

The Lamplighter's Daughter

A VESPER STORY

by Derek Ellerman

Part I

The seventeenth lamp was dying again.

Zara could tell by the way the flame guttered when she opened the glass. Too much air in the line, somewhere. Her father would have known exactly where: he'd press his ear to the post like a doctor with a stethoscope, listening for the hiss that didn't belong.

She didn't have his ear. She had the route, and a pole, and the hours between dusk and dark.

The flame caught on her third try. She closed the glass and moved on.

Eighteen lamps from the cottage to the old fountain. Twelve more along the Philosopher's Walk. Six on the steps leading down toward the river, where Old Town bled into the territories that weren't Old Town anymore.

Her father had walked this path for twenty-three years. She'd been walking it for two, and already the stones knew her feet. She didn't have to think about the uneven one near the bakery, or the slick patch where water pooled after rain, because her body remembered what her mind was too tired to hold. That was the point.

She reached the fountain, dry for years, though no one had bothered to remove it, and lit lamps nineteen through twenty-two. A woman passed with a small dog, nodding the way neighbors did. Zara nodded back. The dog strained toward her, curious, and the woman tugged it along.

Everyone knew the lamplighter's daughter. No one knew what to say to her.

That was fine. She didn't know what to say to them either.

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The last six lamps were the hardest.

Not physically — the poles were the same height, the gas flowed the same way. But the last six stood at the edge of Old Town, where the streets narrowed and the buildings grew strange, and the boundary with the Underbelly, unmarked on any map, announced itself only in the way the air changed. Warmer. Thicker. Alive with something that didn't want to be named.

Her father used to take longer on this stretch, and for years she'd read that as thoroughness, the careful man checking each lamp twice, though lately she had begun to

wonder what he'd actually been doing out there with all that extra time, and who for. She'd stopped wondering eventually, because the wondering led to the other questions, and the other questions led nowhere she wanted to go.

Lamp thirty-five. Thirty-six.

The last four stood in a small courtyard that had once been a garden: dead planters, a bench with broken slats, a statue of someone no one remembered. The lamps here were original, two hundred years old, her father had told her, from when the gaslight first came to Old Town, and he'd loved them, said they had character.

She lit thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.

Something was wrong. She felt it before she understood it: a pressure at the edge of her vision, a wrongness in the quality of the dark. The flame in thirty-eight flickered, though there was no wind.

Zara turned. The courtyard was empty — statue, bench, dead planters, nothing moving. But the darkness near the old garden wall was deeper than the rest of the night, a darkness with actual weight to it.

She should leave. Finish the last two lamps tomorrow, claim the mechanism was broken. No one would check. No one cared about the edge of Old Town, not anymore.

She didn't leave.

. . .

It unfolded from the shadow.

That was the only word for it: unfolded, like something that had been compressed into a space too small now expanding into its real shape. Limbs that bent at angles her eyes wanted to reject. A body that could pass for human at a glance — and only at a glance; past that, the proportions were wrong enough to make her stomach lurch.

And the face. God, the face was young.

A girl. Had been a girl. Sixteen, maybe. Dark hair matted and tangled, skin that caught the lamplight with an oily sheen. Eyes too far apart, reflecting the flame like a cat's.

It moved toward her with a gait that was neither walk nor crawl. A stutter of stillness and motion. There. Then there. Closer without seeming to cross the distance.

Zara's hands tightened on the lamplighter's pole. Useless as a weapon, but it was all she had.

The creature stopped. Tilted its head, and for a moment the gesture could have belonged to anyone: a curious neighbor, a child at a window.

Under the skin of its throat, something dark moved. Shifted. Like shadows had gotten inside and were trying to find a way out.

Bloom. The word came from somewhere deep, something she'd heard as a child and never understood — whispered warnings, don't go to the deep places, don't go out after

full dark, the Blooms will get you.

She'd thought it was a story. Parents scared their children with stories.

The Bloom made a sound that wanted to be language. You could hear the memory of words in it — the rhythm, the rise and fall, everything but the words themselves — a whimper, low in its throat.

Zara should run. Every part of her screamed to run. She stayed.

The Bloom was thin. Starving-thin from going too long without food. It was shivering, though the air wasn't cold.

It reached toward her. The hand was human-shaped but the fingers were too long, joints bending in ways that made her eyes water. She flinched back.

It stopped. Its head tilted again, and in the ruined face she read disappointment, or imagined she did; the face offered nothing reliable to read.

Then its nostrils flared. The whole body went rigid. Prey-stillness, sudden and absolute.

It looked at her one more time, and in that look, unmistakably, was warning.

Then it folded. Collapsed back into the darkness like it had never been there, moving in ways that hurt to watch, and was gone.

Zara stood alone in the courtyard, heart pounding. It hadn't been fleeing her. It had been fleeing whatever was coming.

She lit lamps thirty-nine and forty with shaking hands, got them lit, finished the route, and walked home faster than she'd ever walked it, and didn't look back at the darkness following her.

• • •

She didn't sleep.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw it — the face, the teeth, the way it had reached for her with those wrong-shaped hands.

Bloom. Her father had never used that word. But he'd told her other things, when she was small, in the voice he kept for the dark and for bedtime both: *Stay on the path. Don't go past the last lamp. Some things live in the dark that don't mean any harm, and some things live there that do.*

She'd asked him how to tell the difference.

You can't, he'd said. *Not until it's too late.*

• • •

The next night, she hesitated at lamp thirty-four.

The first thirty-four were easy — muscle memory. But standing at the edge of the courtyard, seeing the darkness pooled by the garden wall, she couldn't make herself move forward.

She went anyway, and the Bloom was waiting.

It didn't approach this time; it only watched, with those too-wide eyes, while she lit the lamps with shaking hands, and when she finished they stood looking at each other across the courtyard.

It made the sound again — vowels shaped like speech, a grammar with the words missing. It reached toward her, slowly, the way you'd reach toward something frightened.

She didn't run. She stood in the lamplight and let it look.

The Bloom's fingers stopped a few inches from her coat. Up close she could see the scars on its wrist: surgical, layered, the record of years of being cut open.

Then its nostrils flared. Prey-stillness. It folded into shadow and was gone.

. . .

It was there every night after that.

Same courtyard, same shadow, same too-wide eyes catching the lamplight. It never came closer than that second night. It only watched while she lit the lamps, sometimes making the sound, sometimes reaching toward her and stopping, waiting for something she didn't know how to give.

She started noticing things: the way it held itself, hunched and protective, the posture of something that expected to be hurt; the way it watched her hands, tracking every movement.

On the fifth night, she spoke to it.

"Did you know him? My father?"

The Bloom went still. A different stillness than before, held and deliberate, the stillness of someone deciding whether to answer. Then it retreated into the shadow, slower than usual, and she had the strangest sense that it didn't want to go.

. . .

On the sixth night, the shadow by the wall was empty.

She lit the lamps anyway. Thirty-five. Thirty-six.

On lamp thirty-seven, someone had left a flower, wilted and half-dead, probably pulled from one of the planters that hadn't grown anything in years.

Zara stood there for a long time, looking at it. Then she put it in her pocket and finished her route.

. . .

She didn't tell anyone what she'd seen. Who would she have told? The neighbors who nodded and looked away, the shopkeepers who gave her discounts out of pity? There was no one left. Her mother had drifted years ago, and her father was dead, found at the edge of Old Town, they'd told her, an animal attack, a dog maybe, something with teeth, a story she'd known was a lie even then, because there were no dogs in Old Town that could do

what had been done to him.

Now she knew what had those teeth.

• • •

The dream came that night.

Her father in the courtyard. Mouth moving, no sound. The lamps behind him burning too bright, the light hurting her eyes. He was trying to tell her something, his hands reaching toward her, urgent, desperate — and the shadow unfolded behind him.

She screamed. Tried to scream. Nothing came out. The thing moved in that stuttering way—there, then there—and her father turned, too slow, always too slow—

She woke gasping, her father's name dying in her throat. The room was dark. The sheets were soaked with sweat.

After a long moment she got up and went into the kitchen.

