

## Chapter Four

*“Besides, maybe it will start speaking to you.”*

“I don’t think he’s dead.”

Manon did not turn at the sound of Luca’s voice. A moment before, the figure in black had been just there, beyond that line of trees—but though she wanted to convince herself otherwise, Manon could see only rough bark and pine boughs. Even the fog, so thick and solid, was dissipating. By the time her heart stopped racing, there would be nothing to suggest the figure had been there at all.

She refused to think of him as Perrin. From the moment she regained consciousness in the dust that had been Elysium, the air still crackling with white fire, she had thought only of finding the being who had summoned the flames from the sky—of finding him and prying her brother free from whatever strange power held him prisoner in a body that was both his and not. Manon shivered still at the thought of the eyes that ought to have been green ringed with gold, at the way the unknown blue irises had stared back at her from a face that belonged to her brother. Worse still was the pit that had gnawed in her stomach from the moment she had understood that Perrin had no recognition for her.

Luca called for her from next to body on the ground. The man’s horse watched from a distance, ears back, neck straining. The mare had not bolted, though, which was remarkable considering. “Manon.”

Manon walked backward toward the hunter from Licenza, unwilling to tear her eyes from the pines where she had last seen the thing that wasn’t Perrin—though she knew there was nothing left to see.

“If he’s not dead, let’s go. If we lose the trail, I don’t know if we can find it again.” She would not lose Perrin. Could not.

“Manon, I think he’s someone important.”

Sighing, Manon turned and looked down at the man she had saved from death—and nearly stumbled into Luca’s shoulder in shock.

Alexandre de Minos was much as she had last laid eyes on him, despite the fact that he was stretched out on the forest floor, his breathing dangerously shallow, his

famous spear just out of reach of his fingers. His face was peaceful, as though he had felt no fear in the moments before Manon's flames had burned through the fog and caused his attacker to flee, as though he had still felt he could defeat his opponent even as he had fallen from the saddle. Manon grimaced at the thought of such arrogance.

"You know him," Luca said, watching her face.

"In a manner of speaking." Manon dropped to one knee, her gaze scanning de Minos's body for signs of injury. There appeared to be none. "Would you like to be a rich man?"

Luca frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You've just saved the life of one of the most important men in Arconia, indeed, in all of the Seven Cities. This is Alexandre de Minos, Arch-Commander of Arconia."

For perhaps the first time since she had met him, Luca, it seemed, had nothing to say. The hunter looked from Manon to de Minos and back again.

"You're sure?"

Manon laughed. "I'm afraid so. I had the unfortunate pleasure of being in his custody not long ago, neither prisoner nor guest."

Luca looked skeptical. "And you think that might make him inclined to reward us for saving his life?"

"I didn't say reward."

The hunter caught her meaning swiftly, and where a matter of days before he might have chided her gently, he now gave her a stare heavy with mock disappointment. "We're not ransoming the Arch-Commander of Arconia, Manon."

Manon laughed again, aware she had not smiled this much since the day in Elysium, the day Perrin became something powerful and deadly. She let that thought wash over her, let it glide away, glad to have a moment without that burden, if only in her imagination.

"I wasn't serious," she said.

Luca snorted. "You were a little serious." He bent over the Arch-Commander once more, intent on the rise and fall of the man's chest. Already improving, Manon noted. "Do you think he will wake on his own?" Luca asked.

“I know nothing more about that fog than you do,” Manon said. “Clearly it robbed de Minos of his faculties, but beyond that....” She shrugged.

“We know the fog doesn’t like fire,” Luca said.

“You say that as though the fog were a thing capable of liking something as you or I would like strong wine or particular cheese.”

It was Luca’s turn to shrug. “I’ve never seen a Carrier do the things our cloaked friend has done.” Manon noted—and was grateful for—how Luca did not name him Perrin. She had not asked him to do so, had not said much of anything about what they had witnessed—what had almost killed them—in Elysium, but the hunter had a knack for understanding her mind. It had unsettled her at first, this realization that a man she hardly knew seemed to sense the workings of her, well, of her heart, if she was honest, before she herself did. Her father had that ability, and Manon was wary of anything that reminded her of Julian Barca. But Manon had, since Elysium, found a sliver of refuge in feeling less alone for the first time in six years.

“As such,” Luca went on, “I won’t be assuming that fog was like any other fog.” Manon acknowledged this with a small nod and the hunter continued. “Stone, water, fire,” he held up a finger with each word. “This Carrier seems to be master of all, or,” Luca frowned, searching for words, “seems to believe himself to be master of all. I don’t think he collapsed that cave on purpose. I think something went wrong. But the fog and whatever it was he did to poison the river, that I have never seen. And then there were the birds, Manon.”

