him down,” ordered his father as reached blindly back, and felt something sharp on the shelf. He curled his fingers around it as Eric strode toward him, but just then doors flew open, and a damp guard announced, “She’s here, sir. Lady Dale is back.”

SIX

Robert and Will hurried to the foyer as Lady Dale and her guards strode in. Icy rain coated their cloaks like frost, their cheeks flushed and their hair matted to their skin from the storm. Will reached for his mother, but Robert cut him off, stripping her cloak and wrapping his arms around her in a single gesture.

“You are the life and death of me,” he said.

She soothed him with a touch. But then her eyes found Will, and widened at the sight of him. Half the blood had washed away in the rain, but his face was still cut and his eyes hollow. She pulled away, and stepped past Robert toward him. Will hugged her close, shivering as his cheek met hers. She was cold as ice.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. He said it again and again until she ran her hand over his hair.

“It’s all right,” she cooed. “You’re safe. I’m safe. You’re here. I’m here.” It was something she used to say, when he had nightmares.

“Katherine,” said Robert. “Let’s get you warm.” She began to pull away. Will didn’t want to let go, but she slid from his embrace. “In the morning, Will, you must tell me everything.”

Will nodded.

“Come,” pressed Robert.

“I’m well,” she said, as she took her husband’s hand. But she did not look it.

Dread crept through Will as he watched them go. He stood in the foyer, surrounded by the guards, and felt...lost. Something was wrong. So many things were wrong, and he didn’t know what to do, so he stood very still and waited. Everyone else waited, too, as if they could feel the wrongness taking shape.

And then, sometime later, Robert returned.

The look on his face was unlike any Will had ever seen. Anger he recognized, and frustration, but the thing threaded through Robert’s features was fear.

“Father,” started Will, but when Robert spoke, he did not speak to his son, did not even acknowledge his presence.

“Take him to his room,” he said. “And make sure he stays there.”

With that he turned, and left the hall.

* * *

Will’s room had two locks, one on the inside, and one on the out. He listened to the outer bolt grate across the wood, and tore the damp cloak from his shoulders before sinking into the nearest chair, cursing the storm and Phillip and himself.

He did this. He provoked his cousin and left the note and chased the darkening clouds, and his mother...she was just cold, he told himself. Chilled from the rain. She would be fine. She would be fine, and Robert’s anger would fade into relief, and in the

morning they would unlock Will's door and he would go down and have breakfast, and sit across from his father, his mother between them like the bridge she was.

He closed his eyes, and sank back in the chair, and played the scene, listening to his parents go on about the spring festival, and the food, and the coming year, talking just to fill the quiet.

* * *

The guards did not unlock Will's door.

By morning, the storm outside had passed, but clouds still hung over the Great House.

Lady Dale was not well.

Will could feel it, even before he heard the news in the guards' lowered voices beyond his door. They said she had a fever and had stayed in bed, at Robert's orders. Will remained bound to his rooms, spared his father's wrath only because Lord Dale spent every moment with his wife.

"How sick is she?" asked Will through the wood of his door, but the guards beyond went silent. He asked again, but they refused to answer. They didn't leave, though. He could hear their shifting weight on the floor. And if he looked out the window, and down, his eyes met more white cloaks lurking in the yard beneath. He was trapped.

Will himself began to pace. He crossed the room a dozen a times, and when that did not help, he reached for his pendant.

It wasn't there.

He cringed and closed his eyes, trying to remember. A glint of silver lost among splintered wood and bent metal. The lakeside. His gaze went to the window, to the sloping hill of Dale. It wasn't far, not really, but with a barred door and a guarded yard, the stretch of grass between the lakes was worlds away. The air wavered nervously around him and he clutched his hand into a fist against his chest as if he could conjure the calming magic from memory.

It didn't work.

That first day was torture, the passing of time marked only by the shifting sun and Will's fraying nerves. The air hummed as he paced, as he tried to read, tried to sleep, tried to do anything but think about the walls of the room and the many more walls separating him from his mother.

She would be all right.

Katherine Dale was strong, and it was only a fever. She was made of magic. She would be fine. Robert was making a show of it, of their confinements, to punish him.