She opened the drawer.

• • •

On the seventh night, she felt the knife in her pocket as she walked the route. It was her father's knife, a folding blade he'd carried for years, worn smooth at the handle.

She'd also brought food. Bread. An apple. Some dried meat wrapped in cloth.

The Bloom was there when she reached the courtyard. Same shadow, same unfolding, same too-wide eyes catching the lamplight.

Zara set the food on the ground near the base of lamp thirty-seven and stepped back. The Bloom watched her without moving.

She lit the remaining lamps. Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine. Forty. When she turned back, the Bloom had moved closer to the food, still watching her, still testing.

"Go ahead," she said.

It moved in its stuttering way and crouched over the food, eating with the desperation of something that had never known when it would eat again, too-long hands shoveling bread into a mouth she had to look away from.

Zara watched. The scars on its arms. The matted hair. The way it crouched like an animal but held the apple like a child.

Her hand found the knife in her pocket.

When the food was gone, the Bloom looked up at her and rose and moved toward her, and Zara's fingers closed around the handle of the knife. Then the Bloom stopped, just out of reach, head tilted, the sound coming again, softer now, question-shaped, and it reached for her. Slowly. Carefully.

The knife was halfway out of her pocket when she saw what it was holding.

A key. Old, iron, worn smooth by years of use. It looked like a key she'd seen on her father's ring.

The Bloom pressed it into her palm, fingers fever-hot, the dark shapes under its skin pulsing and writhing. It looked at her, and whatever word had once lived inside the sound, this was it: *please*.

Then its nostrils flared. Prey-stillness. It folded into shadow and was gone.

Zara stood alone in the courtyard, the key in one hand, the knife half-drawn in the other.

The cold crept in from the edges of the lamplight — a cold that had nothing to do with temperature. Out in the dark beyond the walls, whatever the Bloom had been fleeing had arrived, and it was paying attention to her.

She put the knife away. Closed her fingers around the key. Walked home with cold eyes on her back the whole way.

Part II

She found the tunnel behind the collapsed wall on the third night of looking.

The key had told her there was something to find. You don't carry a key for nothing, and her father had carried this one every day for as long as she could remember. One of the keys from his belt, one of the ones that had been missing when they returned his effects in a cardboard box with her name misspelled on the label.

The collapsed wall was in the courtyard, behind lamp thirty-nine. She'd walked past it a thousand times. Brick and rubble, nothing interesting, until she noticed the rubble was arranged: stacked, placed by hands that knew what they were hiding.

Behind it, the tunnel went down. Wet stone, hand-cut, the air thick with river water. Her lamp threw shadows that lagged behind her like they didn't want to go deeper.

She counted steps. Seventy-three down. The tunnel split: left into darkness, right into more darkness. She stood at the fork, heart pounding, and almost turned back. Then she saw the door. Set into the right-hand wall, partially covered by a heavy tarp, with a keyhole dark as an eye.

She reached into her pocket. The key was warm from her body, smooth iron, worn by years of being turned between her father's fingers.

She put the key in the lock. It turned.

• • •

She knew her father's hands before she knew anything else about this room.

The crates stacked flush against the wall, the labels in his careful handwriting, the medical supplies organized by type and then by size exactly the way he'd organized the kitchen cabinets at home. Bandages hung to dry on a line strung between posts. The smell of the soap he'd used on everything, the one she couldn't bring herself to throw away.

She opened a crate. Gauze pads. Antiseptic. A suturing kit, needles darkening with age.

In another: children's clothes, different sizes. Shoes too small for any adult. A torn blanket mended with stitches that were careful but uneven.

There hadn't been just one creature. There had been many, and for years. She sat on the crate and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

All those nights she'd lain awake listening for his footsteps on the stairs. All those mornings she'd found mud on his boots that he'd cleaned before she was supposed to see. This was where he'd been.

She'd thought she knew everything about him. She'd thought that was the deal. Two people in a cottage, holding on because there was no one else.

"You shouldn't be down here."

She had the knife up before she was fully standing, lamp swinging shadows across the walls. The man in the doorway didn't step in. He stood with his hands open at his sides, watching her not the way you'd watch a threat but the way you'd watch a situation that had just gotten worse.

She'd seen him before. She was sure of it. A handful of times over the years, always late, always at the edges, once talking to her father in a voice too low to hear. Gone by morning. Never mentioned.

He stepped into the lamplight. Dark coat. Hands that knew how to be still.

"You knew him," she said.

He held her gaze. Didn't nod, didn't confirm.

"This was his," she said.

He looked at the room. The crates, the supplies, the blanket with its uneven stitches. Grief would have been simpler. What crossed his face was more worn than that.

"You need to go home," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's not safe down here. The south entrance you came through isn't secure."

"What was he doing?"

"Go home, Zara."

He knew her name. Of course he did. He'd been in her father's garden, in his tunnel, checking his crates with the ease of long practice. He knew her name and he wanted her to leave and he wasn't going to tell her anything.

"No," she said.

"This isn't —"

"My father spent twenty years in this room and never told me. He died and nobody told me. I found this on my own, with a key a creature pressed into my hand, and you, whoever you are, are standing in his doorway telling me to go home."

She held up the knife. Not threatening him with it. Showing it.

"No," she said.

He was quiet for a long time. She could see him calculating, working through options, a route recalculated around an unexpected obstacle.

"The lamps," he said finally.

"What about them?"

“You have six left.”

She wanted to argue. But the lamps needed lighting and the dark at the edge of Old Town didn’t wait for grief.

She picked up her lamp.

“I’m coming back,” she said.

“I know.”

“And I want answers.”

He said nothing to that. She went up the tunnel. At the surface, she lit the last six lamps in a fury, the mechanism responding to her hands the way it always did.

At forty, she turned. The courtyard was empty. He was gone.

On the ledge of lamp thirty-nine, where the Bloom left her offerings, a stone, blue-veined with white. She put it in her pocket with the key and went home.

. . .

The seventeenth lamp was temperamental again.

Three nights since the supply room, and the routine hadn’t changed. Dusk, pole, forty lamps, home. The routine was a rope and she held on to it with both hands. Everything else was spinning but the lamps stayed where they were, the gas flowed the way gas flowed, and the flame either caught or it didn’t.

It caught on the second try. She closed the glass and moved on.

Four by the bakery where old Madame Fournier still put bread in the window, though who she was baking for anymore was a question no one asked out loud. Eighteen to the fountain, dry for years, stone rim crumbling. Thirty past St. Anna’s, where the bells counted hours for a congregation that now fit in three pews.

She’d started bringing food without ever quite deciding to. The decision accreted. She’d packed bread and apples for herself on the second night after finding the room, and then at the courtyard she’d put them down by the wall instead of eating them, and the Bloom-girl had watched from the shadow, and in the morning the food was gone. So she packed more the next night. And the next.

She reached the courtyard. Lit thirty-five. Thirty-six.

The Bloom-girl unfolded from the shadow by the garden wall. The same stuttering movement, still then *there*, but slower now. Less afraid. She ate the bread carefully, with the concentration of someone who’d learned that food was real and would still be there if she looked up, the desperation of the first night already gone.

Zara lit thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.

On the ledge of thirty-nine, a stone. Blue-veined with white, the size of her thumbnail. Another offering. She put it in her pocket with the key.

. . .

Every night after the lamps, she went back to the supply room.

The crates, the soap, the shoes. She opened everything, sifted through it. Read her father's labels. Tried to construct the shape of a life she'd never been shown.

On the third night, he was there ahead of her, working, sorting through medical supplies that hadn't been there the day before. She'd left it unlocked, she realized. Or he hadn't needed it unlocked.

He didn't look up.

"You restocked," she said.

"Some things were expired."

She set down the food she'd brought: bread, apples, crackers, a tin of soup.

"That's too much," he said.

"For what?"

"For one."

"She's not the only one. There's a boy by the fountain. I've seen others."

His hands paused. She caught the fractional stop.

"You've been watching," he said.

"I've been looking. My father looked too, apparently. For twenty-three years."

He resumed sorting. "Your father understood the risks."

