

Chapter One

Blood and Ash

The bells were ringing, and only Atticus could hear them. Faint whispers of sound from the nearby village, drifting through the air that even his trained ears could barely sense. Yet they battered into him. Shaking. Crushing him with the weight of their meaning.

And he knew well what they meant.

Another brother dead. Another man he'd drawn swords with would be put to rest in a lifeless tomb. But this time would be different. This time there'd be blood, and this time there'd be ash.

For a king burns when he dies.

Atticus couldn't stop his gaze as it drifted from the chess game in front of him to the dusty sword hanging across the mantle of the fireplace. The cottage had seen better days. Cracks in the brick. Damp in the wood. Personally, he was sick of the blood. He'd had enough of the withered stench of corpses for a lifetime—The Five Kingdoms War had seen to that. As well as others. Too many others.

Memories bogged him down, lifetimes flying past him as his gaze returned to the board and the small, ashen-haired boy sitting across from him. Gray's face looked as if he was trying to figure out a maze. The boy's hair was a tangled mess as he ruffled it up in thought.

Atticus smirked. Most of Gray's black pieces were captured. Would he see the winning move laid out for him?

Gray smiled as though he finally connected the dots.

“Check mate.”

“Indeed,” Atticus said, and, as he watched the toppling of his miniature white king, a pit forming in his stomach. His breath grew heavy.

Aurorum. The name echoed like a shout through the mountains. It seemed two kings had fallen today.

Was the old bastard already dead? How many years had it even been? At least eight. That's how long it'd been since he'd brought the boy up here after his birth. Any laughing now felt empty. Would anyone remember him back in the capital? Eight years could change many things. Yet the thoughts lingered in the back of his mind like a persistent itch. They would come looking for him, and that was one thing he didn't need.

But storms couldn't be stopped with thoughts alone.

He looked down at the smirking boy.

Yes. Many things had changed.

"What is it?" Atticus asked.

"I won." Gray continued to smile.

Atticus glanced at the board and then the many black pieces which were captured and placed to the side. Pawns, rooks, castles, even the queen. "Won?" Atticus raised a brow. "Despite losing so much. You call that winning?"

The boy squinted and his smile disappeared.

"You lost most of your pieces to take a single king," Atticus continued. "If we were to play on, it would be simplicity for my remaining men to sweep yours away. If this was an actual battle, would you still have won?"

"It's only a game." Gray stuck out his tongue and crossed his arms in a pout. "You're only jealous."

Atticus laughed. He grabbed the boy by the head and rubbed the white mop of hair before straightening it out once more. Gray was right. It was a game, and unfair for an old man like him to inflict his grief upon a child.

Let the boy have his fun. He was too young to experience the horridness of this world. But not even the mountain would protect him forever. A cool breeze came through the window and Atticus moved to close it.

Winter was coming. A good excuse to move on. It was time they moved down the mountain and headed south towards Terth. They'd stay with Ragen till spring and allow the tempests to blow over. Plus, Ragen had his own son. What was his name?

Oliver. Yes. Gray needed someone to play with besides the rabbits and chickens in the back shed. And an old man.

“Have you decided yet?” Atticus looked at Gray as a thought, once forgotten, came back to him.

Gray rubbed his hands, smiling in a way that made Atticus regret he’d ever asked. “Teach me lumenancy again!”

Atticus’s face darkened as he rubbed his temples. “Why did I agree to let you choose the lesson if you won?”

“Oh, come on! Last time was only an accident,” Gray said, as his lips formed into another pout.

An accident? Atticus raised an eye. The boy could have gotten himself killed with the stunt he pulled. Trying to overbrand. Trying to commit the greatest taboo in lumenancy. And trying it on his first attempt, too.

He’d thought Gray a prodigy, to form his brands so quickly. And yet—Atticus ground his teeth. Whether out of cockiness or sheer ignorance, the boy had almost committed the sin. He could have turned himself to ash. Burnt himself from the inside out by the very powers he so desperately wished to possess.

