The Augustine Painters

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THE canvas, stretched andrestretched , primed andreprimed , moved into the light of the open bay windows, and then moved again, and again, as the light's slant grew distant, lay waiting.

Beside it, on a three-legged table, the palette, and beside that, paint, oils, rags, and most of all the brushes, cleaned and cleaned again over years of use, the sediment of old masterpieces still visible at the edges where hair met metal and disappeared beneath it.

"Are you going to start, Camille?"

His tone was rough and impatient, the tone of an Augustine Master Painter. She was so familiar withit, he might have chosen not to speak at all. But he had spoken, and speech demanded words in return.Or action.

She offered words."Yes,Giavanno ."

"Good. You should start soon; you know that the light is fading."

"I can work in the dark."

"You can work," he said gruffly, "in the light. But we're not made of money. Use the sun."

Not made of it, no, but not lacking. She wisely said nothing; his lecture on the virtues of thrift was one of his favorites, and if allowed, he would go on at length, while she, captive audience, was forced to acknowledge his wisdom.

She had prepared water and oil, solvents for the brushes; had already blended the base colors into those muted and suitable for portraiture. But she hesitated, her hand hovering over the slender wooden handles, her critical eye upon the canvas.

"I'm not sure it's ready," she said at last, letting her hand drift toward her side. It rose again as he glowered, smoothing wild strands of hair curled by the humidity in the high summer of the city ofAugustine .

He stood, his glower deepening, the familiar cracks of skin around his eyes a warning. She ducked her head, although he sat in a rickety chair half a wide, wide room away.Old habits, foundling habits.

It irritated him.

"You are hardly a child," he barked, "to be remonstrated with a simple slap."

She lifted her head, straightening the line of her shoulder, her cheeks pink.

"I'm not asking you to paint the battle of the gates of Augustine; I'm asking you to paint a picture of a tired, old man."

She shook her head, which was as much of a lie as she dared; such a task would be beyond most of the apprentices of the Augustine Painters.

And especially this one.

"Camille. Look at me."

Obedient, she raised her head.

"In a week's time," he told her, the gruffness in his voice gentling, "You will be asked to Paint the battle of the gates of Augustine."

"P-pardon?"

He did not return to the confines of his favorite chair; instead, he paced a half circle in front of it. The floorboards in the apprentices' studio were worn with just such pacing; it was part of the ceremony of his art. But the floorboards in the west tower studio had obviously seen little use; they retained no memory of his circular passage.

"You heard me."

"But—"

He rolled his eyes. "We will all be asked to Paint that battle. Have you paid attention to nothing that's happened beyond these walls in the last five years?"

Camille lifted a brush as her Master spoke. It was an old brush, its handle of bone, thin and hollow. Her Master had cast it aside because the strands of hair were bent in such a way that they could not longer produce a clean line—but although he had cavalierly ordered her to burn it, for the brushes of the Master Painters were never merely discarded, she had kept it for her own.

It amused him. He did not understand that these muddied lines fascinated her; that she could use those stray hairs, avoiding the bulk of the brush itself, to paint the thinnest of lines, the evocation of color. Her art and his were not the same.

"Yes, sir."The battle at the gates."But that means…"

All impatience left his face; she liked it better than the gravity that settled there in its place. "Yes. He is

coming. And if the Augustine Painters are not up to their task…"

She was sixteen years of age.

Sixteen, that is, by best guess. The Master Painters of Augustine were renowned for the acuity of their observations. She had come to him, as all apprentice Painters did, from the halls of foundlings, in this case theWesterfield foundlings.Westerfield was not impoverished; it had produced, for the benefit of the Painters, some several Masters of great repute, and those Masters, grudging but mindful, paid their respects in cold, hard bars of gold. She had delivered them herself, when the Master was too busy to run such errands—which was pretty much always.

No one knew what drove a Master Painter to seek apprentices, although Camille had learned, over the years, not to ask. She was not the only apprentice in the House ofGi-avanno . Nor was she the oldest. But of those he had selected, her hands—after the first of many trials—remained steadiest.

Or so he told theWesterfield woman who was in charge of the foundlings. The truth was darker and much more complicated than that.

"Camille!"

She jumped and set the brush aside, but he had seen the expression on her face.

His own grew grim and severe. His smiles were reserved for his paintings, and occasionally for hers.

"You are thinking about Felix."

Felix, the oldest of the apprentice Painters, the jolliest, the loudest, and in Camille's decided opinion, the most talented.

At eighteen, he had seemed so much older than she, so much more confident of his place and his future. She could see him that way, if she struggled. She could remember that boy.

"Camille," he said gently, "I understand. But we have no time for indulgence, not even when it is earned. This painting must be complete."

Better to nod than argue; Camille nodded.

His expressionshifted, a subtle movement of lip and eye. "Camille, the armies have crossed the border. Do you understand?"

She did. But she knew that he had told Felix these same words, and Felix was… gone.

He read the accusation in her mute features. "You've wasted the sunlight, just as I said. I won't waste the crownage on more light for careless girls. Go on, then. Go to your rooms."

She bowed to him, and when she rose, she fumbled with the knotted bow of her apron. It was dense with oil, with charcoal, with the silver lines of lead; her own.

When she had first gained it, it had been perfect, blank as new canvas. He did not allow her to clean it; instead, he designated its place upon the wall, as if it were another work of art, an abstract, something that was uniquely hers.

She found its place, the fourth peg on the student wall, and put it there.

Turned just a shade too quickly to see that her Master was inspecting it, his face softening into lines that suggested age.Impossible, thathe could look old, his hair so dark, his beard unblemished by anything other than flecks of paint, of chalk, of the tools of his trade.

Will you court madness in order to learn this art?

The halls of theWesterfield foundlings were cold and bare. There were paintings along wide, windowed walls in the wing that the dignitaries visited, their signaturesall the accolade that the orphanage required when it, thrice a year, sought money from its patrons. But those paintings were seldom seen by the boys and the girls who lived behind the closed doors of the foundling halls, in their tiny rooms, with windows so high and so small they servedbest as perches for the pigeons that resided beneath the gables and the overhang of the shingled roofs.

Each of the small rooms had four beds, one stacked upon the other and placed against the wall; each of these had two sets of dressers, and a basin for water. There were tin jugs for water as well, and part of the early morning routine—after the rigorous bathing and combing and starching of clothing—was fetching that water from the West Southwest Well.

Camille loved that early morning trudge. She hated rain, for when it rained, the overflow barrels provided what the orphans required, and that task was sharply curtailed.

But when it did not, she would yoke herself to the buckets that dangled when empty, and she would be allowed out the back door with strict instructions not to dawdle and not to talk to strangers.

But what, after all, was a stranger? A person she didn't know.

And on the road, in the early morning, there were no people she didn't know. The farmers in the Southwest market made stalls out of the backs of their wagons near the well, for the well was the heart of all morning commerce. Everyone needed water. Everyone needed food. She learned their names, and they—those who were not above speaking with a gangly orphan girl—learned hers.

Oakley was the man she loved best, with his shock of red hair and his black, black beard. His eyes were great, wide things, open as if in perpetual surprise; he had all his teeth, and showed them frequently when he opened his mouth to emit his great, whooping laugh. He had big hands, and when he had finished setting up his stall, he would slide them under her arms and send her flying in a mad, mad spin above his shoulders, her feet dangling over the radishes and the beetroots, the cabbages, the dirty heavy sacks of potatoes and carrots.

It was for Oakley that she drew her first picture. While the other children were experimenting with circles and squares, with lines, with colors and shapes, she was playing with the long rods of charcoal. She liked it; some of it was hard, and some so soft you could just draw it away, as if it were melting into paper and leaving its essence behind.