"And I don't."

"You don't know what you're looking at."

"Then tell me."

"Go home, Zara."

"You keep saying that. It keeps not working."

He closed the crate and stood.

"The scratches," she said. "On the doorframes along the route. He put those there."

It wasn't a question, and she watched him decide whether to answer it.

"Some of them," he said.

"What do they mean?"

"They mean he wanted certain things kept safe."

"What things?"

"The things in the dark. The ones that can't come to the surface."

"The Blooms."

He looked at her sharply. "Where did you hear that word?"

"People talk," she said. "Old Town has stories."

"Old Town has rumors. There's a difference."

"Then tell me the difference."

He didn't. He picked up the crate of expired supplies and moved toward the door.

“You’re not going to help me,” she said.

“I’m trying to help you.”

“By telling me nothing.”

“By keeping you alive.” He stopped in the doorway. Didn’t turn around. “Your father wanted you out of this. He spent twenty-three years making sure you never found this room.”

She looked at the children’s shoes. The soap smell. The blanket.

“Then he shouldn’t have left me the key,” she said.

He went up the tunnel. She left the food where it was.

In the morning, it was gone.

• • •

The operation, if she could call it that, this strange machinery of bread and bandages, grew the way moss grows, by accretion, without anyone deciding anything.

She walked the route every night. She lit the lamps. She left food at the wall for the Bloom-girl. And then, as the nights accumulated, as the food appeared reliably and the scratch marks were followed and the safe places stayed safe, others came.

The fountain boy appeared first. Smaller than the girl, crouched in the shadow of the dry basin, arms wrapped around his knees. The scars on his wrists caught the lamplight like seams. He wouldn’t approach while Zara was near. She left an apple at the base of the fountain and moved on, and in the morning it was gone.

Then the pair, on a foggy night, emerging from the gap in the garden wall with their arms around each other. Their surgical scars wept a dark fluid that stained everything it touched. They needed fresh bandages. She brought her father’s supplies.

Then the younger ones. Three of them, clinging to each other with fingers that had nearly found their right shape again. They wouldn’t eat bread at all. She tried everything until she found what worked: crackers softened in water, left in a dish.

She brought her father’s suturing kit the night the Bloom-girl arrived with a gash along her forearm, the skin around it inflamed, the dark shapes underneath pulsing faster where the wound was. The girl sat on the courtyard bench, the broken slats bowing under her slight weight, and held out her arm the way a child holds out a scraped knee, an offering at once trusting and absurd.

Zara cleaned the wound. Threaded the needle. Her mother had taught her to stitch. Mending, she’d called it, practical skills for practical times. But the skin under Zara’s hands wasn’t fabric. It was warm, fever-warm, and underneath it the dark shapes shifted away from the needle like fish avoiding a shadow.

“Hold still,” Zara said. “This part’s the worst.”

The Bloom-girl made the almost-words, vowel sounds in rhythms that approached speech without arriving at it. She was watching Zara’s face with those too-wide eyes, the

oily sheen catching the flame from lamp thirty-nine.

Zara finished the suture. Taped it. Sat back.

The girl reached up and touched Zara's face — one finger, tracing her cheekbone. The touch was feather-light and burning hot, a reaching and an asking, a recognition Zara hadn't earned.

"You're welcome," Zara whispered.

The Bloom-girl brought the kitten two nights later. Appeared at lamp thirty-nine with it pressed against her chest, one leg bent wrong, mewling in a voice so small she had to lean in to hear it. She looked at Zara, then past her at the darkness where the Fixer was standing, and held it out.

They splinted the leg in the supply room, working by lamplight. The Fixer held the kitten still while she wrapped — his hands dwarfing the animal, perfectly steady. When it was done the kitten curled against Zara's chest and slept, its heartbeat absurdly fast against her sternum.

She took it home and named it Thirty-Nine.

. . .

He appeared the following night with a crate of fresh supplies and a padlock for the tunnel door. She found him installing it when she came down the stairs after lamp thirty-four.

"I already have a lock," she said.

"This one is better."

"Better how?"

"Harder to pick." He tested the mechanism. Satisfied. Moved to the supply shelves and began reorganizing, her supplies mixed with his, her father's crates refilled with things that hadn't been there yesterday. The canvas bag was back, emptied.

They worked in parallel. She sorted the children's clothes by size; he inventoried medical supplies and wrote notes on a pad in handwriting nothing like her father's — smaller, tighter, as if the letters were trying to take up as little space as possible. The room was small enough that they had to navigate around each other, and she noticed that he moved to avoid contact the way water moves around a stone, fluid, instinctive, a body that had decided long before this room that touching was something that happened to other people.

His sleeve rode up when he reached for the top shelf. A bandage on his forearm. Fresh, neat, professional.

"You're hurt," she said.

"It's nothing."

"That's not nothing. That's a field dressing."

"It's handled."

"There's a doctor in the Warrens. Dr. Vasquez."

“A different doctor.”

The way he said it closed the subject. She went back to the clothes.

“The bandages you brought are surgical-grade,” she said, not looking up. “Military surplus. But the antiseptic is civilian, and the suture kits are veterinary. Three different sources for one crate. You don’t want anyone knowing what you need it all for.”

His pen stopped. She looked up. He was watching her with an expression she couldn’t read.

“Your father used to say you noticed too much.”

Her hands went still on the folded clothes.

“He talked about me?”

“Rarely.” He resumed writing. “When he did, he’d say *my girl* the way other people say a prayer.”

She kept sorting, though her hands had stopped pretending to be steady. The smallest pair of shoes had been re-laced with cord that wasn’t her father’s. Thicker, darker. Recent.

She held them up.

“You’ve been down here,” she said. “Since he died.”

He didn’t answer, which told her what she needed to know. She could see it now: less the operation maintained than something smaller, a man coming down the tunnel between his other work, whatever that work was, whoever else needed him in this city. Checking the lock. Checking the supplies. Doing what he could in the gaps, knowing it wasn’t enough, knowing he couldn’t do what her father had done.

“Not the way he did,” he said finally. As if he’d heard her thinking.

She looked at him. Really looked, the way she looked at a lamp mechanism when something wasn’t right, when the flame was steady but the gas pressure was off. He was writing supply notes and his hands were still and his face gave nothing away, and he had loved her father, not the way she had but the way you love someone you work beside in the dark for years and trust with the things that matter most.

She went back to the shoes. Neither of them said anything else.

At the top of the stairs, leaving, she stopped.

“The Bloom-girl. She’s getting better. Her hands look more like hands now. Her eyes are clearer.”

He was locking the new padlock. “I know.”

“Is that because of the food? The care?”

“Your father thought so.”

“What do you think?”

He tested the lock. “I think you should keep feeding her.”

He went one direction. She went the other. In between them, the dark settled over Old Town.

• • •

The next night he was at lamp twenty-eight when she reached it, adjusting something on the post, a scratch mark she hadn't seen him make. He fell into step beside her without a word.

They walked. Twenty-nine. Thirty. The evening was cold and clear, the kind of night where sound carried. St. Anna's bells. A dog somewhere. The click of her mechanism on the glass.

"The pair need new bandages," she said. "The dark stuff, the fluid from the scars, it eats through the gauze faster than I can replace it."

"I'll bring surgical-grade. Tomorrow."

"Where do you get this stuff? The supplies, the bandages, the lock."

"People owe me things."

"What kind of people?"

"The kind who pay in supplies instead of money."

She lit thirty-one. The mechanism was stiff tonight. She worked it twice.

"The fountain boy took the apple from my hand last night," she said. "First time. He didn't flinch."

He said nothing, but his stride shifted. A fractional thing, the pace easing. She was learning that his silences had textures. This one was warm.

They walked. Thirty-two.

"My grandmother used to tell me about a fox," she said. "A woman in her village found one in the hills above her house. Young fox, injured leg. She brought it home, cleaned the wound, fed it, kept it warm by the fire. The leg healed and the fox didn't leave. It slept on her hearth. Ate from her hand. She'd come home from the market and it would be there in the doorway, waiting for her."

She lit thirty-three.