And yet, Atticus mused, it seemed to almost work. He shook his head. No. It was impossible. There was a reason taboos existed. Such things would always be seductive for man. They would always seem to *almost* work. To almost be possible. Till fate’s kiss touched you with only a promise of death waiting on the other end. But tempting, nonetheless. Who wouldn’t want more power? But power always had a price. Atticus knew that more than most.

Wind rattled the windows, and Atticus stirred from his thoughts. Midday rays shone into the cottage room and the damp air, not dried by the fire’s touch, licked his skin.

“No lessons for today.” Atticus settled it. If they left now, they could reach the town at the foot of the mountain by nightfall—head for Terth in the morning. Escape the storm.

“But why?” Gray cried. He slumped to the floor and pouted even more. Atticus didn’t meet the boy’s eyes. Knew he’d be weak to them. Instead, he moved towards his room to pack. It was best not to cave when the boy acted like this.

“Pack your things, Gray. Winter is coming, and its high time we get a move on. You remember Oliver, yes? Ragen’s son. We’ll be staying with them for the time being.”

“Really?” Gray shot off the floor. “I get to play with Oliver again?”

“Really.” Atticus smiled, and he leaned against the door frame of his bedroom.

“Why didn’t you say so sooner?” Gray cocked his head before scurrying off to pack.

Atticus’s forehead creased. He would have if he’d known it would distract the boy from wishing to learn lumenancy again. Some things were better taught when one was older. It was a mistake to teach the boy so young. Like giving a child a knife, if the knife’s handle was also a blade unto itself. At least now he could delay for a time. Give the boy a friend, someone to distract him.

Moving into his bedroom—a simple pinewood bed, wardrobe, and nightstand—he packed a bag with clothes. From the wardrobe, he grabbed a travel jacket and saw what was lying behind it. A small stack of wooden carvings, each no larger than a fist, each shaped into the figure of the Saintess Virgo, or some likeness of her, with her angelic wings folded behind her back. There were seven of them, the eighth, still half-finished and only a crude outline.

Atticus picked up the unfinished carving with a trembling hand. His lips pursed as he brought it close to him. His heart was a lump of shattered glass held by mere will. Virgo was supposed to mean forgiveness, so why did his penance never seem answered?

“Maria.” The whisper was inaudible, but the tears were real enough. She was always the religious one. He never had the heart to tell her the truth of the lies her faith was built on.

Clearing his throat, he wiped the tears away and put the unfinished Virgo carving in the bag stuffed with clothes. He reached for the knife on the bed stand and shoved it into the pack as well. There would be time left in the year to finish the carving. One carving. One year.

Would she think him foolish for doing penance based on a religion he knew false? Then again, he did it for her, not for him.

Damn the melancholy. First Aurorum. Now Maria. All the dead ghosts seemed to be coming back to crush him, as if they couldn't leave a feeble old man alone. If not, for just a day.

Yet that was a lie.

He was old. That was the truth. No hiding it. Older than any could tell. Or could live long enough to remember. But he was far from feeble.

His ears pricked up at a faint sound too quiet to recognize, but it felt familiar. It was coming up the mountain and it sent a shiver down his neck as it approached.

The growing tempest.

The storm.

Had it already reached them?

The light in his blood burned. The sting of his lumenancer brands which coiled around his upper arms in intricate ringlet patterns, ebbed and flowed. Their ink-black color glowed gold. An intoxicating power washed through him, and a soft burning pain flowed within his ignited blood.

The world came to life. The crispness of the grains of wood. The creak of the floorboards. The musty air flooded his nostrils. His senses were sharpened with animalistic instinct as his muscles tightened. This cottage really had seen better days. The damp mountain air was coming to destroy it.

Yet, as the light continued to flare, not only his brands, but his veins too, gleamed beneath his skin with a pale gold heat, and then he recognized the sound.

Hoofbeats.

At least a dozen of them. A cavalry platoon. But why? Atticus frowned. For some reason, he didn't think he wanted to find out. But also, given the speed, and the direction. It would seem he was going to. Whether he wanted it or not.

Sweeping across the room, he grabbed a belt and sheath from the lowest drawer of the wardrobe. Long strides carried him back to the living room. With one smooth motion, he fastened the belt

and withdrew the sword from the wall. No time to dust it off. He slid it into its sheath with practiced ease.