“Birds fly in formations, Luca.”

They had argued over this before, after tracking the thing that wasn’t Perrin from Elysium to a small lake nestled in a wild moor—where they had watched in horrified wonder as he had proceeded to lift every drop of water from that lake, raise it up into the sky, like a child’s floating soap bubble, and then let it crash down with such thunderous fury that Manon had felt the earth tremble beneath her feet. She had stared at the still raging lake until Luca touched her shoulder and pointed to the sky.

“But not in a perfect circle, Manon,” Luca said.

And it had been perfect. Manon could see it still, dark feathers against a blue sky, and not a sound to be heard.

She knew he was right. Had known it that day at the lake. But while she could accept stone and water and fire, even fog and strange substances to befoul fresh water, the notion that a Carrier could control the flight of birds—and if birds, why not more?—could dictate to a flock of hundreds like artist painting strokes on a canvas, was more than Manon was willing to contemplate.

“But why birds?” Manon burst out. “What purpose did that serve?”

“I’ll add that question to the list of things to ask him, shall I?” The words were light, but the voice behind them was not. Luca held Manon’s gaze, his face grim.

“Ask who?”

Startled, Manon looked down at Alexandre de Minos, who was very much conscious.

The Arch-Commander of Arconia smiled a smile that somehow conveyed genuine humor, more than a little wry understanding of the irony of the situation, and—she was sure of it—the smug conceit that comes with a lifetime of authority.

“Hello, Manon.” Alexandre de Minos propped himself up on one elbow. If the effects of the fog lingered, he did not let it show, or let it mar his handsome face.

Manon made him wait overly long—not just because she wanted to. “You’re fortunate,” she said at last, “that I suffered no harm on your orders when you had me at your mercy aboard the *Horatio*.”

“Fortune has nothing to do with,” he said. “Though I am sorry to know you believe me capable, indeed, willing, to flaunt my power over you, or anyone else at my mercy.”

Manon’s fingers tightened into a fist. No doubt de Minos noticed. “And what of your little performance in the Vismarch’s courtyard? What of the whip Perrin was threatened with?”

Her words had no apparent effect. “Necessary. And your brother was never truly at risk.”

“Then you knew what I would say? You knew I would sacrifice myself to save him? You are mistaken, Arch-Commander, for even I did not know.”

De Minos smiled a little and Manon seethed at the pity she saw there. "I knew. One way or another, Manon, you were not prepared to see your brother harmed."

The audacity of his conviction took her breath away. Certainly it was not that she heard truth in his words. Certainly not.

In the absence of a reply from her, de Minos, still on one elbow as though he were lounging at a picnic, glanced at Luca.

"Perhaps you can introduce me to your friend, Manon?"

"He speaks for himself." It was a petty reply that would wound Luca more than de Minos, Manon knew. But a more civilized response eluded her.

"Very well." With smooth grace, de Minos got to his feet and proceeded to dust at the dirt on the lapel of his coat. Luca lurched upright after him. "I am Alexandre de Minos, Arch-Commander of Arconia." De Minos offered a hand to Luca.

"Luca D'Armand." Luca grasped the Arch-Commander's hand. "Of Licenza." He frowned a little. "Formerly, I suppose."

"And I imagine your acquaintance with Manon has something to do with the Archduke's tasks for her?"

A hint of wariness crept into Luca's face. Manon could have kissed him. "It does," he said.

She expected, as she got to her feet, the Arch-Commander to insist on further explanation, but de Minos merely accepted this with a nod.

"Now," he said, "I think it's time you told me about my attacker." There was no obvious shift, no change in tone, no adjustment of posture. But with those words, Alexandre de Minos was not what he had been a moment before—and there would be no further evading.

That didn't mean Manon couldn't try, out of habit or spite.

"You speak with a great deal of familiarity, Arch-Commander," she said, straightening—they were nearly of a height—and meeting his gaze head on. "Must I remind you we are not friends."

"No," de Minos said, his face still with gravity. "No, we are not friends. I have not forgotten your attempt on Eska's ship, on her life. But I do not name you an enemy."

Yet. Manon heard it, though he did not say it. She thought of the courtyard in Toridium, when she had caught a glimpse of de Minos but not known his face. She had understood him, in that moment, to be a predator. She was no less certain of that now.