"This went on for months. And then one evening the fox bit her. Not hard, not to hurt. My grandmother said it was the way an animal bites when it needs to tell you something it doesn't have the words for. So the woman understood. She got up and opened the door. And the fox went out into the dark." She adjusted the glass on thirty-four. "My grandmother used to say, *love doesn't always mean keeping*."

He didn't say anything for a lamp. Then: "Did it come back?"

"She never said. I always figured that was the point. The not knowing."

The courtyard was ahead. She could see the Bloom-girl's eyes catching the lamplight from the shadow.

"Your father told me the same story," he said.

She kept walking. Didn't look at him. She was back in her grandmother's kitchen, cardamom and dough, a story she'd thought belonged to the two of them, and her father

had carried it into the tunnels and given it to this man without telling her, another thing he'd shared with someone else.

Another door she hadn't known was open.

"In his version," the Fixer said, "the fox came back."

She lit the rest of the lamps without speaking.

Part III

Luca Severan was waiting at lamp nine.

She smelled the cologne before she saw him. Something clean and expensive that had no business in Old Town's atmosphere of old stone and wet wool. He was leaning against the post like he owned it, which, in a sense, he did. Bliss Technologies owned a third of the city's infrastructure. The gas lamps were a historical preservation concession. The concession had an expiration date.

"Lovely evening for a walk," he said.

She tightened her grip on the pole. He was tall, well-dressed. An overcoat that cost more than six months of her stipend, leather gloves, a scarf that looked cashmere. Handsome in the way that expensive things are handsome: well-maintained.

"I'm working," she said.

"Of course. The lamps." He looked up at number nine as if he'd never noticed gas lamps before. "Remarkable, isn't it? In 2066, a young woman still lights them by hand. There's something almost spiritual about it."

"Can I help you with something?"

"I hope so." He straightened, buttoned his coat against the evening damp. "My name is Luca Severan. I represent certain interests in the district. Corporate interests, to be tediously specific."

He paused, as if giving her space to react. She didn't.

"You're Zara Haddad. Your father walked this route for many years. A good man, by all accounts. Very dedicated."

"He's dead."

"I know. I'm sorry for your loss." He said it the way people say *have a nice day*, the words shaped correctly, the warmth generated rather than felt. "I understand you've been expanding the operation. Adding to the route, so to speak. Late nights, tunnels, provisions for... well, for things that don't officially exist."

The air between them shifted. The cologne couldn't cover what was underneath: the particular stillness of a man who was used to being frightening.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Of course you don't." He smiled. It reached his eyes, which was worse than if it hadn't. "And I wouldn't dream of suggesting otherwise. I'm simply here as a courtesy. A friendly conversation between neighbors."

"We're not neighbors."

"We're all neighbors in Vesper. That's rather the point." He took a step toward her, casual, his shoes clicking on the cobblestones. "The things you don't know about have a certain value to certain people: research value, not the sentimental kind. When those things are interfered with, fed, cared for, hidden, it creates complications. Expensive complications."

"I light lamps."

"You light lamps." He nodded, as if she'd said something profound. "Keep lighting lamps, Zara. That's my friendly advice. Light your lamps and walk your route and go home to your cottage and your kitten and your very normal, very safe life."

"And if I do?"

"Then we've had a lovely conversation and I never bother you again."

"And if I don't?"

He looked at her with regret, manufactured to the same standard as his condolences.

"I find that one conversation is usually enough," he said. "Good night, Zara."

He walked away. His footsteps faded toward the Meridian, toward the glass towers and the offices where these decisions were made. She stood at lamp nine until her hands stopped shaking, which took longer than she wanted.

She lit the rest of the route. At the courtyard, the Bloom-girl was waiting in her usual shadow. The fountain boy crouched by the basin. The younger ones held each other near the statue. And further back, where the lamplight gave out, something small and still that she couldn't quite see. It was gone when she looked again.

She left the food. All of it.

"Done," she said at lamp forty, the way her father always had.

. . .

He stopped coming.

Not all at once. The first night after Severan, the supply room was empty; there was no canvas bag and no fresh bandages. She restocked from the reserve crates and didn't think about it. The second night, the same. And the third.

By the fourth night, the padlock he'd installed had been changed. The old one, her key, her father's key, sat on the worktable with a note in that cramped handwriting: *Use the new one. Combination: your father's lamp count.*

Forty. She set the dials and the lock opened. He'd given her access and removed himself, clean and efficient, the kind of solution a man arrives at when the problem is a person he can't control and the danger is the thing she won't stop doing.

She kept walking the route. She kept feeding the Blooms. The Bloom-girl's hands looked more like hands every night, the joints less distorted, the fingers less wrong. The fountain boy had started to approach before Zara had moved past, reaching for the apple she always brought him, his wariness exchanged for the shape trust might eventually fill.

The scratch marks on the doorframes. She mapped them all. The hooked ones, the straight ones, the crossed ones. She traced the routes they described through Old Town, a hidden geography laid over the one she knew, corridors of safety threading between the lamps and the darkness, and at every intersection, her father's hand.

She missed the other handwriting. The tight, contained notations on the supply pad. The crates reorganized with a precision that wasn't her father's but rhymed with it. She missed the way the room felt when someone else had been in it, the way the silence changed quality, from empty to occupied, from absence to aftermath.

On the seventh night, she took a detour. Lamps one through twelve as usual, then a left turn through the alley behind the print shop, a route she'd never walked before, exposed and poorly lit. She stood in the alley for ten minutes, watching the dark.

Nothing.

She went back to the route. Lit thirteen through forty. Fed the Blooms. Said *done* to the empty courtyard. Then she walked home in the dark by herself.

. . .

It came on a night she was alone.

She was at thirty-six, the courtyard in sight — the Bloom-girl in her usual shadow, the fountain boy at his basin, the pair further back with dressings fresh from yesterday.

Then every Bloom went still at once, every dark shape under every scarred skin freezing in place like a tide reversing.

The Bloom-girl looked at Zara. Terror was in her eyes.

All of them ran. The stuttering movement, still then *there* then gone, compressed into seconds. The courtyard emptied as if the shadows themselves had inhaled.

The cold came first, the temperature dropping so fast her breath turned to vapor between one heartbeat and the next.

Then nothing. That was what was wrong. The lamplight hit the garden wall and the wall looked right, the cobblestones looked right, the dark between the lamps was just dark. But it wasn't empty. Something was wearing emptiness the way a man wears a coat.

It glitched. A fraction of a second, less, and she saw it. A figure against the wall, human-shaped but assembled wrong. Features that were technically correct but arranged without understanding, like a mask made by someone who had studied photographs of human beings but had never been in the same room as one. Eyes that didn't blink. Then invisible again. But she knew where it was.

It moved toward her. She could track it only by the wrongness: the place where lamplight bent, where cobblestones seemed to breathe, where the air itself had a seam.

Coming straight for her, not fast but patient, the way something moves when it knows its target has nowhere to go.

She swung the lamplighter's pole.

She hit something solid and invisible; the impact jarred up her arms to the shoulders, the pole ringing like a bell, and the thing glitched fully visible, that featureless face orienting toward her. Then the blow came, not a punch but a redirection: her body moved before she understood that it had been moved, and she hit the cobblestones, and the pain was white and enormous and centered on her left side where the ribs met, and she couldn't breathe.

She heard it coming. Closer. Standing over her, or where she thought over her would be. The cold pressing down.

Then a collision, fast and heavy, the sound of two bodies hitting at speed. The camouflage shattered and she saw them: the dark coat and the thing, locked together in the space between lamps thirty-eight and thirty-nine.

She'd thought she understood what he was. She'd cataloged his stillness, his quiet, the careful way he moved through rooms. She hadn't understood anything.

He fought with a focused brutality that had nothing of performance in it. No wasted motion. He found the gaps in its movement, the microsecond hesitations between one fluid action and the next, and struck at them. The joints. The junctures. He knew where the weak points were and he worked them with professional patience.

It caught his arm and twisted. The sound he made was bitten off, managed, pain processed and filed away, not allowed to interfere. He pulled free. Blood on his sleeve now, his left arm held at an angle that wasn't right.