Will watched the sun sink as he played out the scene a dozen times, tweaking his father's tone or his mother's words, but in every version she sat bright eyed in her bed and chided her husband for being so silly. In some versions, she'd even laugh.

Will swore once or twice that he could hear it, but soon he realized that it was nothing more than restless wind.

SEVEN

That first night, Will dreamt again of blood-streaked air. The wind around him laughed, and laughed, and the laughing grew and twisted with the tunnel of air until it coiled around him, rising into screams and he woke.

* * *

The second day he lay on the floor and closed his eyes and tried to picture the fields, the swaying grass, Nicholas's lessons, while the pages of the books and the bed sheets all fluttered in the nervous air.

* * *

The nights were nightmares and the days were worse.

* * *

Will woke, and shivered, his breath escaping in clouds as he sat up.

The room was freezing, but he'd had to leave the windows open. The memory of what he did to the coffin was too fresh in his mind. He couldn't risk that happening to the Great House. The nervous wind was growing worse.

It was now the fourth day of confinement. Four days bound to his room with no pendant and no word of his mother and no visitors save the guard who delivered his food, coming and going in stony silence. Four days of waiting. Three nights of nightmares.

The cold air rustled around him, tugging at his clothes as he stood, and tangling in them as he crossed to the window.

The first thing he saw was the crisp blue sky.

The second thing he saw were the flowers.

His heart dropped like a stone.

People were setting flowers on the great steps. White wildflowers, the kind that grew in the fields year-round, bloomed even in the dead of winter, and because of that were seen as tokens of health.

Prayers for health.

The top of the steps were piled with the stems of small white blossoms.

No.

He looked down and found the set of guards beneath his window, silent and sober. He might be able to get *out*, but they'd never let him back *in* to see her. He spun and strode to his door.

"Let me out," he said, banging on it. He knew they were out there, the guards, he could hear them moving, hear them talking, but they never answered.

“Eric!” he ordered. Nothing.

“You have to let me see her!” he shouted, striking his fist against the wood.

The wind coiled dangerously around him and he rested his forehead against the door as he tried to calm down. It didn’t work. There were white flowers on the great steps. *White wildflowers.*

The wind kept growing. It began to tug at him, not just his clothes, but his *skin*. He held up his hands, and watched as his flesh thinned, the tips of his fingers threading like smoke through the air. Maybe...his gaze went to the gap between his door and the floor. Whenever he slipped, he felt the thinning, the running of his edges, but he’d always resisted. He’d been afraid. What if he let go, what if he vanished, and couldn’t come back together again?

He had to.

His hands always came back. His body returned to body. And just as something in his bones—deeper, even—drew him into wind, he would have to trust it to draw him back again.

And so, the wind began to pull him apart. And as his body thinned, so did his thoughts, blurring in his mind. His pain and fear and anger weakened, his focus broke apart, and it felt *good* and he didn’t care, didn’t care about his body or his life or this town or Robert’s wrath or his mother’s sickness, none of it mattered, nothing matter—

Will came violently back to himself, and collapsed, gasping on his hands and knees. Back in his mind and his skin, he felt disgusted. How could he think that? How could he be—

The bolt slid back, and his door opened.

Will staggered to his feet and turned to find Eric waiting, flanked by two other guards in white. For an instant, Eric's eyes widened, and Will wondered if some part of him hadn't come fully back, but when he stole a glance in the mirror, he saw that he was fully there, if ashen.

“You've been summoned,” said Eric at last. Will's hopes rose until he added, “Lady Dale is dying.”

EIGHT

Robert stood before the door, arms crossed. When Will hurried toward him, the guards trailing behind, he did not move, did not look up.

“Father, what’s going on? How is she? Eric said...”

“You’re a monster, William.” The words were said low, but Will still heard. “You know that. I don’t care what word you use. A witch or a demon or a godthing. You’re a *thing*. But a powerful one.” Robert straightened, and stepped toward his son. His eyes were rimmed red when he met Will’s gaze. “If you’re so powerful, fix this.”

Will’s eyes widened. “I am no healer.”

“You speak to the moor. Tell it to save her.”

“Father, I can’t—”

Robert took hold of Will’s collar, and slammed him back against the wall. “*If you love her, make it save her.*”

He let go of Will abruptly, and said, under his breath, “If you do not save her life, so help me, I will not spare yours.” And then he strode away.