Manon glanced at Luca, saw him trying to work out the tension between them. She forced herself to exhale and take a step back. Without intent, her gaze wandered back to the pines where she had last seen the thing that was not Perrin, the thing that had nearly killed the Arch-Commander.

“We don’t know who or what he is, Arch-Commander.”

It was Luca who spoke, his words a foundation for her to stand on, a concession made so she didn’t have to relent.

“And the fog?” Alexandre de Minos turned his attention to Luca, leaving Manon to contemplate why this bothered her. “I felt it in my lungs first, then,” de Minos hesitated, gesturing into the air with one hand, “in my mind, I suppose. Everything slowed, but I could hardly move.” He spoke as though describing events that had befallen another. “At the end, my vision grew blurry and my eyes watered, much like when one stands at a smoky hearth or campfire overly long.” De Minos glanced at Manon. “I believe I saw your fire, before I lost consciousness.”

She gave a curt nod.

“Then you have my thanks.”

Suddenly his attention was fixed far too firmly on her. She wanted to look away and found she could not.

“You know this person,” de Minos said. “You will not convince me that your presence here in this little corner of wilderness, four days out from Arconia, is a coincidence.”

“We have been following him for seven days, Arch-Commander,” Luca said. De Minos’s gaze lingered on Manon, but at last he turned to Luca once more.

“Then I think there is a great deal more to be said.” De Minos whistled and the mare, placid now, trotted to his side. “But night’s shroud has fallen.” He stroked the horse’s nose. “There is an outpost not far from here. You will accompany me and we will speak more.”

The order sent a shiver of anger rolling across Manon's skin, but Luca caught her eye and there was something in his face that quelled her, though she did not enjoy knowing that the prolonged glance between them was no doubt observed by de Minos.

Luca broke eye contact and turned to fetch their horses, leaving Manon with nothing but the twilight between her and Alexandre de Minos.

He was close, the mare closer as she sniffed in Manon's direction.

"Come, Manon," he said, his voice as soft as the starlight. "We are not enemies."

The yet was still there. But so was the knowledge that had sunk its claws into Manon days before: she could not save Perrin alone. And saving Perrin was all that mattered.

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"I saw his face."

Alexandre de Minos, his feet propped on the cold hearth, was leaning back in his wobbly chair, staring at the rafters—or perhaps beyond them—of the private apartment he had been granted in the officers' house.

Their arrival at the outpost had been met with surprise due to the lateness of the hour and the fact, Manon learned, that de Minos had only ridden away from the outpost that morning. The captain had greeted them cheerfully, if a bit tipsily, but, to Manon's immense relief, the Arch-Commander made it abundantly clear that he would not be answering any questions. As such, there were no introductions, no efforts at polite conversation. She had never before been so grateful for the respect for authority among members of the military, which flourished, it seemed, even in a remote, entirely uninteresting outpost.

Manon and Luca had been ushered into the private apartment, where Manon proceeded to pace while Luca remained uncharacteristically quiet. When de Minos entered, bearing a tray of food and a jug of ale, they proceeded to eat the bread and meat in silence that even Manon understood to be awkward. During her time aboard the *Horatio*, she had not dined with the Arch-Commander, and she and Luca

had spent most of their time together eating on opposite sides of a campfire, or sheltering under what cover they could find.

When the jug had made its second round and nothing remained but a few crumbs and fatty rinds, de Minos had shifted his chair closer to the hearth, arranging it so he might see both Manon and Luca, and yet it was the ceiling he spoke to when at last the long silence was broken.

“His face?” Manon tried to keep her voice neutral, but her heart raced inside her ribcage. De Minos would not have forgotten Perrin’s face.

“In a manner of speaking,” de Minos said, still musing at the ceiling.

For once, Manon found she was desperate for him to speak.

“A mask, I suppose,” the Arch-Commander said, his gaze falling to land on Manon. “Unless you think it possible our talented friend is dead.”

“Dead?” Manon’s mind tripped over the word as the Arch-Commander toppled her admittedly limited understanding of the thing that wasn’t Perrin. Nor did she expect a man as pragmatic as de Minos to speculate in notions of dead spirits rising. For all their power, even the mighty Alescuans had not conquered mortality. The dead did not walk the world. She heard Luca stir in his chair, but she had eyes only for de Minos. “What do you mean?”

De Minos swung his legs down from the hearthstones and sat up, elbows on his knees, leaning toward Manon. No longer musing. “I saw a skull of gold staring back at me from beneath his hood.”

Not Perrin’s face, then. At least there was that.

“Could the fog have affected you? Created this vision?” Luca’s question broke the eye contact between Manon and de Minos.