Gray peered out from his room. The boy tried to be quiet, to sneak a peek at what was happening, but Atticus noticed him long ago.

Rushing to his side, Atticus gripped the boy's shoulders as he knelt next to him.

“What’s happening?” Gray’s voice was a shadow of the joy from earlier, and Atticus knew his actions scared the poor boy.

Atticus swallowed, choosing his next words carefully.

“Men are coming up the mountain,” Atticus said, keeping his face calm and his tone relaxed. But he knew the boy wouldn’t take a lie. “I’m going to see what they want. Most likely it’s some business about dad’s past when I worked with the king. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. But I want you to stay in your room. Don’t make a sound. Don’t come out.”

“But I’m scared,” Gray whimpered and tried to reach for Atticus’s arm.

Atticus’s lips pursed. He pulled Gray into him. “It’s good to be scared. I get scared sometimes too. But courage is knowing how to act even when we’re scared.” He pushed Gray away from him. “Now, stay in your room. Dad will be right back.” With a smile, one even he didn’t know whether was real or fake, he closed the door to Gray’s room and turned to the front of the cottage.

Eyes closed, he took a breath. He felt the stars above him and his soul connected to the constellation of Leo. Light poured through the intricate brands on his upper arms. His blood grew warm and the shadows in the room darkened as the surrounding color faded, till at last, the flow of light halted and all returned to peace as if nothing changed. Nothing, save the hurricane of light that tore through Atticus’s blood. His soul tapped into Leo at its source, and the heavenly lion's power flooded through his blood.

He stepped through the front door and was greeted by the bright midday rays shining above him. The three suns, Allthena, Spetella, and Marathena, hung high in the sky. The fresh smell of

pine wafted over from the edges of the clearing and, along with it, the smell of sweating horses.

Clapping hooves echoed within the mountain. Dust rose and the cavalry platoon came into view atop the nearest ridge. Atticus's eyes scanned the terrain. His vision, cat-like—enhanced by the burning light of his brands. Flickering leaves appeared in the forest. The snap of a branch.

He bit his bottom lip as he searched for whatever men lay in the forest and mountain paths that surrounded the cottage. It seemed they were prepared. Hand gripping his sword's hilt, he awaited their arrival.

Calm breaths escaped his lips.

The horses came to a rear, and the soldiers dismounted. They finished their approach on foot and Atticus eyed them carefully, as if his gaze could have frozen them like a winter's breeze. For some, it may have, if not for the comfort of the group.

He recognized the two men up front. Langer and Hofsley. He forced down the snarl threatening to come out from his belly. There were some men in the military he had the utmost respect for—men he would have fought hand in hand with while facing death. Then there were some men, well, there were some he rather despised. These two were very much the latter.

Langer's skinny toothpick frame stepped forward first. Mock bravado to hide the cowardice inside. He would always be the man Atticus remembered. The one who ran at the battle of Crawford. He should have been executed. Would have, if not for his family's ties.

Hofsley, the meatier of the two and a full head shorter, put out his hand to stop Langer's approach. It seemed Hofsley understood this point as well. He was a stout man, but none of it was fat. The man was tough—strong. Could have been a talented soldier, if not for his greed. Servitude to the highest bidder.

The question was, who was the highest bidder? Atticus doubted these two came here for fun.

“And what brings you here?” Atticus asked, not trying to hide the hostility in his voice. His eyes gazed over the well-armed soldiers—muskets with bayonets attached, sabers at their belt,

and the blue and white striped uniform which matched the Porstellian coat of arms. It was all rather formal. “Surely a mere visit doesn’t require an armed platoon?”

“Always the perceptive one, aren’t you Atticus?” Hofsey smiled and stretched out his arms as if to pretend friendliness. The falsity of it only served to put Atticus on edge.

His eyes and attention were split between the burly man and the figures he heard snaking through the tree lines. Gunmen with rifled bore muskets.

He was in range.

