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Opening extract from

The Lone City 2: The White Rose

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1.

The arcana falls silent.

I stare at the small silver tuning fork, nestled among the jewels scattered across my dressing table. Garnet's words echo in my ears.

We're going to get you out.

I force my mind to work, push down my terror and try to fit the pieces together. I'm trapped in my bedroom in the palace of the Lake. How does Garnet, the Duchess of the Lake's own son, have an arcana? Is he working with Lucien, the Electress's lady-in-waiting and my secret friend and savior? But why wouldn't Lucien tell me?

Lucien didn't tell you that childbirth kills surrogates, either. He doesn't tell you anymore than he thinks you need to know.

Panic grips me as I picture my lovely Ash, trapped and bleeding in the dungeons. He endangered his very life merely by loving me. Ash, a companion to royal daughters, and the only other person in this palace who understands what it feels like to be treated like a piece of property.

Something must be done. After the Duchess caught us in his room together, Ash was beaten and thrown in the dungeon. If he stays there, he'll die.

The terror resurfaces, rising in my throat like bile. I squeeze my eyes shut and all I can see are the Regimentals bursting through his bedroom door. Ripping him from the

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bed. Ash's blood spattering across the comforter as a Regimental slammed a gun into his face again and again while the Duchess looked on.

And Carnelian. The Duchess's wicked, horrible niece. *She* was there, too. She betrayed us.

I bite my lip and wince. I look at myself in the mirror—hair disheveled, eyes red and puffy. My lower lip is split at the corner and the beginning of a bruise darkens my cheekbone. I probe the tender spot, remembering the feel of the Duchess's hand as she struck me.

I shake my head again, trying to make sense of everything that has happened I can still see the fury in the Duchess's eyes as she saw Ash and in bed. *Whore*, she called me, as her guard of Regimentals dragged Ash away. I don't care about her insults. I only care about Ash now.

I could have escaped—I could have been free from the Duchess forever.Ash and I had it all planned. Lucien gave me a serum that I was supposed to take tonight. It would make me appear dead, and Ash would be able to get me out of the Jewel, to somewhere safe. But I didn't take it. I gave it away—to save Raven.Not only is Raven pregnant with the Countess of the Stone's child, but she is being tortured in ways I can't imagine. She is a shell of the girl I once knew.

And I couldn't leave her there. I couldn't let her die like that.

So I gave her the serum.

Lucien will be furious when he finds out, but I had no choice. He'll have to understand.

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Thinking of Lucien brings my attention back to the arcana. With trembling fingers, I pick it up and sit on the edge of my bed, away from the door and the Regimentals who might overhear me.

"Garnet?" I whisper to it. "Lucien?"

No one answers me.

"Garnet?" I say again. "If you can hear me…please. Talk to me."

Nothing.

My head throbs—it hurts to think. I curl up on my bed, the silver tuning fork clutched tight between my fingers, trying to will it to buzz, to make someone speak to me. I feel so alone.

"Please," I whisper. "Don't let him die."

I, at least, have something the Duchess wants. My body might be enough to keep me alive. But Ash doesn't have that.

I wonder what it would feel like, to die. The wild girl appears in my mind, the surrogate who tried to escape the royalty and went into hiding. The one I saw executed in front of the walls of Southgate, my holding facility. I remember her strangely peaceful expression as the end came. Her courage. Would I be as strong as she was, if they put my head on the chopping block? *Tell Cobalt I love him*, she'd said. That, at least, I can understand. Ash's name would be one of the last words on my lips. I wonder who Cobalt was to her. She must have loved him very much.

I hear a noise and jump up so quickly the room seems to tilt. My only thought is that I have to hide the arcana somewhere, now. It's my one connection to the people who

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can help me. But there are no pockets on my nightdress, and I don't want to risk hiding it in the room in case the Duchess decides to move me.

Then I remember the Exetor's Ball, when Lucien first gave it to me. When Garnet ruined my hairstyle and Lucien came to my rescue, hiding the silver tuning fork in my thick, dark curls.

Has Garnet been working with Lucien since then? Did he muss my hair on purpose?

But there's no time to wonder about that now. I bolt to my dressing table, throwing open the drawer where Annabelle, my own personal lady-in-waiting and my closest friend in the Duchess's palace, keeps my hair ribbons and pins. I twist my hair back into a thick, messy knot at the nape of my neck and secure the arcana inside it with pins.

I fling myself back onto my bed just as the door opens.

"Get up," the Duchess orders. She is flanked by two Regimentals. She is still wearing her golden dressing gown as she did when last I saw her in Ash's bedroom an hour ago, her glossy black hair hanging loose around her shoulders.

The Duchess's face is cold and impassive as she approaches me. I am reminded of the first time I encountered her, almost expecting her to circle me with those sharp, critical eyes then slap me across the face again. But I know this time she will do far worse to me.

She stops less than a foot away, and her expression turns from cold to blazing.

"How long?" she demands.

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"What?"