The Arch-Commander leaned back in his chair and spread his hands before him, palms up. “I will allow it is entirely possible, considering what else it did to me. But if so, that begs another question. Why? Whether the skull was an illusion or is made of cold hard gold, surely it has meaning.” De Minos let his words linger in the candlelight. “I’m going to need to know everything you know.”

Everything was a great many things.



Manon stared at the floorboards, debating a losing argument with herself about the consequences of refusing.

“Manon.” De Minos waited until she looked at him. “I do not understand your reticence. But allow me to ask you to think of this situation from a perspective other than your own.” Again he waited, though for what Manon could not say. “I am Arch-Commander of Arconia, charged with defending all the Seven Cities and their people. And I have just learned that an unidentified person of some considerable power and unknown intentions has poisoned a river, possibly murdered a woman, and attacked me. Not to mention whatever this person has been doing for the past, what was it, seven days?”

Luca offered a confirming nod Manon knew the Arch-Commander did not need.

“Can you see how this is a matter that concerns me?”

She could.

“Tell about this woman you say was killed,” Manon said.

“First you tell me what you have seen since becoming acquainted with our friend. And the circumstances of your meeting.”

And so she did, starting with the day white fire burst from the sky over Elysium. She said little of the Archduke’s reasons for sending her there, and nothing at all of Perrin, only that they had seen a figure among the ruins who had appeared to summon the bolt of flames. With Luca’s assistance, she recounted the days that followed, how they picked up the trail, how they witnessed the hooded figure—always hooded—enter a cave burrowed into a hillside and emerged in a cloud of smoke, how the cave had collapsed a moment later and of the howl of rage that had chilled Manon to the core. The Arch-Commander listened quietly, without interruption, his expression changing little, until Luca related the story of the birds hovering over the lake. His gaze sharpened in that moment, but he said nothing until after Manon finished describing how they had watched the unknown figure wade into the river upstream from the village, how he had caught a fish with his hands, seemed to stroke its striped side like a fascinated child, and then how the fish had rotted before their eyes.

“And he threw it back in the river?” de Minos asked.

Manon nodded. "The water began to blacken instantly."

"And you never tried to speak to him? Engage with him in any way?"

Manon thought of the moment in Elysium when she had spoken to Perrin, when she had realized her brother was not behind the face that looked back at her. She swallowed down the lump in her throat. "No." She glanced at Luca, then admitted, "My abilities are limited, Arch-Commander. The fire I sent to chase away the fog today was nearly at the uppermost boundary of what I can create and wield without assistance. Confrontation did not seem wise." Never mind the fact that she had no wish to harm whatever was left of Perrin under that hood.

She expected a clever remark, a slight against her bravery or skills. But Alexandre de Minos remained grave. "There you and I agree." He rose from his chair and poured the remainder of the ale into their cups. "A body was found in the river just downstream from that very same village today." De Minos returned the empty jug to the table and paced to the window. "A woman. Her throat was torn open." He turned back to face them. "I carried her from the water myself, and discovered a brand on her." He gestured to the place just below the joining of his ribs. "Just here. Perfectly round, much like your birds. And yet there were places within the circle where the skin was untouched. Everything around them blackened and burned, but these remained, like markings on the skin."

"Markings?" Manon asked.

"Nothing recognizable," de Minos said. "Not letters or symbols. Just—"

"Lines and dots," Manon broke in, the words out of her mouth before she knew she was speaking them aloud.

His expression sharpening, de Minos fixed her once more with that stare. "It seems you are not done surprising me, Manon Barca."

Manon's heart beat against the bronze disc, so easily forgotten, in the chest pocket of her traveling coat. Smaller than its cousin now in the Archduke's possession, but both the disc Julian Barca had left for her in her dead brother's sarcophagus and the disc he had buried in the stone circle at Pontevellio were marked with the same series of grooves—line and dots.

Though it would create more questions than answers, more questions the Arch-Commander could use to crack open the things Manon would not say, Manon reached up—her fingers were steady, to her surprise—and into the pocket above her heart.

She held the disc up between two fingers, the bronze gleaming dully with candleflame. Without a word, she set it down on the table.

Alexandre de Minos studied it from a distance for a moment. The darkened markings in the bronze were unmistakable.

“It’s smaller,” he said at last, his head tilting slightly, “smaller than the brand.”

“It is not the only one I have held,” Manon said, “though I no longer have the other.”

“And the other was larger?”

“Yes.”

De Minos looked up at Manon and shaped his hands into a circle, his fingertips touching, a question on his face.

“Roughly, yes.”