Will stood there, stunned. And then he heard his mother, calling through the door. He went in. And stopped.

Katherine Dale sat up in bed, her black hair clinging to her face with fever.

She smiled when she saw him, but it was thin, tired.

“William,” she said. “You came.” There was something missing from her voice, replaced by a faint sound when she breathed, a *shhhh* sound. He came to the bed, and kneeled, but when he took her hand, he nearly recoiled. Her skin was cold as stone.

“They wouldn’t let me come,” he said, voice hitching. “I would have come. I didn’t...”

“Hush now,” she said. “And listen to me.”

“I didn’t know.”

“William. *Listen.*” He listened to the sound of her breathing and thought of Robert’s threat. He bowed his head and tried to picture the sound in her lungs as wind, but it was useless. His power didn’t work that way.

“Look at me,” she said, guiding his chin up with her other hand. He met her eyes. There wasn’t enough life in them, and he felt the panic welling in his chest. The air hummed, and his mother tightened her grip on his hand.

“Dale is your home and your inheritance,” she said. “You must look after it. And you must be careful. Now more than ever.”

“Please...” he whispered, but he couldn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t know how.

He heard the door open behind him.

“Tread lightly, my sweet,” she whispered.

Will felt Robert’s hand come down on his shoulder, heavy as a house. He stiffened, but held his mother’s gaze.

“You should rest,” said Will softly. He got to his feet and leaned forward, placing a kiss on his mother’s temple. It burned beneath his lips.

He gave her hand a last squeeze, and then let go.

* * *

Lady Dale was wrapped in black.

The pyre was erected on the landing halfway up the great stairs, and was made from the festival wood. All of Dale was draped in garlands. The Great House gardens had been stripped bare to wreath the city, blossom and wildflower and grass and stem woven together into streamers that ran from the royal house down the steps and through the streets, turning the hill of Dale into a bed of color.

They set the fire at dawn, Robert and Will standing at opposite ends of the pyre, the people gathered at the base of the steps. Will watched the fire reach his mother’s black cloak, and pictured her burning beneath it, hair crumbling, skin peeling away like paper. The wind lifted, and he closed his eyes, but the firelight echoed against his lids. He dug his nails into his palms until they bled. Something new had come over him, something worse, more engulfing, than fear and anger and pain and panic and anything else he’d ever felt. Sorrow. The wind sang with it, low and sad, and the fire danced.

Will felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder, and opened his eyes.

“This is your fault,” Robert said, his tone ice. From the base of the steps the two men must have looked like a family bound by grief. But Robert’s grip tightened. “It should be you.”

Tread lightly, my sweet.

Will bit his tongue, and tried to pull away, to take a step forward, but Robert followed, forcing him toward the lip of the landing. Will twisted out of his grip but his father grabbed him by the collar, his blood-shot blue eyes meeting Will's sad gray ones for only an instant before he threw him backward, off the landing, and down great steps. He hit the first stairs hard, his shoulder cracking, before the air sprung up to break his fall. By the time he hit the path at the base of the steps, hands thrown out to brace himself, the wind had sprung up, coiled and cushioned his fall, his body seeming to hover a moment above the stones before dropping him. The people gasped, and drew back.

Robert stormed down the steps as Will struggled to his feet, tasting blood.

“This thing,” announced Robert, “is not my son. He is a monster.”

Will straightened, the wind churning around him, rippling his cloak. He took a step away and the crowd shifted, moving back to avoid him.

“He is a witch. He summoned the storm that—”

“Enough,” said Will, clutching his shoulder.

“—killed my wife.”

“That's not true,” begged Will, the air whipping up around him. “I would never, ever...”

But whatever spell his mother had cast over Robert, over Dale, it died with her. His father's eyes were filled with hate, and the people stood and watched, but made no move. The guards, too, stared on. Will looked around, and saw Sarah, eyes wide with shock, and Phillip, smiling. His head snapped back to Robert when the crowd gasped, and saw that his father had pulled free his knife.

“Don’t do this,” said Will as the wind tore at him, his limbs thinning. “Don’t make me—”

Robert lifted his blade. “You brought the storm,” he growled, gesturing up the steps to the pyre. “You murdered her.” He charged forward.