He drew something from inside the coat, small, dark, nothing she recognized, and pressed it against the thing's torso. It convulsed. The dark shapes under its skin went haywire, its camouflage cycling like a dying signal, and for a moment she saw what it was underneath: the scars, the surgical seams, the body that had been human once and wasn't anymore. He drove it back, each strike precise, each one costing him. Blood on the cobblestones now, and it was his.

It came at him again. They locked together and she could see the edge, the absolute limit of what he had against something that didn't tire, didn't slow, didn't feel what he was feeling.

He got inside its reach and pressed something against its neck, a device, a tool, humming at a frequency she felt in her teeth. The thing's body seized. Every muscle, every organism inside it, locking at once. It dropped, the dark shapes under its skin pulsing erratically, the camouflage cycling, cycling, going still.

He stood over it, breathing hard, blood running from his fingers onto the cobblestones.

"Can you walk?" he said.

She could. She stood. The pain in her ribs made breathing a series of small negotiations, each inhale purchased at a price.

“What is that thing?”

“A Whisper.” He said it the way you’d say the name of a disease. “They send them.”

He carried it one-armed to the edge of the courtyard and set it facing away from Old Town, an animal returned to the wild, a weapon pointed elsewhere.

“Twenty minutes,” he said. “It’ll come to. And it’ll go back to the man who sent it.”

Zara looked at the courtyard, at the empty shadows, at the food untouched at the wall.

This is what killed her father.

The animal attack that wasn’t, the teeth marks that weren’t teeth — her father at the edge of Old Town, at the boundary between the lamps and the dark, doing exactly what she was doing, and one night the thing came and he didn’t have someone in a dark coat to fight it for him.

Lamps thirty-seven through forty were dark. She’d missed them, the first time in two years. She looked at the dark lamps, at the blood on the stones.

She left them dark.

“Come on,” she said.

• • •

At the cottage, he checked the windows before he’d let her unlock the door.

She watched him move along the front of the house, testing the latch on the garden gate, checking sightlines, reading the street the way he read everything. His left arm was tucked against his body. The blood on his sleeve had gone dark. She could see the effort it cost him to lift that arm and check the high window, the way his jaw clenched against something he wouldn’t name.

Then he nodded and she let them in.

She built the fire. He placed something small and black on the front doorframe, a sensor, barely the size of a coin. She watched him do the same at the back door, the kitchen window, the hall window, methodical and professional. Whatever these were, Old Town didn’t have them; he’d brought them from somewhere else, somewhere that made things designed to watch the dark.

“Sit down,” she said.

He was examining the window over the sink. “In a minute.”

“You’re bleeding on my floor.”

He looked down. A pause. Back up.

“Sit down.”

He sat in the chair by the fire, her father’s chair, the one she hadn’t been able to sit in since, the cushion still molded to a shape that wasn’t hers. He settled into it as if he’d sat there before, and maybe he had, maybe he’d sat in that chair across from her father on

nights she was sleeping upstairs, the two of them talking in voices too low to carry.

She put the kettle on. Got the kit from the hall cupboard, her father's kit, the field version of what lived in the supply room. Knelt beside the chair.

"Shirt off."

"It's fine."

"I've been stitching Blooms for three weeks. You're not that different. Shirt off."

A beat. Then he pulled the shirt over his head and she saw the damage.

The fresh wounds first. A deep cut along his ribs on the right side, still bleeding, the edges clean; whatever that thing fought with, it cut precisely. Torn skin on his upper arm where it had gripped and twisted, both still open, both needing attention.

And underneath the fresh damage, the older scars, layered, a history written on his body in a language she was starting to understand: years of being in rooms like this, being stitched by hands like hers, going back out into the dark and coming back opened again. The scars weren't random; they were occupational, the record of a man who put himself between things.

She cleaned the rib wound first. He didn't flinch, not at the antiseptic, not at the pressure, not at any of it, as if pain were a signal he'd learned to set aside, a radio turned down until it was background noise.

She threaded the needle. "Expand on the left. Hold it."

He expanded his ribcage. Held the breath. She stitched. Neat, even, the patience she'd learned from sitting on the kitchen floor while her mother mended and talked and made the needle fly. She'd been nine and her mother had been present, before the Bright, before the drifting, before the woman who'd taught her this particular steadiness had traded it for something generated and warm and fake.

"She taught me this," Zara said. Her eyes on the suture line. "Mending. She said I'd need it."

His eyes were on the fire. "She was right."

"She meant socks."

She tied off the suture. Taped the arm wound, shallower, manageable. Sat back on her heels.

She looked at his torso in the firelight, at the scars and the fresh white tape, at the way the shadows from the flames moved across his skin like something alive, and she stood before she could catalog any more.

She made tea. Brought him a cup. He held it with both hands. Both hands, always, as if the warmth were the thing he was after and the tea itself was incidental. The fire dried the blood on his knuckles into dark flakes that fell like rust.

"Your turn," he said.

"What?"

"Your ribs. You've been guarding your left side since the courtyard."

“They’re fine.”

“You’re breathing shallow.”

“I’m fine.”

“Zara.”

“Fine. Check.”

She held still. He set the cup down and knelt in front of her, and she understood, too late, the geography of what she’d agreed to — him kneeling, her sitting, his hands about to be on her body, the fire behind him turning him into a silhouette with warm edges.

His hands came to her left side over the shirt, professional and precise, the way she imagined a doctor might work: impersonal, efficient, following the ribs the way a mechanic follows a pipe.

Except. The first touch sent something through her that had nothing to do with the bruise. A sharp involuntary current radiated from where his fingers pressed through the cotton into her stomach, her chest, the hollow at the base of her throat. She caught her breath and converted it to a wince. Badly.

“Here?” he said.

“Lower.”

His fingers moved. She could feel the spread of his hands, the careful pressure, the warmth of his palms through the thin fabric. He pressed along each rib methodically, reading the bone the way her father had read the gas pressure through the lamp pipes, listening for the thing that was wrong.

She focused on the fire. On the mantel. On the crack in the plaster above the door that she’d been meaning to fix for a year.

“Breathe in,” he said.

She breathed in. His fingers found the bruise. Pain flared, real, bright, useful. She let it anchor her.

“Breathe out.”

She breathed out. Slowly. Carefully.

His hands moved up her side, following the line of the rib to the front. She could feel the flush climbing her neck and prayed the firelight covered it.

He paused for a fraction of a second, the same fractional stop she’d seen before, the same recalculation; his jaw tightened, his gaze fixing on a point past her shoulder.

Then his hands moved on and finished.

“Not broken,” he said, and he stood and stepped back, and the distance between them expanded as if he’d pulled a drawstring. “Badly bruised. Two, possibly three. Ice tonight.”

“I think there’s some in the box.”

“I’ll get it.”

He found the ice. Wrapped it in a cloth with the focus of someone performing a critical task. Handed it to her without meeting her eyes. She pressed it to her side and the cold was a relief. It brought her body back to a version of itself she recognized, one that ached in simple places for simple reasons.

He put his shirt on. The coat went over that. Layer after layer between his skin and the world.

From the hall, the kitten, Thirty-Nine, orange and small, padded into the room and went directly to him. She wound between his ankles. He looked down at her.

The kitten mewed, higher and more insistent than her usual sound.

He made a sound back. Low, below the floor of hearing, a vibration in the chest more than a vocalization — the sound the Bloom-girl made when Zara touched her face, the sound the fountain boy made when he took the apple from her hands, the thing that came before words.

The kitten settled immediately. Curled at his feet. Purred.

Zara watched this from behind her ice pack and said nothing.

“Get some sleep,” he said. “They won’t send anything else tonight.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be outside.”

She looked at him. He was already moving toward the front door. The coat buttoned and the layers restored.

“Good night, Zara,” he said.

She went to bed and lay in the dark. The ice melted against her ribs and the water was warm by the time it soaked through. Her skin remembered his hands. He was ten feet away on the other side of the wall. Sitting on her step in the cold.