But the picture was not what she had thought it would be; she had tried to draw his smiling face, and she had ended up, instead, with something leaner and more frightening.And more complicated, as well. His whole body was in the picture, shaded in gray and black, and he held his hat over his chest, while at his

side, a man she had never seen before—and so, she thought, she had invented—was laugh-ing. It was not a kind laugh. Camille had heard enough cruel laughter to know it, even deprived of sound.

In his hands were papers, curling in the wind; the words were smudged and dark; she could not read them. There was also a woman in the picture, thick as an old tree, bent,her hands in her face. There was a boy just older than Camille, and two much younger.

She did not like the picture, and because she did not like it, she hid it when the teacher walked past. The Sisters of theWesterfield Hall emphasized grace and beauty in all things.

"If you are lucky, you may prove worthy of the Master Painters in the city ofAugustine . Do you understand what that means? But they are interested in the creation of things of beauty; they are looking for children who strive for perfection. Is that understood?"

Well understood.

And Camille's rough sketch would be beneath the notice of even the Sisters.

It rained the next day, and so the day after she was kept in, but on the third day, she was sent to the well, same as always.

On impulse, she took the picture from its hiding place and shoved it down the front of her apron dress, and then she scurried out into the sunlight like a frightened mouse.

Oakley was there, at the market. He smiled as he caught sight of her, and then frowned as she drew close enough that he could see her face.

"What's wrong with my lass?" he asked, frowning, his voice a deep bass. "Have they been mistreating you at the foundling hall? It won't do, girl, if they have. 'Fess up."

She shook her head. She loved it, most days, when he talked to her as if—as if he was kin, as if he was family. Had always wanted to ask him if she could come and live on his farm, for any farm that he owned must be a wonderful place, and she was used to hard work.

But she knew that he would say no; if he'd wanted her, he'd have asked, and the foundling hall would have been happy to see her go; they were always happy to find placements for the children left, year after year, on the grand, flat stretch of their steps.

"Then where's my smile,Cammy ? What's clipped the wings of my flying girl?"

She shook her head again, holding back.

And then, although she could not, years later, say why, she reached into the folds of starched cloth and dragged out her picture, her folded, bent picture, charcoal smudged at the unintentional creases she had put there. She held it carefully; charcoal on her smock was not to be forgiven by the severe mistress of the hall in which she lived.

"What's that, there?"

"It's a… picture. I drew a picture."

"You drew, eh?" He shook his head. "What they think of at that place. Do they teach you anything useful?" But he knelt when she didn't answer, and his voice was gentle. "What did you draw, girl?"

"I—I wanted to draw a picture of you."

He smiled. There was a wealth of pride and pleasure in the smile, something that put gold to shame. She loved the smile, and it made her hate the picture even more.

"Let's see it, then.Cammy?"

She shook her head, holding back.

"What's wrong?"

She was afraid he wouldn't like it, and after a few minutes, and one glare at a customer who had the wit to step back, she told him so.

He laughed. "I'm not handsome enough to be vain, girl. And if you drew it, I'll like it.My word on that."

The paper shook in the wind of her hands as she held it out. He took it gently. Turned it around; she saw the charcoal revolve until she was looking at the smudged and creased back of the large, square sheets the foundling hall gave its students.

She could not see his face for the paper, but he said nothing, and Oakley was almost never quiet.

The buckets, empty, were at her feet. Cheeks pale, she bent over them, lifted them, and made her way to the line of people waiting for the pump to be free.

"Lass," Oakley said.

She turned to face him.

"This picture… when did you draw it?"

"Days ago."

"And this… this man… where have you seen him?"

"I've never seen him. I made him up."

"And this woman?"

"I made her up, too."

"Tell me what's happening in this picture."

"I—I don't know."

"I don't look happy."

She shook her head. "No. He does, and that's just wrong."

"Cammy, are you fromWesterfield ?"

She nodded.

"And did they—did they see this?"

Shook her head.

His eyes were wide, as they always were, and they looked surprised, as they always did, but the delight was missing, and his face seemed pale in the light of the August sun.

"I—I'm sorry, Oakley. I know it's not good. I shouldn't have brought it."

But he shook his head. He didn't offer to spin her around, he didn't reach down to lift her,he didn't do any of the things he always did. She thought he was angry.

"May I keep this,Cammy ?"

She nodded.

Filled her buckets.Left.

Three days later, one of the foundling Sisters came to her room. Her knock was always different from the knocks of the other children; sharper and harder, shorter and more distinct. All four of the children in the room sat up at once, and three of them breathed an obvious sigh of relief when Camille was taken away.

She didn't wonder what she'd done wrong; she knew.

She was led down the long, narrow hallway, to the room of the woman who headed theWesterfield Hall, MadamDagleish . MadamDagleish never smiled. But her frown was reserved for special infractions, and she wore it now in full force.

"Camille," she said coldly, "sit."

There was a chair, indicated by a curt nod, a dip of a pointed chin. Camille obeyed instinctively, her knees folding around the hard wood of the seat's edge, her feet brushing the carpet.

"Did you give a drawing to a farmer at the West Southwest Well?"

Camille froze in place.

"I asked you a question.Darya, that will be all."

The Sister nodded and retreated with just enough grace that she didn't appear to be fleeing.

"Camille?"

"Yes."

"Did he ask you to draw that picture?"

"No!"

"When did you draw it?"

"In—in class."

"In class."MadamDagleish strode around her desk as if it were abattlefield, the starched folds of her shirt her armor.

"We did not see that picture."

"No, Ma'am."

"Do you understand the significance of what you've done?"

She nodded. And then, thinking better of it, because she really didn't, she shook her head.

"I see. You are relieved of your duties at the well until further notice. You may go."

There was no argument with such an edict. Camille knew it. But she had to try. "But the water—"

"The water can be fetched by someone else. Are you arguing with me?"

She shook her head. Better that than speak.

"Go to your rooms. You are to consider yourself in confinement for three days."

Three days. She had been confined before; there wasn't a foundling in theWesterfield Hall who hadn't been. But an end to confinement this time didn'tmeant an end; she was no longer to be allowed her one freedom. Oakley must have come to the hall. He must have spoken with the Mistress of its vast wings, its multitude of unruly children. She wondered what he said.Daydreamed about it, sheets tucked beneath her chin as she tried—and failed—to sleep the days away.

But she didn't find out that day; instead, she received a summons from the ward Sister. It was one of the few times she was happy for it.

She was led to the Mistress' office, and there, seated beside the forbidding and dour MadamDagleish , was a man she had never seen before. He was obviously noble—or so she thought then—for he dressed very, very finely, and his clothing was not the severe and durable linen that enwrapped every other person who walked these interior halls. She wondered why he had been brought here; all the important guests were entertained in the halls lined with paintings.

He frowned as she entered. "Honestly, Marianna, what you do to these children?"

"I?"

"They might be appealing if you didn't insist on starching them. Well, come here, girl, and let me have a look at you."

She didn't need to "come there" to be appraised; she knew it because his gaze, unblinking and undeterred by the possible disapproval of MadamDagleish , had never wavered. But she knew that if she disobeyed, she might face another confinement. As always, at the end of days staring at nothing but walls and empty beds, she was pathetically eager to please.

She crossed the room.

"Marianna, if you would be so kind?"

"I am not in the habit of being kind."

"It was a figure of speech."

"A poor one."She rose, shedding the buttressed wall of her ironwood desk. "However, you are a busy man, and even, in your fashion, a respectable one."The emphasis on respectable sounded more like a warning against future behavior than a compliment. "I will not waste your time. Do not waste mine."

She led the way out of the room, and he followed. But Camille had the sense to wait until she turned back and said, "You are to accompany us."

They went, not back to the ward, and not to the many classrooms theWesterfield foundlings toiled in, but rather, out through the plain doors and into the wing reserved for dignitaries. There, where the halls were lined with works of art that would enrich the foundling hall for decades, she paused.