Langer fidgeted with his knee, as if impatient, waiting for something to happen. “It’s customary for a full platoon to summon a general, Atticus. Or did you forget that in your old age? I’m sure you’ve heard of the king’s death. Or does news not reach this accursed place?” Langer snorted and clicked his tongue. “You’ve been summoned by the King’s court.”

Atticus almost smiled. It seemed they still hadn’t realized he was burning his brands. Did they take him for a fool? The gunmen in the forest. The agitation of the men. Even the sweat dripping down Langer’s face didn’t escape his eyes.

“Is that right?” Atticus played along with their game. “I’ve been summoned by the court. And who sent that order?”

“Does it really—”

“Adstrum sent the order, of course,” Hofsey stated, holding nothing back, and shutting Langer up.

“Adstrum?”

“Who else? He took your place as Minister of War when you left.”

Atticus mused at the words. He’d heard about the replacement. Adstrum was an honorable man. One of the few he owed his life to. And more. Rain and mud shattered his train of thought as images of that night came back to him. The worst night of his life. The best night of his life. No. He doubted any such orders came from him.

“As you’ve said, I’m retired.” Atticus shook his head. “I’m not a general anymore, and I no longer take orders. You can tell

Adstrum.” He stressed the name. “That they can begin the ceremonies without me. I’ll grieve by myself.”

“That’s not possible.” Langer spat, and as soon as the words left his lips, Hofsley slapped him across the back of his head.

“What he meant—” Hofsley sent the skinny man a glare “—was that your name, and opinion, still holds weight within the capital. It would be erroneous to continue without you.”

Atticus laughed. This farce had gone on long enough. “Do you honestly believe that I haven’t noticed the gunmen hiding in the trees?” He watched Hofsley jolt. The man’s eyes sharpened to a pinprick. “Do me some credit,” Atticus continued. “Don’t underestimate me and put me in the same pile as this lot.” He nodded towards Langer and the rest of the men as the grip on his sword tightened.

His blood was boiling.

It’d been years since his last fight.

“You old fool.” Langer laughed. “You think you’re all that?”

“Shut up.” Hofsley’s eyes were cold. “There are easier ways, Atticus. No blood has to be spilled today.”

Atticus paused. So, the man had grown in the past eight years. The man he once knew would have leaped at the chance for blood. Would have found it easy.

“You’re beginning to understand the cost of things.” Atticus sighed. If this was eight years ago, maybe he would have played along. Let them lock him in some cell or whatever they had planned. A breakout would have been simplistic if he ever wished to leave. But what of Gray? He had a boy to take care of, a son. There was no turning back now. Blood would be spilled. His, or there’s. “Sometimes, Hofsley, there is only one way.”

Hofsley’s nostrils flared. “So be it then.” He waved his hand and gunfire sounded. Two shots, a few dozen yards away, from either side of the tree line.

Atticus took a casual step, and the musket balls skewered the air behind him.

He flared the brands on his arms, spurring the light within his body onward. He felt the power of Leo take hold. Eyes sharp

as a lion. Golden claws protruded from his fingernails as his muscles rippled with a heavenly power.

The drawing of his sword made no sound as he walked forward. He faced the muskets leveled toward him with a sense of calm. Calm born not from a lack of fear, but from a sense of control. Utter control. A platoon was nothing to him as long as this old body of his could withstand it.

The sky was peppered with flashes of gunfire. Flames spurting from the bores of the soldiers's rifles as a barrage of lead was shot at a blistering pace.

Atticus stood seemingly still. Only he knew the subtlety of the movements he made. An inch here, an inch there. The musket balls whizzed past him once more. A smile traced his lips, hands still on the grip of his sword he'd yet to swing.

The soldiers stifled backwards.

Not a single shot landed.

"Don't worry," Hofsley reassured them. "He's weaker in the daylight."

"Weaker? What do you mean weaker?" Langer asked, all the previous courage stripped from his voice as if stolen by the mountain's breeze. "You said he was a freak who could only brand Leo. It's the bloody daytime. How could he possibly—the suns are still out! There's no starlight to even wield!"

"I said that. And so what? As I said, he's a freak." Hofsley drew the saber at his side. "Now hold your ground or I'll kill you myself. Our orders are clear. We bring him back alive, in chains, if need be. Now get a move on." He signaled for the men to move.