“Do you know what they are?”

Manon shook her head. “You have not asked what happened to the other.”

The Arch-Commander’s gaze had returned to the bronze disc and he leaned across the table to see it better. “I am more concerned at the moment with the one our friend appears to have in his possession. Unless you mean to tell me they are one and the same?”

The thought had not occurred to Manon, though she realized now, with the sudden weight of the Arch-Commander’s words, that it ought to have. And yet why would the Archduke give up the thing he had coveted for so long?

“I don’t know.” True enough.

“But you think not.” Though he did not raise his head, de Minos looked up at Manon from beneath his eyelashes.

Manon hesitated, unsure how much of the Archduke’s task to reveal.

“There are six, Arch-Commander,” Luca said, his gaze on Manon. “Or so we were told.”

Alexandre de Minos accepted this without comment. He reached across the table and lightly traced the edge of the disc with one finger—or so he meant to. The instant his skin made contact with the bronze, the disc shuddered and, to Manon’s shock, folded in on itself until it was nothing more than a misshapen lump of metal.

De Minos recovered first and Manon, aware that he was staring at her once more, tried to rearrange her face.

“I take it you have not witnessed that particular event before now.”

Manon’s absurdity of what she had seen burst from her in a sharp exclamation of laughter. “Certainly not. The thing is made of bronze, Arch-Commander. This is impossible.”

“And yet,” he said, gesturing to the crumbled bronze, the impossibility, on the table between them.

The calm in his voice sparked fury in Manon’s ribs and she felt Luca flinch next to her. She reached for the disc, lashing out with the anger she could not inflict on the Arch-Commander, nearly upsetting the candelabra. She plucked the lump of bronze from the table and nearly dropped it as the metal, as malleable as a puddle of wax, unfurled and resumed its original form.

For all his calm a moment earlier, even Alexandre de Minos took a half step back, his lips parted in fascination. Manon’s heart thrummed somewhere in her skull.

Turning abruptly, she shoved her hand in Luca’s direction. The hunter lurched back.

“Take it,” Manon said, her voice hard and desperate.

Luca met her gaze and for a moment Manon feared the trust between them, the trust forged from his stubborn loyalty, might break. But then Luca stretched out his hand, his fingers brushed hers—and the disc crumpled once more as he lifted it from her palm. He released it instantly and the moment it hit Manon’s palm, the reversal was complete.

Manon took a deep breath. “It is a Carrier device.” She knew the words to be true, though she could not have fathomed them a moment before. “Of the three of us, I am the only one who Carries.” Luca’s strange gift was another matter entirely,

but Manon had no intention of revealing the hunter's secret to the Arch-Commander of Arconia. "It is," she hesitated, staring at the bronze disc in her palm, trying to find the words, "open to me. Somehow."

More questions upon questions, and each of them burning behind the Arch-Commander's eyes. Except for why the Archduke of Arconia, who did not Carry, was seeking six bronze Carrier discs—that question was Manon's alone to wrestle with as long as she kept Valexi Arcturos de Vauquelin-Preux's secret.

"Then our friend with the golden skull mask must be trying to use it," de Minos said.

Manon set the disc on the table once more. "Yes." But Perrin did not Carry. Perrin could not do these things. Manon's head swam and she made to step away from the table and the disc, but the look in the Arch-Commander's eyes held her in place.

"Could you use it?"

"I told you, I don't know what it is," Manon said, her words coming faster than she could form them. "I have carried that thing in my pocket for weeks now and never once did I think I could use it."

Alexandre de Minos did not look away. In another moment, Manon might have resolved to learn something from him about the power of waiting, of silence. Now was not that moment.

"Do you expect it to speak to me?" Manon's voice pitched high. "To whisper to me some great power that I might tap into?" Still de Minos looked at her as though she might have a sudden revelation. At last he released her from his gaze.

"You had better hold onto that," he said, nodding at the disc.

Manon frowned. She had expected him to claim it, insist on taking it back to Arconia where it could be kept safe now that he knew something of what it was. She wasn't sure whether she would have refused him. Did Julian Barca know what he had left her? She had thought the gold ingots—stolen from the Licenzan treasury—were what he had intended her to find in Victor's sarcophagus. Now it seemed she had yet another reason to understand she had never understood her father as well as she had once thought.

“Why?” She hated how her voice shook.

“Because you stand a better chance of surviving another encounter with our friend than I do. And I’d rather he didn’t get his hands on a second one.” Alexandre de Minos smiled, his face brightening with a humor Manon could not share.

“Besides, maybe it will start speaking to you.”