

PROLOGUE

Aurelie Chantelune had no business comparing herself to a bard. She was to be a soldier, not a musician, and yet her face tightened at the notes she coaxed from her lyre—sharp and staccato, a far cry from her mother’s effortless melodies.

“You’re thinking too much,” Myrah instructed, her voice matching the quiet of the archives. She sat poised in a high-backed chair, eyes glinting in the low candlelight as she watched her daughter play. “The music should come naturally. Feel it, and let it flow freely.”

Aurelie’s calloused fingers danced upon the strings, white hair spilling over her shoulders as she bent over the instrument. She sat on an ornate crimson rug, her tongue pressed against her teeth in concentration.

“You’ll never learn to play properly if you sit curled like a boiled whelk.” Her brother, Orion, dropped his head back to peer at Aurelie, misty blue eyes narrowing. “You look half feral.”

Orion had the same stark white hair that marked him as a Chantelune. It made him appear almost otherworldly as he sprawled sideways in his chair, sketchbook balanced atop his knee. His sleep shirt hung open at the collar, exposing skin tanned several shades darker than Aurelie’s own fair complexion.

With a flourish, he twisted his sketchbook toward her.

“Behold. This is what every boy sees when he looks at you.” The drawing was a twisted mockery of her likeness—wild-haired, hollow-eyed, lips a devilish sneer. Her posture, too, was horrific, hunched and contorted at impossible angles.

Aurelie reached for the nearest book to hurl at his head, but their mother caught her wrist.

“We do not throw books,” Myrah chided with a lilt of amusement. “Orion, stop tormenting your sister.”

“It’s hardly torment.” Five years her senior at the age of eighteen, Orion was lean and toned, with a deep voice that had appeared overnight. Yet with his hair mussed and his body folded awkwardly in the chair, he looked more like the boy he’d always been. “Someone has to tell her the truth. How else is she going to find a husband—”

The tolling of a bell cut him off mid-sentence. The sound rolled through the castle like thunder underfoot, shaking dust from the rafters and knocking several loose scrolls from a nearby desk.

Orion lurched upright as all of Rhovar trembled. His sketchbook hit the floor, forgotten, as his hands sought the daggers strapped to his thighs.

In an instant, his boyishness vanished and the teasing glint in his eyes sharpened into a knight’s focus.

Rhovar’s tolling bell meant only one thing: a demon had breached the kingdom.

“Take Aurelie and get to the stronghold,” Orion commanded. “I’ll find Father.”

“He’s already left for the hunt.” Myrah’s fingers squeezed around Aurelie’s wrist, pressed against her galloping pulse.

“Then it’s time I earn my wings.” He attempted a thin smile before pushing his mother along. “Go. Get to safety.”

There was no time to argue. “Light be with you,” she said, giving his head a swift kiss before turning and tugging her daughter through the stacks. Candlelight bled against the stone in uneven swaths, fear winding tighter around the girl’s ribs with each step. Hives prickled along her arms and neck, rising in hot welts as her skin betrayed the panic she was too afraid to voice.

“All will be well,” her mother promised, though when Aurelie caught a glimpse of the figure prowling through the stacks ahead, she knew it was a lie.

For six years she’d studied demons, memorizing each species and mapping out their weak points, reciting them to herself until her throat ran dry. But none of it had prepared her for seeing one in the flesh.

The demon moved between the shelves with a predatory grace, its massive black wings swallowing all trace of light.

The whorling, silvered patterns along its body marked it as a wrathborn. The demon was three times her size, its body so muscular that Aurelie felt like a child's toy in comparison.

"Come out, little Chantelunes," it sang, clawed fingers trailing the spines of old tomes.

Aurelie's knees locked, fingers tightening around the neck of her lyre. The demon lifted its head, nostrils flaring as if scenting the air. For a heartbeat it began to turn toward their hiding place, but a sudden crash from deeper within the archives sent it twisting away with a snarl, wings toppling books to the floor as it stalked toward the sound.

Aurelie didn't dare exhale, instead counting the breaths she couldn't take until the last echo of the demon's footsteps faded. Only then did her mother's grip loosen.