She was caught by the beauty of the paintings that had been donated to the foundling hall—although not to the foundlings themselves, who were never granted leave to study them. Each of the Painters had captured the essence of light, of life, of movement, in a way that defied their medium. Her own meager sketches were now an embarrassment.

But one day, she thought, with a sudden determination, she would paint, and she would be perfect.As perfect as these.

The stranger did not seem to see the same beauty that moved her; he scanned the paintings with a critical eye, and the occasional derisive snort. "Where is it, Marianna?"

"You are prejudicing the experiment."

"I do no such thing.I am simply following your request and attempting to use as little of your time as possible."

No one spoke to the Mistress in that tone of voice, and certainly she seemed to think so, because she gained an extra two inches of height. But he was unperturbed.

"It is in the upper hall," she said at last.

He immediately left them standing there. "Camille," she said with the severity of a frown that the stranger had earned but was impervious to, "why are you standing there gaping? Go on."

Camille nodded, her hair flouncing as her head jerked up and down. She was almost too shocked to be excited, and she kept out of range of MadamDagleish's hands just in case, but she did follow.

The stranger had stopped his frenetic pace, and now stood with his hands behind his back, his fingertips touching. "Well, girl, what do you think of this one?"

She looked up at it.

It was much like the other paintings that she had seen before she was forced to speed up a staircase so wide she felt dwarfed and insignificant. Landscapes often figured prominently in the paintings, although one or two were portraits of famous people—emperors, empresses, people whose names were engraved in memory in much the same way the names of the gods were.Or the days.

But in this one, the clouds were dark, their undersides tinged with a gray-green that she had seen on the wildest of storm days, in the haven of her room, through a window high enough that only the sky was visible. Beneath and against these roiling clouds were men in armor, but their armor, unlike the gleaming perfection of the Imperial portraits, was dented and stained; dirt clung tosurcoats , wheresurcoats had not been too torn and bloodied to hold shape and form. Around thesebeleagured knights weremen who wore no armor, or none that the painter had chosen to depict; they carried spears, wooden shafts with stone heads, broken poles. They also wore bandages, scant pieces of cloth that were incapable of staunching the flow of wounds' blood; bright scarlet, brighter than emblems, a testament to their courage or their foolishness.

As she stared at the painting, she realized that not all of the men in it were on the same side; that some of the armored knights were swinging their great swords at others, their faces twisted by the strain of the exertion. She had never lifted a sword. Had never realized just how heavy they were. There were horsed men in the distance, upon the crest of the hill. The battle itself was girded round by folds ofearth, mud now, although the texture of the open ground suggested that grass had once covered it.

It would get worse. The storm clouds were heavy with rain, with lightning, with the voice of elemental anger.

One of the men on horseback moved forward; the others stood their ground, their hands upon the pommels of their swords, their faces obscured by the lowered visors of great helms.

He lifted his visor, and for a moment, the clouds seemed to part; his face itself was covered in golden light, his eyes gold, his lips gold; all natural color had stepped aside for the splendor of this moment. He lifted a horn to his lips, and the sound of its music was worse than the thunder that answered it.

Storm.Rain.

In the valley—the basin, she thought, in growing horror— rain fell.But only there.

She cried out a warning to the men who toiled in their closed lines, as their blood fell, their arms wavered, the weight of the fight descending upon them.

And they lifted their faces, as one, and they looked up.At her.

She was horrified by it, fell silent at once. But their eyes were not the only eyes that had turned toward the sound of her voice; eyes of gold did as well, as the sound of the horn died. They scanned the horizon beyond the picture's frame.

She froze in place, silent now, still and small, as a West-erfieldfoundling learned to be when faced with the ire of their keepers.

And the stranger lifted a hand, dropped it on her shoulder.

"Look away!" he shouted, his lips very near her ears. But his voice was not as loud as the thunder that rolled into the valley. She did not know what his face looked like; she could not turn away.

"Girl, look away! Look away, damn it!"

She tried. She did try. But the painting had swallowed even the edges of her peripheral vision; it existed. It was real.

And then, it was gone.

Suddenly, it was gone.

She heard MadamDagleish's outraged shriek, and she looked up, her vision returned to her by an act of vandalism so profound, she had time to wonder about it only later.

The painting was on fire.

The stranger caught both her shoulders and turned her around until she was facing him; his long nose was an inch away from hers, and his eyes were a very strange color, like light on water. "Who are you?" he asked her.

She tried to pull away.

"Girl, answer me. Who are you?"

"C-Camille.OfWesterfield ."

"And who is she?"

"An-nobody.A foundling. I fetch—I used to fetch—the water."

"Marianna?"

"It is true."

He let her go. "You are also a very lucky young lady." He turned to face the Mistress. "Why did you wait so damn long to call me? Or am I not the first Painter you called?"

"You are the first,Giavanno ."

"Do you realize what you risked?"

"She has shown no signs."

"None?"

"Until the drawing she gave to the farmer, none at all. She has none of the… particular compulsion toward perfection and beauty. And she is a full three years from the age at which—"

"Agebe damned. If she had chosen a different subject— a farmer, you say?—you might not now have her here. And we would all be in greater danger for it."

MadamDagleish said nothing for a long moment. And when she did, her voice was her own; cold and severe. "Do you mean to imply that the painting in question—which I assure you, MasterGiavanno , you will replace—is actually a danger?"

"It was."

"Then you must look to your own for culpability here; if I had known, I would never have allowed it to grace these halls." She turned.

"I will take her," he said.

And she nodded.

Just like that.

In the morning, Camille knew that she would stand in front of the easel again, the paints spread before her, the brushes readied. And MasterGiavanno , much older now than he had been that day, would sit in his favorite chair.

She did not want to do this.

"This is how it is done in the House ofGiavanno ," her Master told her, over a quiet meal. It was not quiet because they were alone; there were five apprentices, all now younger than Camille, at the long table. It was quiet because Camille now occupied the chair that had belonged to Felix. Of all the signs that had been given the younger students— all foundlings, all like Camille—this was the most concrete: Felix was gone.

Camille pushed food around her plate. The Master, unlike the Sisters of her former home, did not carefully monitor the disappearance of food on the plates of the children; he did not comment. But she noticed that he, too, ate little.

"In the House ofGiavanno , you earn your title by painting a portrait. I have chosen the portrait; you will paint it."

She said nothing. She wasn't certain why she was afraid.

After dinner, instead of retiring to the studio with the rest of the children, she retired to her room. It was

a much larger room than she had had inWesterfield Hall, and it possessed a single bed, a large window, a tall, ornate shelf which held her brushes, her palette,the curled fold of her smock, with its years of sediment. The armoire held her clothing, and in the last two years, the Master had seen fit to gift her with fine dresses and robes, suitable for the company of nobility; she often accompanied him when he went to work on the commissions he accepted. There had been fewer of those in the last year.

She lay on the bed in silence as the sun descended; the window framed a sunset that she could capture in spirit, but never in substance. She watched shadows lengthen, watched colors fade; the curtains were seldom drawn in this room.

But sleep eluded her.

Felix was gone.

Felix.Gone. She rose, spoke three words; the room was lit from above. Only inGiavanno's house did such nonsense yield results, but they were potent. She remembered the fire that had taken canvas and gutted it on the day her future had been decided. She found her smock, her palette. Hesitated for just a moment and then set the palette aside, reaching instead for the closed tin box that held such a special place in her heart. Charcoal, in strips of various thickness, was ordered as neatly as it could be; pencils, some hard enough to tear paper, some soft enough to almost be worthy of charcoal, were also there. She held the box carefully, because dropping it could be so catastrophic, and made her way to the studio.