She listened to Old Town settle into the small hours: the distant bells from St. Anna’s marking two, the rain beginning, the vast specific silence of a man who would not sleep.

She closed her eyes.

. . .

In the morning, she opened the front door and he was there.

Sitting on the step, coat around him, back against the wall; he turned his head when the door opened. His eyes were the same as they’d been seven hours ago. He hadn’t slept. Not wouldn’t. She was starting to suspect the distinction didn’t apply.

“Your arm needs redressing,” she said.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Come inside. I’ll do it properly.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

She leaned against the doorframe. The early light was thin, gray, the color of dishwater. He looked tired in a way that went deeper than one sleepless night, as if tired

were a country he'd been living in so long he'd forgotten there was another one.

"What happens now?" she said. "With Severan."

"Ice the ribs. Rest today."

"That's not what I'm asking."

"I know."

She watched his face. He was already somewhere else, calculating, planning, running routes through a city she could see but he apparently navigated differently, a city made of threats and leverage and angles of approach.

"He'll send another one," she said.

"Not soon."

"But he will."

He didn't answer.

"Be careful," she said.

He looked at her with the ghost of surprise, the expression of someone who'd forgotten that people said things like that to him.

He stood. She watched him walk down the garden path and through the gate, into Old Town's morning streets. His left arm moved carefully. The coat hid the rest.

She went inside and made coffee. Fed the kitten. Stood at the kitchen window.

The sensors were still on the doorframes, small, dark, precise — his eyes in her house when the rest of him wouldn't come in.

She touched the one on the kitchen window. It was warm.

• • •

Three days. He was gone for three days.

She walked the route. She fed the Blooms. The Bloom-girl's face was changing, the proportions settling toward something more human, the too-wide eyes narrowing by degrees, as if the body were remembering a shape it had been pulled away from. The fountain boy ate the apple from Zara's hand now, his fingers nearly touching hers before he snatched it away and retreated to his basin. These were children learning to be children again, and the process was as slow and irreversible as freezing water.

She stitched the pair's bandages. Softened food for the younger ones. Spoke to all of them in the same voice: steady, matter-of-fact, the voice her father must have used, the voice that said *you are real and I will be here tomorrow*.

At night she lay in bed listening for sounds that weren't there. No footsteps on the step. No weight against the wall. The sensors blinked on the doorframes, green, green, green, and she watched them in the dark the way a sailor watches a lighthouse.

On the second day she sat in her father's chair for the first time, and it didn't feel like a decision; she'd been standing with her tea and her body had chosen the chair because the chair was closest and her ribs still ached and the cushion was the right shape for someone

who needed to sit down.

The leather was worn. The armrests smooth from twenty-three years of her father's hands. She ran her fingers along the grooves and thought about all the things he'd carried in silence, the Blooms and the tunnels and the danger and the man in the dark coat who'd helped him, and she thought about the key the Bloom-girl had pressed into her palm, and the shoes, and the blanket, and the soap smell that was nearly gone now, and she understood what she hadn't wanted to understand.

He'd kept her out of it because he loved her. The secrecy wasn't betrayal; it was the same instinct that made him check the locks at night, that made him walk her to school when she was small, that made him sit in this chair and listen for her footsteps on the stairs and only go out into the dark when he was sure she was sleeping.

He'd kept her safe the only way he knew how, by carrying it alone.

She finished her tea.

Part IV

He came back on the third evening.

She was at lamp twenty-three, one of her father's scratch marks on the doorframe here, the hooked one, the one that meant the Blooms could surface, and she felt him before she saw him: no sound, no movement, only a change in the air behind her, as if the street had been holding its breath and suddenly remembered to exhale.

"You've been gone," she said, without turning.

"Yes."

"Is it handled?"

"For now."

She lit the lamp. The mechanism caught on the first try. Twenty-three had always been reliable. She moved to twenty-four.

He fell into step beside her. Not close: a body's width between them, the lamplighter's pole between them like a fence. She could see the edge of new dressing on his left arm where the sleeve rode up. Someone else's work. Neater than hers.

"Who stitched you?" she said.

"A doctor."

"The same different doctor."

The hint of a smile on him. "The same different doctor."

"Is the arm better?"

"Better enough."

She lit twenty-four. Twenty-five. He held the pole for her at the cracked step near thirty-one, steadying it while she adjusted the gas line. The step had always been treacherous, the cobblestones pitched at an angle that wanted to send her sideways, and her father had braced himself against the lamp post and held the pole for her when she was learning, and she hadn't needed anyone to hold it for a year.

His hand on the metal was warm. She could feel the heat of it through the pole, conducted like a current, and she adjusted the gas line and didn't look at his hands and didn't think about his hands.

"My father's log," she said. "He drew you."

He went still.

“In the back of the book. No label. Just a sketch: the coat, the hands, the way you stand. I recognized you.”

The route carried them through the narrowing streets toward the courtyard. The lamps here were older, the mechanisms stiffer, the light they threw more yellow and less certain.

She lit thirty. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. Thirty-four. The courtyard was ahead. She could see the Bloom-girl’s eyes already, catching the lamplight from the shadow.

“He was a good man,” the Fixer said. His voice was the quietest she’d heard it. “He was a good man and he did good work and he should have had more time.”

She looked at him. His face was turned toward the courtyard, toward the Blooms emerging from their shadows, toward the ritual of food and care that her father had built and she had inherited.

“You were there,” she said. “When he needed you. All those years.”

He didn’t answer.

“You could have told me.”

“He didn’t want —”

“I know what he didn’t want. I’m asking what you wanted.”

He looked at her. The lamplight caught his face and she saw, for just a moment, what was behind the discipline: a crack in the architecture, a window she wasn’t supposed to see.

“It doesn’t matter what I wanted,” he said.

He moved into the courtyard. She watched him kneel by the Bloom-girl and check the suture on her arm, Zara’s work, holding well, and the girl reached up and touched his face the way she touched Zara’s. One finger. Tracing. He held very still and let her.

Zara lit the last six lamps and tried not to think about what it meant that he let the Bloom-girl touch him but kept a body’s width between himself and everyone else.

• • •

The rain came three nights later, and it came as if the sky had been saving it.

Not the usual Vesper drizzle, the thin gray presence that was more atmosphere than weather. This was rain with intention. It hit the cobblestones hard enough to bounce, and by lamp fourteen the route was a river and her jacket was soaked through and the lamps hissed when the water found the seams in their glass.

She was alone. He’d been back for three nights, walking the route at that careful distance, but tonight she’d started early and the courtyard was still an hour away and the rain was a wall between her and everything else.

At lamp thirty-one, the cracked step, her boot slipped on the wet stone. A lurch, her ribs protesting, a bright flare of the old bruise, and the pole swung wide. She caught it

before it fell but her balance was gone, and then his hand was at her elbow.

She hadn't heard him come. Hadn't seen him. Just the hand, warm, steadying, the lightest pressure redirecting her weight, and then he was there beside her, rainwater running down his face as if he'd been walking in it for hours.

"The step wants repointing," he said.

"My father said that ten years ago."

"He was right ten years ago."

She laughed. It surprised her, the sound escaping before she could catch it, loose and ungoverned, and in the rain and the dark it sounded like something that belonged to a version of herself she'd misplaced.

He looked at her. She couldn't read his expression in the rain-dark, but his head turned and held, and she felt the weight of his attention the way she felt the rain: everywhere, at once.

She kept walking. Thirty-two. Thirty-three.

At the courtyard, the Bloom-girl was waiting.

Crouched in the rain, arms wrapped around herself, the dark shapes under her skin pulsing faster in the cold. Her hair was plastered to her skull and she was shivering, not the minor tremor of someone chilly but the deep, structural shaking of a body that didn't have enough fat to insulate it and enough care to know it should come in out of the wet.

Zara set the food down under the overhang of the garden wall, the one dry patch in the courtyard. The girl didn't move toward it.

She was looking at the Fixer. Her too-wide eyes fixed on him. She made a sound, deeper than the almost-words, a vibration Zara felt more than heard.

He answered.