“*Stop*,” ordered Will, and the wind responded, and slammed into Robert, sending him back several steps. But it wasn’t enough to stop him. He bent his head and struggled forward, and this time when Will tried to retreat, a pair of hands shoved him forward toward his father and the knife.

Will took a breath as Robert slashed the blade across his chest. The people gasped. But there was no scream, no blood. Will’s whole body wavered, like smoke, the knife passing straight through. Will looked down at himself, eyes wide.

“Witch,” someone shouted.

“Demon.”

“Stop,” said Will.

“Monster.”

“Murderer.”

“Please, stop.”

“Witch.”

“Kill him.”

And then, the circle of space collapsed, the people plunging toward him, and he threw out his hands and closed his eyes and screamed, “STOP!”

There was a sound like a large door being slammed, a heavy crack as the wind whipped into everything around him, and threw it back with horrible force. At the same moment, everything around Will went very, very still.

He opened his eyes.

He was standing in the center of a column of wind, a wall of air that whined and moved so fast that the whole world blurred beyond it, and he blurred within, his body thinning more and more toward nothing. A nothing that was safe, empty, a nothing without thought and feeling and pain and loss. He began to vanish.

And then, above the howling wind, he heard the first screams.

Threaded through the wind was something bright, all light and color, brilliant and hot, and Will realized through his thinning mind what it was.

Fire.

The wind had caught up the flames from the funeral pyre and spread them to the garlands that ran like roots through Dale.

Will, still fading, tried to pull himself back. The wind didn't listen. He kept fading and the fire kept spreading.

No. I didn't want to... He reached out, but his arms were smoke and air. He tried to break free of the tunnel of wind, but every time he moved, the cyclone only shifted, keeping him in the center.

I didn't mean to hurt... The screams grew louder, the air choked with smoke, and he tried to pull back, but it was too late.

The wind tore Will from his body, and his mind, and set him free.

NINE

William woke in snow.

The late afternoon sun shone down as he lay there on the cooling stone path, and looked up at the sky, and watched the white flecks float down around him, thinking how rare a thing it was in Dale. It fell, and coated his skin, his hair, his cloak. And then he took a breath, and choked, and realized what it was.

Ash.

He jerked up, coughing, and then he looked around, and saw that he was sitting in the charred remains of Dale. The buildings, what was left, were blackened, stone skeletons with the wood burned out. And all around, to every side, were mounds of ash. Will got to his knees, and reached for the nearest heap, and when he wiped away the film, his hand met still-warm bone. A corpse. All the mounds were corpses. Will staggered to his feet, and spun to look up the great steps. His mother's pyre was gutted, burned to nothing, and beyond it the Great House stood, a still-smoking shell.

And through it all, a deathly stillness reigned. No sound but the settling of dust and the pounding of Will's heart, and then his boots as they tore through the ruined streets and down to the base of the hill where Dale gave way to the lakes and the field and the moor. He reached the edge and collapsed to his knees and retched.

There was a line on the ground, a seam where the singed world stopped and the green one started. A crisp, clean, impossible divide.

The wind. It hadn't simply pushed the people of Dale back, it had trapped them in, confined the destruction to the hill, sparing only Will and the moors beyond. He shuddered, and wrapped his arms around his ribs. He made it to his feet again, and toward the nearest lake, the shards of the coffin still scattered across the grass. Among the warped metal and wood, he found his pendant, took it up, and carried it to the water's edge, where his legs gave way. He felt hollowed out as he closed his hand around the necklace, and pitched it into the lake.

His reflection rippled, but he didn't meet its gaze. Instead he forced his eyes up to Dale, the sun hovering above the ruins of the Great House.

He couldn't stay. He felt the wind, now gentle, brush again him, soothing. At first he resisted, but then he realized, with a hollow kind of grief, that there was no reason to hold back now. He could have power or people, but never both, and now the people were gone, and so he gave in, let the wind rise and fall with his breath, let it course through him as he forced his shaking body to its feet.

And then, he began to walk.

He walked until he was no longer the heir of Dale, or the callous prince, or William Hart. He walked until he was simply a shadow, a stranger, a ghost. Until his edges blurred and his body thinned, and he was nothing but a gray streak against the wind.