At this hour, it was empty. She spoke a different series of words, a longerone, that she had never spoken before. She had heard them, though; MasterGiavanno spoke them in his sonorous, musical bass. The studio was much larger than her room, but it, too, responded to words, as light filled the shadows with color. Not day colors, not exactly, but not the grays that silver moon made of everything.

She found the paper she had made—in HouseGiavanno such tasks were not left to outsiders—and set it out flat against the tabletop. She set the box beside it, lifting the lid, its creaking hinges familiar as a favorite conversation.

She began.

"Do you understand why the Augustine Painters are so revered?"

Camille shook her head.

"Answer the question, Camille. Or did they cut out your tongue inWesterfield ? If they did, they've become more severe since my day."

"No, sir."

He rolled his eyes. "It is always easier to take in boys," he said with a snort. "They have a much more obvious spirit." He dropped his hands on the tabletop with a loud slap."Very well. The Augustine Painters do not simply paint insipid and flatteringly untrue portraits as adornments for the halls of vain men. Those who do well do not paint them at all. You will understand why in a little while, and I think it is best—for your sake—that you abjure portraiture. I will teach you the basics of anatomy; I will teach how to handle paints in such a way that you could, should you prove a disappointment, make your living on such foolishness. But you will promise me, today, that you will not undertake such a sitting at the behest of

anyone but me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. The Augustine Painters are often asked to paint history. Sometimes it is the history of a thing—like the great tower occupied by the Senate; sometimes it is the history of a place. But understand,child, that it is a history that has not yet unfolded."

"You mean the future, sir?"

"Good girl. No, that is precisely what I do not mean."

"But—"

"Let me finish; you can ask your questions later. I assure you there are not many that I have not heard, no matter how vapid or how poorly thought-out.

"When I choose to accept a commission—and I do not do it out of the goodness of my heart, not even at the behest of the Emperor himself—I must understand the shape of the place that I will paint. I will often go, for a week, and live there, if at all possible. If the place is to be something that is not yet created, I will request—and be given—the designs for its construction. And then, having read them, having understood them—often by drawing them in rough from several perspectives, or in several seasons, I will walk the streets in which such construction is to take place. I will observe the people, I will pay attention to what must be destroyed in order to build, or rebuild. Am I being clear?"

She nodded hesitantly.

"That is not an acceptable answer in this house."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. All places have a sense of history. A sense of what unfolded in the moments, the hours, the years, before you chose to stand within it. That history is the foundation for all that follows, do you understand? Without that past— which is fixed and unchanging, as much a truth as can exist—there is no future."

She nodded. Swallowed and said, "Yes."

"No 'sir,' this time, eh?Well, good. So we paint history as it unfolds. We paint a continuity of events, a possibility.

"It is not for possibility that we are paid, of course. The Augustine Painters are renowned for the accuracy of their understanding, of their depiction. They are known for the perfection of their work, their ability to handle nuance and detail; they create a reality that is also a visual splendor; to wit, a work of art. You may never become an artist to your own eye; you will always see the flaws and the weaknesses inherent in your own work. And you will strive, girl. You will put the whole of your mind into the task of becoming that artist. You will work toward the day when you will create that one defining masterpiece of which you might be proud. You may never achieve that greatness—but if you struggle to achieve it, if you constantly improve, you will always be considered one of the Augustine Painters.If you survive your apprenticeship."

She did not understand, then, what he meant by that. InWesterfield Hall, children did die. The summer season was the time of the crippling disease, and the winter, of the endless cough, and many of the smaller or weaker children died. She assumed that his house would be no different.

"There is a magic in Augustine," he continued, his voice softer now, his gaze distant. "It seems centered here. We do not entirely understand it, and many, many experts have come to study the paintings, the Painters, and the city in an attempt to gain for themselves some of that magic. They have failed."

This, she did know.

"You have it, already."

"But… But I—"

"The drawing that you gave to that farmer was an Augustine picture, child." His voice was gentle, now. "It was rough. I understand why the Sisters did not see it; you did not feel that it was worthy of their attention. Is this not so?"

She swallowed and nodded.

"And although MadamDagleish would never countenance my saying so, you did the farmer a great favor. He had been about to enter into business with the man you portrayed in your painting, against the wishes of the woman whose face was hidden by her hands—his wife. Had he, he would have lost what little livelihood he now possesses. He is not a slow man; nor is he a stupid one. He understood the significance of what you gave him instantly. He came toWesterfield Hall with that drawing, and he spoke with Mariannaat length."

"Did he… ?"

"Did he what?"

"Did he ask for me?"

"You mean, did he ask if heeould take you home?"

She nodded. She could not find voice for the words.

He met her eyes. "It has not been so many years," he said softly, "since I dwelled in the halls. I know why you ask, child. I will not ridicule you. But I will answer you truthfully. No, he did not ask."

Her gaze fell to the tabletop in silence.

"I told you, he is no fool. If you do not understand the history of the Augustine Painters, he does. To my surprise," he added gently. "Yes, I spoke with him. I had to. He is fond of you, and I cannot speak for what might have happened had you not delivered him your drawing. But when he had it, when he understood what you were capable of, he knew that he could never keep you in safety upon his farm. And he knew, as well, that you might be in need of safety. He came toWesterfield Hall. He spoke with MadamDa-gleish . And then he spoke with me.

"I came at once. The Sisters ofWesterfield Hall—of any of the foundling halls—keep an eye on the children who dwell within the wards. There is a reason that art is taught, and taught early; it is the only

clear measure of a child's ability."

"But—"

He sighed."But?"

"Why the foundling halls?You—all of the Augustine Painters—are men of power. You're important. You have…" she looked around at the high ceilings, the great windows, of the studio, "more money than the Churches. What about your children? What about—"

"We have no children," he said quietly.

The way he said it stopped her."None?"

"None of the Augustine Painters has ever proved fertile. We may marry, if we can find anyone tolerant and forgiving enough to spend a whole life in a place like this, but that marriage produces no children."

"But…"

"Find the words, Camille. You have leftWesterfield , and the only way you will ever, return to it now is to gift its great hall with a painting of your own, as a sign of your gratitude."

"But we were born. We had parents."

"That is a mystery of Augustine," he said quietly. "Not all of the foundlings will become painters. Most of them will find other work—accounting, perhaps, if they've a mind for numbers. I think one or two of them have gone on to become lawyers of great repute. But the few who come to the Painter Houses belong in them. Do you think that those parents, who left children on the steps of that hall, would not claim them after their rise to power? You have seen too little avarice, child." He rose. "The foundlings are of the city. We have tried, all of us, at one time or another, to find our parents.Our mothers, perhaps our fathers.

"We have, to a person, failed."

She wanted to cry. Years ofWesterfield training held her in good stead; she was silent, her eyes dry.

His voice was surprisingly gentle. "All of the foundlings dream of parents," he told her."Of belonging, of family. I, too, had those dreams. It is the loneliness," he added, "that makes men mad.Any man. But Camille, the gift of the paintingitself is this: When you work, you will never be lonely. You will forget about the desire to find family, to find home. You will be possessed, instead, by the desire for greatness, the pursuit of perfection. It will be your only true freedom.

"But understand, child, that you at least will have that freedom. Many, many of your foundling siblings will never have that peace, and they will be driven to foolishness, time and again, in an attempt to assuage what they falsely believe they would never have felt had they kin." He rose. "Felix!"

A boy of ten stood up. He had been almost hidden by the great easels that were strategically placed windowside , for light, or she would not have missed him; he was tall for his age. His hair was brown, but the sun had trailed sunset fingers through its strands. His eyes were brown and wide, framed by lashes and high cheeks.

"Master?"

"Show Camille where we keep our smocks and our supplies.We will go out in the streets in exactly forty-five minutes, and I wish you to accompany us."

He smiled brightly.

"What about me?" an older boy said, peering from around another easel in this forest of easels.

"What about you?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good."