The same low sound he'd made for the kitten, but different. Modulated, shaped, as if the vibration had grammar. The girl's shaking eased. She moved toward the food. Started eating.

Zara didn't ask. She'd stopped asking about the things she noticed. The questions accumulated like the blue-veined stones in her pocket, held and turned and never resolved.

She lit the last lamps. Thirty-seven. Thirty-eight.

At thirty-eight, the rain intensified. A curtain of water between her and the lamp, the mechanism refusing to catch, the gas hissing and the flame dying before it could take hold. She tried again. Her hands were numb. The cold had gotten into her fingers and the fine motor control was going, the pole slipping against the wet glass.

His coat settled over her shoulders.

She went still. The weight of it, heavier than she expected, warm from his body, smelling of rain and something underneath the rain that she couldn't name, that she'd been breathing all these nights without knowing it. The coat fell past her hips. It was enormous on her. Inside it, the world contracted to warmth and the smell of him.

“The lamp,” he said.

She tried the mechanism. Her hands were still shaking.

He stepped behind her. His hands came over hers on the pole, his fingers finding the spaces between her fingers the way water finds the spaces between stones. His chest against her back. His arms along her arms. The warmth of him enormous and specific, and underneath it his heartbeat, slow, slower than it should be, a rhythm that didn’t match any she knew.

“Turn it left,” he said, near her ear. “The housing’s warped. Your father used to —”

“I know how the lamp works.”

“Then light it.”

She turned the mechanism left. The housing shifted. The gas caught. The flame took hold, steady, golden, indifferent to the rain hammering the glass above it.

His hands stayed on hers. One second. Two. The rain came down and the lamp burned and his heartbeat was the slowest thing in the world.

He stepped back. The cold rushed in where his warmth had been.

She lit thirty-nine. Forty. “Done,” she said, and her voice cracked on it, and she didn’t know if the crack was the cold or the thing she wasn’t saying.

They walked home through the rain, his coat on her shoulders, his shirt soaked through, neither of them speaking. The rain said everything that needed to be said, and the silence between them was the loudest thing in Old Town.

At the cottage door she took off his coat and held it out.

He didn’t take it.

“It’s your coat,” she said.

“Keep it tonight. You’re cold.”

“You’re colder.”

“I don’t feel it the way you do.”

She held the coat. He stood on the step. The rain ran down his face and he didn’t blink, and she thought: *What are you?* And then: *It doesn’t matter.*

She hung his coat on the hook by the door. The hook where her father’s coat used to hang. It fit like it had been measured.

“Come inside,” she said.

“I’ll be on the step.”

“Come inside. Sit by the fire. Drink tea. Stop being on the step.”

He looked at her. She looked at him. The rain between them.

He came inside.

• • •

He sat in her father's chair. She made tea. The fire crackled and spat and the cottage filled with the smell of wet wool and wood smoke and the castile soap from the kit she used to re-dress his arm while the kettle heated.

He held the tea with both hands. She held hers. The kitten curled on the hearth between them and the rain hit the windows in waves and neither of them spoke.

She was looking at the shelf above the mantel. The photograph she'd turned face-down months ago and never righted.

"My mother used to make this tea," she said. "This exact kind. She kept it in a tin on the top shelf because she said the heat from the chimney kept it dry."

He was watching her. She could feel it without looking.

"She'd make it after the route. My father would come in and she'd have the pot ready and they'd sit, him in that chair, her on the couch, and they wouldn't talk for the first cup. Just sat. She said the first cup was for the cold, and the second cup was for the conversation."

The fire popped. A log shifted.

"She went into the Bright when I was fifteen. Didn't say goodbye. Didn't leave a note." Zara looked at her cup. "I came home from school and the tin was on the counter and her coat was gone and my father was sitting in that chair and he didn't say anything for a very long time."

The rain hit the windows. The kitten purred.

"He made tea that night. Same kind. Same tin. Put a cup in front of me and sat back down and we drank it and didn't talk and that was — that was how we learned to do it. Just the two of us."

She set her cup down. Didn't look at him.

The fire settled.

"He kept a tin of it," the Fixer said. "In the supply room. Top shelf, behind the suture kits. Same tea. I asked him once why he kept tea with the medical supplies." A pause. "He said it was Nadia's. That's all he said."

She looked at him. He was watching the fire.

"I didn't know what that meant," he said. "Until now."

She pressed her thumbnail into her palm and held.

The rain eased. They sat without speaking for a long time, the fire burning down to coals and the kitten shifting between them and the cottage settling around them the way old houses do at night, with small sounds in the walls and the wood contracting in the cold. The clock in the hall struck eleven. The sound was thin, old, slightly behind the hour the way it had been for years because her father had never fixed it and neither had she.

He finished his tea. Set the cup down carefully, the way he did everything. Then he stood and reached for the coat on the hook.

She was looking down at her hands in her lap.

“Stay,” she said. Quietly.

His hand on the coat. Her word in the air between them. A single syllable with the weight of a house that had emptied twice.

“Zara —”

“The fire’s still going. The rain hasn’t stopped. There’s a blanket on the couch.”

He stood with his hand on the coat for a long time. She watched the decision move through him like weather, distant at first, then gathering, then arriving.

He sat down.

Not in her father’s chair. On the couch, where she’d pointed. He didn’t take his boots off. Didn’t take the blanket. Sat on the edge as if he might leave at any moment, as if sitting down were a thing that could be done provisionally, on loan.

She got the blanket. Put it on the couch beside him. Then she went to her room and closed the door.

She lay in the dark listening to the fire settle and the rain fade and the silence of a man who was, for the first time, inside her house and sitting still.

She pressed her hand to her mouth and breathed.

• • •

In the morning he was gone. But the blanket was folded. The fire had been fed. Fresh wood, the coals arranged the way her father used to arrange them, banked to last.

His coat was still on the hook.

She touched it. The fabric was dry now, rough under her fingers. Inside the left pocket, something small and hard. She reached in and found a blue-veined stone, white striations, the size of her thumbnail.

She held it in her palm for a long time.

Then she put it in her pocket with the key and the other stones, and got dressed, and fed the kitten, and went to check the first lamp on the route, because the day didn’t stop and neither did she.

• • •

He came for the coat that evening.

She heard the knock from the kitchen. Two taps, a pause, a third. Her father’s knock. The one he’d used on the supply room door, on her bedroom door when she was small, on the garden gate when he came home from the route. Two taps, a pause, a third.

She opened the door.

He stood on the step. Clean shirt. The arm in a proper sling now. He looked past her into the cottage, at the fire, the coat on the hook, the kitten watching from the kitchen doorway.

“I came for the coat,” he said.

“I know.”

She took it off the hook. Held it out. He reached for it and their hands were close on the fabric, his fingers and hers, and neither of them moved for a beat, two beats, and the evening light was the color of old gold and the street behind him was empty and the bells of St. Anna’s were counting six.

He took the coat and put it on. The layers restored.

“The route starts in an hour,” she said.

“I know.”

“Are you walking it with me?”

“If you want.”

“I want.”

He nodded. Turned. Walked down the garden path. At the gate he stopped and looked back — not at her, at the doorframe, where the sensor blinked green. Checking. Always checking.

She closed the door and leaned against it. Her hand found the stone in her pocket.

• • •

Twenty-seven days since she’d found the footprints in the supply room, and the Old Town evening was clear. No rain, no fog, just the cold and the stars hidden behind Vesper’s permanent overcast, and the lamps catching one by one as she worked the mechanisms and he walked beside her, and something had changed, though not between them; between her and the work. The anger had shifted. Still there, but threaded now with something else.

“The crossed scratches,” she said, at lamp twenty-three. “I figured them out.”

He waited.

“Danger. The places where the Blooms shouldn’t surface because they’ve been spotted. He was tracking the threats.”

“Yes.”

“There are three new ones. Since he died. Someone’s been adding to his marks.”

“Yes.”

“You.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

She lit the lamp. “Your scratches are deeper. He used a penknife. You use something harder.”

“You notice too much.”

“He said the same thing.”

“He was right.”