"You mean your orders." Langer snorted, before drawing his saber and following the soldiers who began to approach.

Atticus breathed in the sooty air polluted by musket smoke. His heart settled as the familiarity of the smell took the edge off. He grounded his feet on the rocky terrain, waiting for the coming slaughter. There were still two men in the woods to worry about, but first, he'd need to handle the men charging at him.

Glow of flickering orange, yellow, and red interweaved amongst the men. Their solar brands ignited, and sunlight sucked

into them as the surrounding forest and mountainside dimmed. Power coiled through them as their souls connected to the trio of suns above.

Atticus swallowed hard. His eyes scanning. All of them were lumenancers. Every single one. Apparently, Hoflsey wasn't as stupid as he thought. He eyed the solar brands that glowed on their arms. Atticus scoffed. Remnants of a shattered bloodline. The ignorant fools.

Three soldiers, sabers drawn, charged toward him. Yellow light flashed from their solar brands and their bodies blurred ahead of the pack. Spetellas, Atticus noted, as the sunlight sped their bodies into accelerated motion.

Timing was everything. Eyebrows crossed, Atticus swung his blade for the first time and let it clash against an oncoming saber. He easily overpowered it, shoving the man back. He gripped the next blade bare-handed and pulled the second man into the third.

Reversing the flow of his blade, he struck down against the second and third men with a single clean sweep. Blood splattered and soaked into the dust that clung to the surface of the sword.

The oozing scarlet blood soaked into the intricate binding runes on the flat of his blade, and they began to shine with bright gold lines as every drop was guzzled up.

"The sword of Ithel," Hoflsey muttered under his breath. "Watch out!" Hoflsey ordered. "Even a scratch will cut you in two."

"You have an excellent memory," Atticus said. The sword was his most prized possession. Even he had to admit the Halcyons were grand craftsmen. Perhaps they were greedy, bloodthirsty fools, but their metal work was beyond anything anyone of today could produce.

The approaching men faltered. Atticus's eyes darted between them. Their faces were ghost-like. Langer, the worst of them all. "But you're right, Hoflsey. When my blade tastes blood, nothing can stop its path."

A thousand years old and the blade still held its edge. Even the blood-binding runes etched with sun-patterned gold still held firm on the blades flat.

“Form a line and hold your positions,” Hoflsey ordered before chaos could take hold. Atticus noted the six soldiers that took to the front line, drawing on the sunlight of Marathena. All of them welled up on light like a pile of flesh shields as strength filled their bodies. Those who branded Allthena and Spetella braced themselves behind the meatier six.

Hofsley matched Atticus’s gaze as they both ignored Langer’s frantic squirms.

“Are we not going to do something?” Langer reached out to grab Hofsley’s arm, but was shoved away just as fast.

What were they doing?

Sweat dripped down Atticus’s cheek as the sunlight warmed him beyond comfort. All taste of winter’s coming seemed lost to him now. The iron smell of blood rested on his tongue. It was as if Hoflsey wanted to buy time.

Perhaps the gunmen in the forest? No. They should have fired long ago. Wait . . . A thought came to him.

The cottage.

Gray.

Atticus’s head turned, peeking back at the cottage. It stood there quietly unperturbed by the goings on around it. But it wasn’t all silence. Atticus could hear the muffled screams from inside and his heart stopped. His chest grew heavy as each breath became ragged. How could he be so stupid and drop his guard?

He spun on his heels, staring down at Hoflsey.

“What have you done?”

Hofsley crossed his arms. His smile was all too smug. “I heard a rumor in the nearby village. About a boy and an old man, living in a cottage. I was curious. Especially when the place they described matched the one I was given perfectly. You know, I didn’t expect you to be the fatherly type.”

Atticus turned back to the cottage. His jaw clenched as he watched two men dragging Gray’s squirming body through the door. The boy’s mouth was gagged, and all that was heard were his muffled cries.

It was all Atticus could hear. It drowned out the wind, the birds, even the fast drum of his heart.