Felix was a gangly bundle of energy. He talked nonstop from the moment the House doorsopened, and it seemed that everyone in the street knew who he was, because everyone had a word or two to exchange for his hundred. He was a little too tall to be treated as a child, but everyone treated him that way anyway; his hair was thoroughly tousled before MasterGiavanno chose to stop.

"Felix," he said dryly, "is much loved, and not only by himself."

Felix grinned brightly. "Yes, sir," he said.

The Master rolled his eyes. "Luckily he has not yet earned the right to use the name of my House; people do not expect such friendly nonsense from me. Felix, attend."

"Yes, sir."

"Attend with a little less bounce, please."

"Yes, sir."

"This, Camille, is paper. We use it for watercolors and rough sketches. You will learn to make it, but for now understand that it is costly."

She nodded. And then, as he glared, said, "Yes, sir."

"Understand, as well, that I have money. Do not let petty considerations get in the way of your art."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Did you bring pencils, Felix, or only a hundred thousand words?"

"Pencils, sir."

"Good.Sharp ones?"

"Uh, mostly, sir."

"Good. Give some of them to Camille."

Felix smiled. "You see these letters?"

She nodded. "The A is softest. It's almost pure charcoal, I swear. We used them at lot at East Holly Hall."

"You weren't inWesterfield ?"

"No. But I wish I were—East Holly was sort of like all those stories about hell, but worse."

She laughed.

"Do not, please, laugh," The Master said. "He has the entire city encouraging his ridiculous claims."

"The B is a little bit harder. That one, the H, is hardest of all. I don't like it much, that's why it's so long. See the knife there? You can sharpen the points any way you like," Felix said.

"We had charcoal, at the hall. And some pencils. Not as many as this.Lots of chalk, though."

"Oh, chalk," Felix said, with dramatic disdain. But he winked.

"We will draw the fountain today. Camille, what do you know about the fountain inHastingPark ?"

"Nothing, sir."

The Master sighed."Of course. Felix—tellher about the fountain."

"All of the pigeons in Augustine crap on it."

"Felix!"

"Yes, sir."He started to speak, and his words ran together in a stream not unlike the tendrils of water that fell from their height in the fountain's center. After a moment, he shrugged. "I can show you better than I can tell you. Can you give me the C?"

She handed him the pencil and he began to draw.

He drew as quickly, and as generously, as he spoke, the pencil creating wide, arching lines in its rapid wake. They made more sense than his words, although at first, they looked like simple lines.

But she saw the curve of the fountain's basin in them, and after a moment the only words he used took the form of letters, like a foundling code. "A. D. E." She handed him the pencil he requested.

She saw the shadows of flying birds over the flat stones that led to thefountain, saw the droop of the leaves of the great weeping willows that protected it from the gusts of wind that swept through the city's center. She saw children with willow switches, chasing each other at the base of those trees, saw an elderly couple, at home among the pigeons, their hands outstretched.

He smiled, when he saw them appear. "That's Elva," he told her quietly."And her husband, Willem.

They've been together forever, near as I can tell, and they've even been happy about it. They like the birds, the fountain, even the really obnoxious little kids."

But the picture wasn't complete. She touched the paper, and Felix smiled, nodding. Without a word, her hand fell into the pencil box and came up with a letter, a designation that made no sense in this rapidly unfolding sketch. She began to draw.

In class, in the hall, drawing had been contained. Circle. Square.Triangle.And then, oval, diamond, straight line. Beyond that, a collection of these shapes, and beyond that, a sharp rap on the desk for not paying enough attention.

This was nothing like that. No one spoke; the need for words fell away. Confinement was almost inconceivable, and it was forgotten. She could not say, as their hands touched and crossed, who had drawn shape from the silver-gray of pencil lead, who had made the face of the weeping man, of the silent woman at his side; who had, by rapid, sweeping line, suggested the shape of a passing carriage, its emblem bright and shiny upon the moving blur of its body. Horse hooves kicked up a spray of water, not unlike the splash of the fountain, shadowing ground.

And in front of those flying hooves, another shape emerged, a child's form, small and bent, face obscured by a tangle of hair, attention absorbed by a roadside puddle.

She could see theconvergance of lines now, although the carriage lay beyond the fountain at the center of the drawing. Could see where the hooves and the child ran parallel, as if they were one thing.

She reached out, dropped the pencil, as the carriage continued to move.

"Not that way, Camille," MasterGiavanno said quietly. His voice was soft, but it was not at all gentle. The gruff-nesshad left it entirely.

"Felix?"

At the sound of his name, she turned; Felix was still. "I can't see her face," he said quietly.

"Ah. Let me."

Camille watched in confusion as one of the most respected of the Augustine Painters chose a pencil from Felix's humble box. He frowned a moment, and then his pencil touched the paper. He began to work.

She watched him as carefully as she could, trying to see the drawing, trying not to see the collision that she was absolutely certain was about to happen.

Wind blew through the square, lifting willow leaves; wind fell low, traveling west, toward-the carriage. The child's hair rose, and her face, three-quarter and in shadow, was clear for a moment.

"Got her, sir," Felix said quietly.

"Good.The time?"

"This afternoon, I think, by the shadow."

"And not tomorrow afternoon?"

He frowned. "That's Mr.Wainson , and his wife, Elva. They come once a week.This afternoon, sir. Or a week, but…"

"But you think it soon?"

He nodded.

"Good. Well done. Go and speak with the child's mother, and take the… sketch… with you. Tell her when you think this might happen. Camille?"

She was staring at them both."Yes, sir?"

"Go with him. He'll talk for hours on the way, and he doesn't have the time. If he says more than three words to anyone on the street, kick him."

Her first picture.

The pencils that she had laid out in a neat row, letters up, were not the same pencils, of course. But the box was the same; Felix had given it to her, on impulse, when they had returned from the grateful woman's house. She hadn't had to kick him; she remembered that clearly. He didn't speak at all to the people who stopped him on the street; he simply held up the rough paper, waved it forward like a flag, and they fell away respectfully and let them both pass.

They had, with pencils and paper of Felix's construction, saved that child's life.

It was not to be the last time that it happened. There were others, and they started—always—in the same way: an outing into the streets of Augustine with paper and pencil. Charcoal, the Master said, was all very good, but the lines were too muddy to be of use when identifying the details that were truly at the heart of the drawing, rather than at the heart of its composition.

Yet it was charcoal that she reached for in the false light.

The first time that Camille worked with paints should have been memorable, but she could not clearly recall it. She loved the colors, bright and vivid; hated the length of time it took to dry, the care with which one had to move, to lift brush, to lift canvas once the day's exercise had been completed. She grew in fits and starts, and always, along with inches, came spates of pure clumsiness which she was certain the whole of Augustine—at least anyone who passed within a mile of the House at the time—knew about.

Painting with oils, as opposed to drawing with pencils, was a type of confinement. Felix, years her senior—almost three, in fact, although that seemed so much less significant now— loved paints with the happy fecklessness that he loved words, and it was to Felix's care that she was given. Roger, the oldest of the Master's pupils, wasmore stern and more severe; he was, he said, destined for greatness, and he did not wish that greatness to be stained by foolishness and childish pranks.

The Master, for some reason, tolerated this unbelievable arrogance, but he was kind enough to Camille—to all of the new students—to make Felix her senior.

The exercises were not paintings. They were, according to the Master, an attempt to teach the young their craft; the art itself was already there.

"Understand," he said softly, "that your pencil work has been very fine—and it has done more than simply appeal to men with a few extra coppers in their pockets; it has saved lives; it has made a subtle difference in the streets of Augustine.

"But you—or at least Felix—knowthe people in the streets we travel. When you have such knowledge, even charcoal will do. Imagine that you had to recognize, from one of your drawings, the small child who was about to be crushed by a horse, when neither of you had ever seen her. You could not tell the color of her hair; you could not tell the color of her eyes; you could not even tell the color of her clothing.