The courtyard opened before them. The Bloom-girl was in her shadow, the fountain boy at his basin, the pair emerging from the gap in the garden wall with the careful

slowness of things that had learned to check before committing to the light. Two of the younger ones tonight, holding each other. No sign of the small one. The watcher. The last to trust.

Zara set the food out. He moved through the courtyard checking the wall, the tunnel entrance, the sightlines. She watched him kneel by the pair and check their bandages, his hands as careful with them as hers, the same gestures, the same patience. He re-dressed the smaller one's shoulder wound and the Bloom held still for him the way it held still for her. Trust, or something shaped like trust. The currency of the dark.

"You're good at this," she said. "The care. Not just the fighting."

He finished the dressing. Stood. "Your father was better."

"My father had years of practice."

"Yes."

"The work doesn't get easier, does it."

He looked at her. The courtyard lamp threw his shadow long across the cobblestones. The Bloom-girl, behind him, had moved to the food and was eating with her more-human hands, her more-human face, her more-human eyes that still caught the light wrong.

"Lamp thirty-nine," he said.

She turned. The flame was out. The seventeenth was guttering too, the gas line that ran between them had the intermittent fault her father had never been able to fix, the one that plagued the original lamps, the ones with character.

She went to thirty-nine. He followed. She opened the glass and worked the mechanism and the flame caught, and in its light she saw the latest stone, blue-veined, white, placed on the ledge where the Bloom-girl always left them.

"She leaves these for me," Zara said, and picked it up. "Every few nights. I have seven now."

"Your father had a jar of them."

"I found it. In the supply room, top shelf. Forty-three stones." She turned the new one in her fingers. "He never told me what they meant. But I've watched her choose the ledge — the same ledge, every time — and I think they're how she says *this place is safe*."

"That's what your father thought."

"What else did he tell you?"

The question was quiet. The courtyard was quiet. The Blooms were eating and the lamps were burning and the night was still, and she was asking what she hadn't meant to ask, the question that came from below the anger and the grief, where the only thing left was the need to understand a man she'd buried without knowing.

"He told me you'd be angry," the Fixer said. "When you found out. He said you'd be furious. And then he said you'd do it anyway, because you're his daughter, and his daughter doesn't walk away from things that need doing."

Her eyes burned. She turned back to the lamp. Closed the glass. Moved to forty.

“He was right,” she said.

“He usually was.”

She lit the last lamp. “Done,” she said. The word was steady. Her hands were steady.

They walked back through the route in silence. At her gate, he stopped.

“Good night, Zara.”

“Good night.”

She went inside. Stood at the kitchen window. Watched him walk away down the lamplit street until the dark took him.

The sensor on the kitchen window blinked green.

She touched it. Still warm.

. . .

She kissed him at lamp thirty-eight.

Not at the cottage, not by the fire, not in any of the places where a kiss might be expected, where the lighting was right and the moment was prepared and the gesture could be folded neatly into a story about two people falling for each other. At lamp thirty-eight, on the route, in the cold, with the Bloom-girl watching from the shadow and the courtyard stones wet with the evening’s earlier rain. The mechanism was open and the gas line was hissing. His hands were over hers on the pole because the housing was warped and she hadn’t turned it far enough. He’d reached over to help and his fingers had found the spaces between her fingers and she’d felt his heartbeat through his wrist, that same slow rhythm, and she’d turned her head and his face was right there and she kissed him.

It wasn’t graceful. Her mouth found the corner of his first, then corrected, and for a moment the kiss was nothing: just pressure, just contact, a thing that had happened before the decision to do it had finished forming.

Then she felt him — he didn’t pull away, didn’t lean in, went completely still. The stillness of the Blooms when the Whisper came, the stillness of held breath, of something that had been moving for so long it didn’t know how to stop. His mouth was warm and he wasn’t breathing and his hands were still on the pole, and under her palm she could feel him shaking, and the shaking had nothing to do with cold or weakness; it was structural, as if the architecture that held him together, the discipline, the distance, the careful careful management of every point of contact, had been struck at the foundation and the whole edifice was trembling.

She pulled back, and he looked at her, and she looked at him, the lamplight between them, the gas hissing, the Bloom-girl in the shadow watching with those clearing eyes.

Zara put the lamplighter’s pole in his hands.

“Finish the route,” she said.

And she walked home. She didn’t run. She wanted to; every step was a negotiation with the part of her that was screaming to go back or to go faster or to stop in the middle of

the street and cry. But she didn't run.

She walked. Through Old Town. Past the lamps she'd lit, one through thirty-seven, each one burning the way it was supposed to burn. The routine was still a rope. She held on.

At the cottage, she closed the door. Leaned against it. The kitten wound between her ankles and she sank to the floor and sat with her back against the wood and her hands shaking in her lap.

She'd kissed him. On the route. At the lamps. In front of the Bloom-girl.

The tears were already coming, hot and stupid, the kind that didn't ask permission. She let herself sob — once, hard, the sound ugly in the dark kitchen — and then again, and the kitten climbed into her lap and she held it against her chest and cried the way she hadn't cried since her father's funeral, which was the last time she'd been this sure she'd lost something she couldn't get back.

She sat on the floor for a long time. The kitten purred against her sternum. The sensors blinked green on the doorframes. The fire was dead and she didn't light it.

Eventually, she got up. Went to bed. Didn't sleep.

• • •

In the morning, she opened the front door.

He wasn't on the step.

The morning was thin and gray, Vesper's default, the sky that couldn't commit to clearing or to storming, the light that made everything look like a photograph taken through gauze. The street was empty. The gate was closed. The garden was still.

She looked down.

On the step, placed with the care of someone who understood that placement was meaning: a stone. Blue-veined with white. Larger than the ones the Bloom-girl left, polished, or held for a long time, the surfaces smooth, the veins vivid against the white like rivers seen from very far above.

He'd answered in the only language they shared.

She picked it up. It was cold from the night. She held it until it warmed.

• • •

The route that evening was forty lamps, and all of them caught on the first try.

She walked it the way she always walked it. Dusk, pole, the mechanism that was muscle memory now, her body moving through Old Town's narrowing streets with the mindlessness of long practice. The bakery at four, where Madame Fournier's bread was in the window. The alley at nine, where Severan had stood and wouldn't stand again. The print shop at fifteen. The scratch marks at twenty-three, her father's and his, layered now, a shared language written on the bones of the city. St. Anna's bells somewhere behind her, counting the hours.

The cracked step at thirty-one. She braced herself, the way she always did. No hand at her elbow tonight. No warmth on the pole. She managed it alone, the way she'd managed it before he came, the way she'd manage it if he left.

But the stone was in her pocket. And his coat had hung on her hook. And the sensors were on her doorframes.

She reached the courtyard.

The Bloom-girl was waiting in her shadow. The fountain boy at his basin. The pair at the wall, freshly bandaged. The younger ones near the statue, holding each other, making their quiet rhythmic sounds. And behind them, further back, in the deepest part of the shadow: the small one. The watcher. Come at last. Trust at the very edge of its reach.

Zara set the food down. Lit thirty-five. Thirty-six.

At thirty-seven, she paused. The lamp her father had loved. Two hundred years old, the mechanism worn smooth, the glass etched by centuries of weather. She opened it and the gas caught.

Thirty-eight, where his hands had been over hers, where the rain had come down like a wall and his coat had settled on her shoulders and his heartbeat had been the slowest thing in the world.

Thirty-nine, where the kitten had been found, where the stones appeared, where the Bloom-girl had pressed a key into Zara's palm and changed the shape of her life.

Forty. The last lamp. Her father's lamp.

She closed the glass. The flame burned steady. The courtyard was full of creatures that had been children once and were becoming children again, and the night was cold and the dark was wide and there were things in it that wanted to do harm, and she would be here tomorrow and the next night and the next.

"Done," she said.

She walked home through the lamps she'd lit, one through forty. Her father's route. Her route.

At the cottage, the kitten was in the window.

The sensors blinked green.

She put the key and the stones on the kitchen table, all of them, nine now, including his. A small cairn.

She touched the sensor on the kitchen window. Warm.

She left the garden gate unlocked.