The Duchess's eyes narrow. "Do not play stupid with me, Violet. How long have you been sleeping with the companion?"

It's jarring to hear her use my name. "I—I wasn't sleeping with him." This is partly true, since at the moment we were discovered, we were not actually sleeping together.

"Do not lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

The Duchess's nostrils flare. "Fine." She turns to the Regimentals. "Tie her up. And bring the other one in."

The Regimentals descend on me before I have a chance to react, yanking my arms behind my back and binding me with a coarse rope. I cry out and struggle, but the bonds are too tight. The rope chafes against my skin, the polished wood of the bedpost pressing against my back as they tie me to it. Then a small, willowy figure is marched into the room.

Annabelle's eyes are filled with fear. Like me, her hands are bound behind her back. She won't be able to use her slate—Annabelle was born mute and can only talk through writing. Her copper-colored hair is out of its usual bun, and her face is so pale that her freckles stand out clearly. My mouth goes dry.

"Leave us," the Duchess orders, and the Regimentals close the door behind them.

"She—she doesn't know anything," I protest weakly.

"I find that hard to believe," the Duchess says.

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"She doesn't!" I cry, louder now, fighting against my bindings, because I can't let anything happen to Annabelle. "I swear on my father's grave, she didn't know!"

The Duchess studies me, a cruel smile playing on her lips. "No," she says. "I still don't believe you." Her hand whips across Annabelle's face with a sickening smack.

"Please!" I scream, as Annabelle stumbles back, almost losing her balance. "Don't hurt her!"

"Oh, I have no *wish* to hurt her, Violet. This is *your* fault. Her pain ends when you tell me the truth."

My wrists are raw, the rope cutting into my skin as I struggle against it. Suddenly, the Duchess is inches away from me, my face clutched in her iron grasp, her fingernails biting into the bruise on my cheek. "How long have you been sleeping with him?"

I try to answer her, but I can't open my mouth. The Duchess releases me.

"How long?" she says again.

"Just one time," I gasp. "It was just one time."

"When?"

"The night before," I say, panting. "Before the second time that the doctor tried…"

The Duchess glares at me, seething with rage. "Have you been intentionally destroying these pregnancies?"

I can feel the blankness on my face. "I—no. How would I even *do* that?"

"Oh, I don't know Violet. You're clearly such a resourceful girl. I'm sure you could find a way."

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"No," I say.

The Duchess's hand slams into Annabelle's face again.

"Please," I beg. "I'm telling you the truth."

One of Annabelle's shoulders is hunched up as if to try and cradle her swollen cheek. Our eyes meet and all I see is fear. Confusion. Her eyebrows knit together and I know she's trying to ask me something but I can't figure out exactly what.

"Here is my dilemma, Violet," the Duchess says, pacing back and forth in front of me. "You are a very valuable asset. As much as I might *want* to kill you for what you've done, it wouldn't be a very good business practice. Obviously, your life in this palace will be different from now on. No more balls, no more cello, no more…well, anything, I suppose. If I have to, I'll keep you tied to the medical bed for the duration of your stay. I've sent an emergency petition to the Exetor for the companion's execution, so he should be dead in an hour or so. That will serve as some sort of punishment. But is it enough, I ask myself?"

I try to swallow the whimper that climbs up my throat, but the Duchess hears it and smiles.

"Such a waste, really—he is so very handsome. And quite skilled, from what I've heard. The Lady of the Stream just *raved* about him at Garnet's engagement party. Pity I didn't get the chance to sample his talents myself."

A cold, slippery feeling squirms around inside me. The Duchess's smile widens. "Please, tell me," she continues, "what exactly did you think would happen with him? That you two would ride off into the sunset together? Do you know how many women

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he's slept with? It's disgusting, really. I would have thought you'd have better taste. This time when the Duchess hits Annabelle, the skin breaks open just below her right eye. Tears stream down Annabelle's cheek.

"I need you to understand," the Duchess says. "You are mine. The doctor will not stop until my baby is growing inside you. I will no longer have any consideration for your pain, or discomfort, or frame of mind. You will be like a piece of furniture to me. Is that clear?"

"I'll do whatever you want," I say. "Just please don't hit her anymore."

The Duchess becomes very still. Her expression softens, and she sighs. "All right," she says.

She walks to where Annabelle is bent over. In one fluid motion, she yanks Annabelle upright, holding her head back by her hair.

"You know, Violet," the Duchess says. "I cared about you. I truly did." She seems sincerely sad as she holds my gaze. "Why did you have to do this to me?"

I don't really see the knife in her hand—just a flash of silver as it whispers across Annabelle's throat. Annabelle's eyes widen, more in surprise than in pain, as a crimson gash opens on her neck.

"NO!" I scream. Annabelle looks at me, her face so lovely and frail, and I can see the question now, clear enough on her face that she wouldn't need her slate to express it.

Why?

Blood spills down her chest, staining her nightdress a brilliant scarlet. Then her body crumples to the floor.

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