"When the emperor calls upon you—and he will; he will have need of all his Painters soon—he will require colors.The standards that hang upon the field. The swatches of clothing that serve as crude armbands for the levies.The colors of the trees in their season, the color of the sky, the river. You will learn this, Camille. Love your pencils, if you must; love your charcoals. But this, this is the weight of your responsibility."

And so she struggled.

Felix helped, of course, and when they painted together, she loved the colors because she could see them, briefly, through his eyes.

That year, there was the first rumbling of a distant war. The Augustine Painters were summoned, and the Master returned with books, more books, letters in a script so strange that no one but he could read them. Men came to visit, with skin dark as copper. He did not spend time in the studio with the children, and as was so often the case, Felix was told to mind them.

Felix.

"Master?"

"What?"

She had grown used, by this time, to the curtness of his speech."The day that you met me inWesterfield Hall."

"What of it?"

"Why did you burn the painting?"

He looked up. "Ah. It's taken you long enough, child, and I am busy at the moment, but it is a good question. Come."

He led her to his offices, the three rooms that he occupied with his work, his scribbling,his vast library. She expected him to tell her to take a seat—hadalmost, in fact sat down, when he shook his head and reached for the ring of keys he often wore on his belt.

"Do not touch anything you see," he told her quietly. "And do not speak of it outside of these rooms."

She nodded. "But—"

"Camille, you must learn to preface a sentence with a less odious word."

"I didn't touch the painting inWesterfield Hall, sir."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"You were not aware of what you were doing, child," he told her gently, "But you did; you touched the canvas."

"And you knew what I saw."

"I… did not know… what you would see, or I would not have taken you to that painting. No Master would be so careless. But, yes, when I saw your reaction, I did know. The man who painted that picture died sixty years ago," he added quietly. "But he did not die in the painting. Had he, that picture would have been gathered and hidden away."

"Not burned."

"Not burned, no. We do not fire what we create unless the need is great." He spoke, and the interior of this win-dowlessroom was lit from above. "Look," he said quietly.

"But give me your hands while you do so. The compulsion is often strong."

She obeyed almost without thought, for the room itself was like the storage room of a great gallery. Paintings, un-framed, lay against the walls in great stacks, their edges inscribed with names, with dates, with numbers. Most were not visible, but some, those recently dated, were among the most prominent.

"Part of the reason," he told her gently, "that we often choose an apprentice to accompany us, when we at last begin, can be seen here. There are some works that are not meant to be finished. Some that cannot in safetybe finished.

"This," he said quietly, gesturing with his chin, "is the clearest example."

"I don't recognize the name."

"No, you wouldn't. It is twenty years old. It was painted by one of the students here." He closed his eyes. "It was meant to be a portrait of a local merchant. You can see, by the clothing, that it was even started in that fashion.Safe enough; an example of craft, no more. But the boy was strongly gifted. I arrived late," he said quietly. "I went to the merchant's house when he had not returned for dinner.

"He had been painting for hours. Hours; he painted without his subject; he painted without any volition at all. We had to break two of his fingers to remove the brush from his hand."

She stared at the painting.

At the golden color of the man's skin, the shape of his exquisite eyes,the curve of his lips.

"You recognize him."

She nodded. It had been a number of years since she had seen his face, but she remembered it clearly. "Who… is he?"

"That," the Master said, "is the question that Augustine Painters have been asking almost since the founding of the city."

"What happened to… the student?"

"He was completely mad," the Master replied. "He would not eat, or drink; we could have forced either, but the end result would have simply taken longer. It was… difficult. He was the first student that I had lost in many years, and I was… unprepared for the difficulty."

"How could you have been prepared?"

"These paintings… happen most frequently… in times of war."

"There was a war?"

"Oh, yes," the Master said softly, as he stared at the face of the man who seemed to be much, much more than oil and canvas. "But we were unaware of its progress; it did not start within the borders of the Empire. It came upon us slowly. But it did come." He shook his head; freed her hand a moment to rub his eyes. But even in this he was careful; she stood too far away to reach out and touch anything.

"Then—"

"Yes," he said softly. "As in the last one, the war that is coming started well beyond our borders."

"War happens all over," she said quietly.

"Yes, child.It does. But it is only the conquest of Augustine that is reflected in the paintings you will see in the room; if Augustine is to have no part in the final outcome of the fray, he is absent from our work."

"But who is he?"

"Who?I don't know. I told you, no one does." He reached out and moved one of the canvases, catching it by the edges. The stacks were shifted, until he had uncovered a painting that was cracked with age and the conditions of its storage.

"This is the oldest. I believe that the House ofCeville has one that is older." She knew this was serious, for he spoke ofCeville in a tone that was entirely free of his usual rancor.

It was not a portrait. It was an entire landscape, similar to the one that she had seen in theWesterfield Hall. But there was no battle here; it was a simple slaughter, in grays and blacks, in dark, dark reds, bright oranges,pale yellow hearts of flame.

Those flames were his carriage, his chosen method of arrival; there was no horse, no cavalry.

"The man who painted this?"

"He died of it."

She nodded.

"When I feel that you are ready, child," he told her, although his gaze was weighted by the painting before them, "you will paint.A portrait, a simple work. If you can do that, you will be called upon to serve the Emperor.

"If you cannot, and I am present, you will paint nothing until the course of the war is decided for this generation."

And if you aren't present?She didn't ask. He hated pointless questions, and she already knew the answer: it was here, in this hidden, windowless room.

It had been just over half her life—byWesterfield Hall's count—since she had last been a foundling, but some skills never left. She wasn't breaking his rules—no one who wanted a home did that. She wasn't painting.

Paint, its vibrant colors, its immediacy, its subtlety,were too new. She went back to her roots. She went back to their roots.Pencil.Charcoal.Paper. This paper, she had made on her own. It was her gift.

Felix had been absent from the hall for three days.Three, and she had counted every waking minute in a numb daze, afraid to ask the Master for any details.Afraid to ask him if she could see what he had painted, his last painting. She knew it was that. The oils would be dry enough to move, but not to touch.

If you know the person, or the place, well enough, you need no study; experience is the best teacher. It is why the Augustine Painters learn so many languages, read so many books, see so many plays; it speaks to experience. It helps us to perceive.To observe.

It is why you could draw a picture for your farmer.

It was not the farmer she drew now.

She had never touched Felix's face. This was as close as she had come, this broad curve of dark line against paper.Too hard. She softened the line by smudging it carefully. That much, she could still do consciously.

Felix, where are you?

She drew his chin, the broad, generous line of his mouth, the height of his forehead, his cheekbones, his eyes; she left the prominent features as a white, clear haze around which she built the shadows of his face. He was no longer ten years old. No longer twelve, or fourteen; he was no longer a child, although some of his youth remained in his smile, the curve of his eyes, the crinkle at their corners a reminder of his habitual smile. Although he worked as hard as any of the other students for the Master's approval, Felix was the one boy in the halls who did not need it.

Roger, older, more adept at his craft, had needed far more. She saw that now, although she couldn't say

why; the arrogance of that face was a mask, one that Felix had no need, no desire, to wear.

She wondered how he saw her, if he saw her at all; wondered how he would draw her, if he came to this room in the dark, summoned light, and worked in the secrecy of the sleeping hall. Wondered how they might draw themselves together, their hands moving over and around each other's in a constant state of near-collision that never quite attained visual disaster.

She drew him.From memory.From experience. His face emerged, smaller than she had intended, and she realized that this was a work, an Augustine work. It was the only moment at which she could have set the pencils aside, closed the box oncharcoal, let the studio retreat into nightfall.

But she let it pass by.