“Let him go,” Atticus said, his tone iced with a deathly growl.
“He’ll be following us to the capital,” Hofsley replied.
“Leverage to ensure your cooperation.”

“You’d use a boy as a shield?”

“I’d use my mother as a shield if I knew it would work.”

“Hah!” Langer sneered. “Where’d the confidence go, Atticus? What happened to your smug look?”

Atticus bit his tongue till he tasted blood. His head spun and his gaze wandered to the mountain’s top. His eyes rested on the opaque cloud-like shadows that floated around the Igadrith’s peak. He peered through the rolling shadows at what only his eyes could see—the very peak of the mountain.

It seemed his time was up. Quicker than he’d hoped. He turned to look at Gray, dropping his sword, letting it clatter to the ground. How would he ever apologize to the boy for what was to come? How would he ever apologize to Maria? Too many oaths held him from speaking the truth.

But he would leave zero chance of Gray being harmed today. There was no time to spread his soul out and burn the light in the air without risking them noticing. Not nearly enough time. He’d been too confident, and now he would pay for it. He would need to kill them in one movement.

And that required power.

And power always had a price.

Now it was time he paid his.

“So, you’ve given up,” Hofsley said. “A wise choice. Pass me the selestrium cuffs.” Hofsley waved to one of his men. “You know, Atticus, I wouldn’t have wanted to—”

Something clicked within Atticus’s soul. Like a myriad of chains, falling away link by link as if a snake were shedding its skin. And then light crashed into the earth like a thunderbolt around him. The ground beneath his feet cracked, splintering like wood. His silhouette glowed. The light became a hurricane that swirled and twisted the air atop the mountain. Trees, now leaves in the wind as dust and rock were kicked upward. Clothes fluttered, and the soldiers were forced to step back. Atticus felt

the power—relished it, felt it burn. Too long he had gone without it.

Went it ended, Atticus's body, glowing gold, flickered. Two heads appeared within his hands and the men who were once holding Gray now lay limp against the ground.

The nine stars of Leo shone in the midday sky. Each point connecting into a tapestry of a majestic lion as a roar echoed through the mountain.

“You should never have threatened my son.” Atticus's voice roared like a beast's howl quaking the earth. Men fainted at the mere sound and touch of his breath. He flicked the two heads aside as if to touch them for a single second longer would soil his existence.

His sword lay to the side, and he picked it up and stabbed it into the rocky ground. There was no need for it. Some things were better done by hand.

These men deserved no simple death. He reached inside his body with his mind, touching upon his soul, sacrificing a piece as an offering. A misty haze of soul surrounded the golden claws on his hands. The air near them began to crackle and tear like white sparks. It was time he showed these mongrels a power that had not graced this land for an age.

Their souls were ripe.

Shaken by the power radiating off Atticus, the soldiers limped backward, sabers dropping at their sides. Their will, stripped from their faces till their cheeks turned white. Even Hofsley's usual calm was perturbed by an uncertain frown.

Atticus snorted. A snarl at his lips. He'd rip the souls from their chests. Eradicate them. There would be no rest in the eternal, not for these pack of jackals that dared try and take his son from him.

With a step that seemed a blur, he tore towards them. His clawed hands cleaved down with streaks of gold that were stained with blood as the first of the men fell to his hands. Their bodies withered into lifeless haunches on the ground as the grey mist of their souls was stripped away. The husks that were left, turned to

dust blowing in the breeze. The remaining soldiers gasped. Legs shaking but unmoving.

With a grand sweep, Atticus summoned a tidal wave of power. It tore apart the sky as it slammed into the group of men. The power, like a heavenly claw, ripped through them. Dust and rock were kicked into the air. The soldiers were sent tumbling downhill as a bundle of corpses.

Atticus watched on expressionlessly as the bodies rolled down the sloping edge of the mountain. But his heart flickered when he met Hofsley's gaze.

He was still alive.

Atticus's skin cracked. The power flowing through him was on the verge of overwhelming his fragile frame. He was running out of time.