He held a piece of paper, clenched in his hands, the image turned toward his chest. His smile was absent, his eyes narrowed with purpose, his shoulders a straight stretch.Before him, she saw that she had drawn children, and behind him, the fountain at the heart of the square. She saw Elva, her Elva, subtly different from his own, alone on the bench; her husband had passed away last year. She fed the pigeons quietly, age her mantle.

And he held the picture out, toward her, as if, of all people present, she was the one who needed it most.

But she wasn't, Camille thought. Her vision was blurred now; she could not tell if it was the charcoal's soft lines or her tears, and it didn't matter; her hands moved, and moved again, picking up and discarding pencils, the box opening and closing, the hinges a creaky whisper.

She could not say later how many hours she had sat in this room, drawing, compelled by what she created, what she remembered.

And then she was finished. She looked at the picture. There was something about it that was wrong, something missing.

"Camille."

She started, but she did not look back; she recognized the voice.

"Camille, come away, child. It is well past your bedtime." He spoke; the studio dimmed, its darkness falling across the easels, the night sky, the table upon which her things lay scattered.

She grabbed the drawing in shaking hands; held it to her chest with as much care as she could.

"I want to see him," she said.

"You don't."

"I do. He's not dead. He's not dead yet."

"Camille, whatever he was, whatever you remember,it is gone. He will not recognize you. Do you understand? He will not know who you are."

"I don't care. I want to see him."

She heard MasterGiavanno's weary sigh, and she rose, knocking her chair over. He spoke again, and the lights returned.

"What are you holding, child?"

She shook her head.

"Camille. What are you holding?"

"A sketch."

"Let me see it."

No. No. No. But she could not say the word. Mutinous, she faced him, the paper curling around her, thin and inadequate armor. He closed the distance between them; his hands met hers around the edges of the paper. When he pulled, she let go; she could feel the tension in the paper itself, and she knew that it would not survive a tug-of-war.

He turned it around.

She could not see his face for the textured white of the paper, but she could see his hands; could see that the paper shook.

"Camille." His voice was strange. She had expected anger, perhaps, or pity, even that odd gentleness that occasionally crept into his voice. This held none of those things; there was an edge in her name that she had never heard there.

He walked past her, almost as if she weren't there. Bent to retrieve the fallen chair as if it were an afterthought, and not the crime it would have been during class time. Her stammered apology came to nothing; he sat in the chair, just as she had done, and his hand reached for the box.

She wanted to run to it, grab it, close it; it was Felix's gift.To her.

But instead she watched as he took up pencil in hand.Frowned. "Paper, girl," he said, in an entirely normal—and extremely irritable—tone.

She ran to the cupboards, his cupboards. Ran back to grab the keys that he held out in the crook of one finger. She had attended him often enough that it was easy to obey the commands he no longer cared to find words for.

Her paper was not so fine, not so finished, as his, and usually she felt a twinge of envy when she touched its smooth surface. Not tonight. Tonight, it was simply another tool. She laid it out in front of him from the opposite side of the table. There was no chair for her; the chairs were stacked neatly to the side. She almost went to get one, but he had already brought pen to paper, and his hands were a moving blur, a magician's set of arcane gestures; they produced a magic of their own.

Augustine Painter.MasterGiavanno .

He drew a room. It was the room that came first. It was almost entirely empty; there was only one piece of furniture in it.A bed.

But the bed was not empty. The blankets had a shape and a form and as his hands traveled up their length, she knew whose form it was. Felix. Helay , eyes wide, lips open; she could see them moving as he struggled. Although she could not see them, she knew that restraints held him back.

She had said she wanted to see him.

But not even MasterGiavanno could be this consciously cruel, and he had not yet finished his picture. Before the bed, another figure appeared, bent over the first. She recognized the uniform of a student, recognized the ties of a smock at its neck and waist.

But she had seldom seen her own back.

He did not linger over details. He finished quickly.

And then he looked up across the table to where she waited. "I do not understand," he said quietly, "and I am certain that a council of the Masters of Augustine would see me disbarred for what I am about to do. Come," he told her quietly. "Bring your picture. I will take you to Felix."

He did not speak as they traversed the silent halls. Did not lecture her, did not offer her his counsel, his brusque advice. She had taken the picture, as he commanded, but had also taken the box of pencils, hurriedly throwing everything inside. She was certain that she had heard the snap of two delicate pieces of charcoal, but it was either that orleave them behind.

"W-what did he paint?"

MasterGiavanno did not glance back. But he said, "You will see it. It has not been moved."

Just that.He did not tell her not to touch it. He said nothing at all until he reached a door that Camille had seen on many occasions. It was never open.

The east tower studio.

He reached for his keys and then frowned as he remembered who had them. They exchanged hands, hers shaking, his steady; he opened two locks. They were shiny, these locks, newer by far than the door that played host to them. Her reflection slid past her eyes as the door opened into a long, empty room.

There were windows, of course; all of the studios required windows, and these were as wide and tall as any in the hall. But she did not recognize them at first because their curtains were drawn shut. No curtains were drawn in the halls of the Augustine Painters.

"Where is he?"

"There.Beyond that door."

The room was as MasterGiavanno had drawn it; stark and empty. But he had not placed the easel upon the planks of the floor. She wondered if he had so much control that in the drawing he could consciously

omit it. Wondered, but did not ask. She knew that had she thought to draw this place, it would have been there, and it would have been the center of the composition. She could not see what it held; it was turned from the door toward the windowless wall.

Turned from the bed, so that the boy in restraints could not see it.

His lips were moving. They were cracked, bleeding; he had had nothing to drink for three days, she thought. She felt a sudden, bright anger, a red shiny rage in the dim, muted colors of this terrible room. "Did you even try?" she said, wheeling on her small feet.

"The water," he replied, his tone completely colorless, "is beside the bed. You may try, if you wish."

"He can't drink lying down!"

"He cannot be made to sit in safety."

"Whose safety?"

He said nothing. She ran across the room; it was deceptively large. As she drew close to Felix, she could hear him speak, but the words were in a language that she did not know.

"W—what is he saying?"

"We do not know. We have recorded it for the better part of two days. We have," he added grimly, "always recorded what was said, to the best of our ability. Men whose skill and knowledge resides in language have been trying for years to gain information from the words."

She didn't have to ask if they had been successful.

She stopped three feet short of the bed.

"Felix?"

He did not turn; his eyes, wide, were vacant, his lips moving as if they belonged to someone else. For a moment, fear and hopelessness rooted her to the floor, as if the wood itself were still alive, as if the act of hewing it from tree had had no diminishing effect.

But she had not come all this way to be afraid.

No? And why, then, she asked herself, have you come? The Masters have worked for centuries—forever—surely they did all they could do to—to…

No.

She lurched forward.Freed one hand, the other clutching her drawing, her tattered flag. She yanked the blankets away, and saw that he was, indeed, restrained; broad straps held his feet at the ankles, knees, and thighs; they hugged his skeletal hips, his chest,his shoulders.

"Camille, what are you doing?"

She shook her head. She didn't know. But it seemed to her that it was wrong, wrong to bind his arms.

She worked at the buckles of the restraints, all the while avoiding the sight of his terrible, hollow eyes.

His hands were weak, his limbs weak. She raised his right arm. As if that were a signal, he struggled madly, pouring an intense, insane energy into the attempt to sit up. His eyes saw through her, to where the easel lay.

She shook her head. "No. No, Felix."

His answer—and she thought it was an answer—was beyond her.

But he was not. He could not be. She reached into the pocket of her smock, and drew from it his pencils, his box. She put it in his palm.

Even that did not catch his attention. He gripped it, but as an infant grips a wayward finger; reflexively and without thought.

"Camille," MasterGiavanno said.

"Help me. Help me with these.Just—-just this one.These two.Just these."

The Master nodded after a long pause. He must have been hesitant, but it did not show at all in the steel cast of his face.

Felix sat. Wild now, but weak, he reached out with both hands to the easel. She was there, between them. She took the pencil box from his hands, and sat upon the bed; her own drawing now had two large creases and a multitude of smaller ones; charcoal would be smudged almost beyond recognition. She could fix that. She could fix it later.

"I need a board."

"Pardon?"

"A board.Just—a board.Like the ones we travel with."

She heard his steps retreating; over the urgent plea that underlay words that had never been a part of Felix's life, she heard them approach. He handed her what she had asked for, and she felt him hovering, near the bed. He did not interfere.

She laid the picture on the board. Where paper had bent, charcoal gathered like black dust in its creases. She opened the pencil box, all the while interposing the whole of her body between his and the only thing in the room he desired.

And then she placed the A in his hand, and curled his fingers around it.

For her own use, she took the F, with its harder point, its thinner line. She began to draw, to draw the picture that she had started, that she had thought finished in the safety and familiarity of the studio. No, she had not thought that; she had thought it lacking. She understood what it lacked, now. Felix.

Camille, the gift of the paintingitself is this: When you work, you will never be lonely. You will forget about the desire to find family, to find home. You will be possessed, instead, by the desire for greatness, the pursuit of perfection. It will be your only true freedom.

Drawing was not painting. It was not that. Because all she could think of, as her pencil hovered above her rough sketch, was that desire. No: It was the falsity of that desire. She had found family and home in Felix. Of what use was perfection, if she lost that?

She drew.

She spoke with pencil, with pencil lines, with the charcoal that left the box. She had to make him see. This boy, this almost-man with his paper carefully held inches out from his chest, his eyes turned toward the face of a lonely widow, this was Felix. He was not mad.

Felix, she said, in the medium that was her oldest, her most tactile, this is you. This is us. We saved children, old men, young men; we stopped robberies, found lost dogs, freed trapped birds. We did this. This is how.

And then, as she worked, she felt the whole of the drawing shift. She saw the pencil's lines harden, saw something appear on the back of the drawing that she had given into Felix's care. Lines, she thought, a man's body, the outlines of a man's face.

He did not work in paint. He could not, by simple force of will, force pencil to offer color. But it offered shade.Complexity.Menace.

She heard MasterGiavanno's voice from a great distance off. "Camille—bewary. There is a danger here."

But she could answer him in only one way. She drew. Where Felix seemed to concentrate in his entirety on the picture in his hands, she worked on his face, on his lips, on the shy smile, the somber cast of his features. She had hoped that he would laugh; had hoped that he would offer joy, as he so often did, fecklessly and without thought for the cost to himself. But she saw, in the tentative smile on Elva's face, that he offered more now.

He drew quickly; she drew more slowly, but she had the advantage: she had almost completed the picture before she had brought it here, and she now knew what it had to say.

And she knew what it was that Felix was offering Elva.Knew that it had to be a picture of her husband, the old man with the gentle hands and the flock of birds at his feet.

But that was not what Felix drew.

And Camille set about correcting it, seeing clearly at last. She did not lose herself in the art; although it contained the whole of her heart, it had more besides: ferocity.Intent.

Everything they had ever drawn had come together almost on its own, the cooperation an artifact of the singularity of their vision. She had never once argued about his choice, his design; he had never chastised her for her lack of care, her rough, imprecise lines.

They argued now.

All of those years of peace formed the basis for this battle. Silver lines crossed, hands collided; they reached for the same pencils, the same letters, the same pieces of charcoal.

In the silence of their skills, they argued; they drew over each other's pictures. Camille wondered if the paper would take such a punishing exchange; the pencils were not as soft as charcoal, and her paper-crafting had never been equal to his.

But she saw that she would lose; that his vision was stronger than hers, his hands quicker,his desperation greater. And how could it be? What had he to lose?

She stopped for a moment. Felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Camille."

It was heavy with her momentary resignation.

No, she thought. Not yet. Not yet.

She could not compete with him; not that way.

Instead, she turned her eye to Elva's face. And she b

eganto rework what she had drawn there. Lines darkened the old woman's eyes; lines narrowed them, lines smudged the corners of her lips, giving them less definition. She worked best with people, had always worked that way; she brought out the grief and the sorrow that Elva felt after a lifetime of companionship had inexplicably ended.

And she found a truth in this that was keener than the truth she had attempted to draw in her duel with Felix: This sorrow, this loss, was an echo of her own. With shadow and light, she made Elva the heart of the picture.

And she felt the board in her lap still.

Had he finished? Had he finished the drawing that occupied the whole of his attention, the few square inches a miniature paean to what lay on the easel, hidden from view.

She did not dare to look beyond the lines of Elva's face.Did not dare to stop working.

But she saw his hands move, jerking now, the pencil lines a part of no picture, no drawing, no classroom. He cried out in fury and rage; the pencil flew from his hand, its lead broken within the case of its wooden body.

"Felix," she whispered.

He looked up.Looked at her.

He was weeping. "It was my best work," he told her, his hands empty. "I will never ever capture such a perfect beauty again. I will never ever have that chance." His hands covered his face; his breath came out in terrible, coughing sobs.

She caught his hands, setting her pencils down for a moment, although the picture was not finished. Because he was weak from lack of food and water, it was possible— barely—to pry them away.

"And what would that perfection do for Elva?" she asked him. "What would that beauty do for the little girl who was almost killed by a careless driver?"

"You can't understand—you will never ever understand." He was crying.

She said, "I don't want to."

"I can't—I can't work with pencils. Camille, give me paints, and I'll do whatever you ask. Just give me my palette. Give me my tools. I can't work with pencils."

"You can. Look, look at this: when is it?"

He looked down; she wasn't certain that he could see through his tears. But he did see.Enough to say, "Next week."

"Why next week?"

"It's just… next week. Elva will be there."

He didn't know. He didn't know how many days he had been here, in this terrible room. "And will you take her that painting? Will you offer it to her, while she sits by the fountain and thinks that in a year or two she might not even remember her husband's face?'"

She could have slapped him with less effect. She opened the pencil box. She placed the B in his hand. And then she looked down at the picture he had been drawing, and her own eyes clouded with tears.

Felix had drawn Willem.Idealized, too perfect, perhaps too beautiful, but recognizably Willem to Camille's eyes. "But… but I don't understand," she said, although it was hard to get words out of the closing walls of her throat.

"She was crying," he told her, crying as well. "She was crying because she thought—she thought I had brought her—a picture.Of her husband. Of the man she's afraid she won't be able to remember a year from now.

"An old man.One old man."He covered his face again."An ugly old man." And then he wept, and he wept, and he wept.

In the morning, eyes heavy with lack of sleep, and dark with lack of food, lack of water, Camille of HouseGia-vanno rose. She climbed the stairs to the west tower studio, understanding the significance of its isolation; she had seen Felix in the east tower, and understood why the Master had chosen the west for her test.

MasterGiavanno sat in his favorite chair. His head was bowed as she entered; she thought he was sleeping, and turned to creep out of the room. But the door was not well-oiled; after all, the room saw use only once every few years.

"It's about tune you arrived, girl."

She turned and shut the door firmly behind her back.

"How is he?"

"He is recovering. He cries almost as much as a foundling."

"MasterGiavanno ."

His brows rose. "You know, girl, you sound a little too much like MadamDagleish for my liking." But he smiled wearily. "He is well. He is asking for you."

She nodded. "I'll see him," she said quietly. "After."

"After?"

"I finish your portrait."

The old man nodded almost regally. "Nothing unflattering, girl," he told her primly.

She laughed. "I will make it as true to what I know as possible."

He frowned.

"To what I feel," she added. She was tired; it was a good tired. She knew that she would paint, but she felt no fear of that task now.

No fear of the battle for the Augustine gates.