Hofsley held onto Langer's body like a shield and used it to protect himself. They were at the back of the squad and took the least damage. Langer's face was torn apart and had a gaping slash. One side marred, aged, as if life was stolen from it. As it had. Atticus gritted his teeth. He must have only nicked a piece of the man's soul.

Sunlight coalesced on Hofsley's body. The orange glow from his veins stretched across the surface of his skin as he released whatever power he had built up with a burst of blinding sunlight.

Dragging Langer over his shoulder, he bolted downhill, no longer daring to look back. Even at this distance, it seemed the man didn't feel safe.

And he wasn't.

About to chase, Atticus paused. The skin on his body was already flaking away like ash in the wind. His body, burning apart from his own power. Atticus looked down at his disintegrating hand. What a useless sack of flesh. His gaze shifted back to the departing figure of Hofsley carrying Langer. If he chased, there was no guarantee he could return in time. He weighed the odds in his mind as he continued to stare down.

Hofsley paused to glance back. "Atticus." Hofsley spat. "You're already a dead man. Just look at you." Hofsley gave a last sneer before he fled in terror. Obviously, he'd seen the decay

taking hold over Atticus and Atticus had half a mind to continue the chase.

With a flash of orange sunlight, Hofsley dashed deep into the trees, down the mountain, and out of sight.

Sighing, Atticus turned away and moved towards Gray. Certain things were more important than spilling blood. Plus, Hofsley wouldn't dare return right now. Not unless he was a fool. Those blasts of sunlight he used would no doubt take their toll.

Atticus knelt beside Gray, his body still radiating a soft golden hue. The boy's lips were quaking. He'd long removed the gag around his mouth and tears dripped down his small cheeks.

"It's my fault," Gray cried. "I tried . . . I tried to hide but they—"

"Hush now." Atticus pulled the boy into his embrace. "None of this was your fault. None of it. You hear me?" He should have left the moment he heard those bells ringing. He was a fool to think anything had changed. These men would always lust for power.

"But your body . . . If I had . . . they wouldn't . . ."

"No, Gray." Atticus tried to swallow the sob rising in his voice. "It was their fault, not yours. I was the one that was too weak to protect you. And now I won't be here—you have to listen to me, Gray. Can you do that?"

Still shaking, Gray nodded.

"Good. You remember your way to your uncle Ragen's?"

The boy nodded again and Atticus smiled weakly. The strength of this body was beginning to fade. "There's money in the drawers in my room, take it, you'll need it for the border. Take my sword too." He nodded to the blade still stuck in the ground nearby. "It's the most valuable thing I own, it's yours now."

"I don't want to leave you," Gray cried, clutching onto Atticus's body tighter. The man's flesh cracked and flaked like a disturbed fire that puffed up ash into the sky. The tears finally breached Atticus's eyes as he stared down at the boy.

"You were the greatest son I could have ever asked for. But you need to learn to let go." Atticus felt his body waning. It was

any moment now when his soul would be sucked back. Chained as it was. Bound by oaths and so much more.

A thought hit him.

He smiled as he called upon one last surge of strength. There was time for one more thing. Maybe one day it could save Gray's life. It was the least he could do after being such a wretched father.

With a finger, radiating with gold light, he poured the last of his power into Gray's chest. It burned the boy's skin, causing him to wince. All that was left was a small circular scar that pulsed with heat upon his chest.

Atticus felt his body sway, ready to fall apart like wet sand drying in the sun. He hugged Gray once more and whispered in his ear. "Learn to let go, Gray. Be better than I was. Be stronger."

His vision faded to a slow black. He could feel his soul being pulled home. If only he could have gone to where she was. Though that didn't seem possible for him. His fate had always been different. But maybe? Yes. There was always hope.

Smiling, he felt his body shatter into dust. It was an odd sensation. Now his body would act as fuel for the lilies in the spring. Maria loved the lilies.

Gray arrived at Terth sopping wet. Shivering. He stood in the dark as he helplessly hammered on the manor door while the late autumn rain devoured him. Sword in hand. Small sack strapped over his shoulder.

The door swung open. A fierce red-haired man, Ragen, whose eyes pierced the darkness stared down at him. The face shifted from shock to sadness. "So, it finally happened."