Myrah had gone pale, her dark hair wild and unbound. "Go," she said, hurrying Aurelie forward. "We're almost there." They moved forward still as they came across several velari that lay slumped on the floor. A quill dangled from the limp fingers of one scholar, black ink from an overturned pot darkening her blood as it pooled across the marble slabs.

Aurelie's breath caught at the sight of the corpses, and suddenly Myrah's hands were covering her eyes.

"The song you were playing earlier," she whispered sharply. "I want you to think of it now. Play it in your mind."

Aurelie tried, but the sounds of the dying were impossible to ignore. Their ragged breaths scraped against her until any trace of a melody fled, leaving only the hammer of her pulse.

Her vision was returned when they'd reached a small alcove nearly swallowed in shadow. A heavy tapestry hung there, its gold embroidery dulled to a warm bronze. It depicted several angels stitched in sweeping lines, their faces tired, wings stretched across a sky bleached pale with age.

Myrah swept the tapestry aside, revealing a narrow crack in the wall barely wide enough to be noticed. She pushed against the stone, her fingers searching until they found a small divot. She nearly pressed into it when the air behind them shifted, a second demon materializing as if spun from the shadows themselves.

“Ah,” it crooned, the sound slithering down Aurelie’s spine and raising goose bumps in its wake. “So this is where you flee to.”

Its eyes were not the scarlet red typical of demons, but a milky white that bled into alabaster skin. Black nails curved like talons glinted as they pressed against Myrah’s sides like a butcher gauging the tenderness of its next cut.

Aurelie’s body went cold, terror seizing her.

Then she saw her brother.

Orion’s blades were drawn as he crept up behind the demon with steps as silent as the night. Still, he was too far.

She needed to buy him time.

“What are you?” Aurelie demanded of the demon, forcing the words out despite the tightness in her throat.

“Leave it,” her mother warned, but the demon’s gaze flicked toward her. It tilted its head, studying her with something akin to amusement.

“Aren’t you a brave little thing?” it asked, smiling to reveal a mouth full of jagged teeth.

Aurelie gripped her lyre tighter, the wood slick in her palm. This creature—whatever it was—was nothing like any of the demons she’d learned of in her studies.

“I am Gluttony,” it said with a flourish of pale fingers, the words rolling off its tongue like silk soaked in rot. “And by the look of your hair, you must be the youngest Chantelune.”

Not a gluttonborn, but Gluttony herself. One of the Original Sins in the flesh.

Even Myrah hitched a breath, more shaken than Aurelie had ever seen her. “Go,” she hissed. “Aurelie, I want you to run. Now!”

But Orion was already there.

His arrival came with the slice of steel as he sank two daggers deep into Gluttony’s back.

The demon howled, its eyes burning with fury as it twisted upon him.

“Get her out of here!” he called, daggers held at the ready, dripping black with demon blood.

Myrah turned and slammed her hand against the hidden divot in the stone. A

faint click echoed, and the wall shifted inward. Behind it, a narrow staircase spiraled down into darkness.

She shoved Aurelie forward. “Run, and do not stop for anything until you find a familiar face.”

Cold air met her like a slap, damp and heavy with the stench of mildew. Aurelie hesitated at the threshold, grabbing for her mother’s arm. “Come with me!”

Myrah looked to Orion before she pressed the lyre against her daughter’s chest. “Whatever happens, remember that there is more to this world than swords and bloodshed. A good song can outshine any blade, so keep singing, my love, and promise that you’ll never stop.” Myrah pressed a kiss to her daughter’s brow, then pushed her down the steps.

Aurelie struck hard against the stone, the impact rattling her bones and sending a sharp pain through her ankle. She tried to scramble upright, heart slamming against her ribs, but her ankle gave out beneath her, and the door was closing faster than she could move.

Her heart sank as she watched the demon slam Orion against the shelves, moving upon him for a final blow.

Myrah was faster. She whirled on the beast, unsheathing a dagger she drove deep into Gluttony’s chest. The strike wouldn’t kill the demon, but it didn’t have to. All she wanted was its focus off her son.

In that, she succeeded.

Gluttony’s claws lashed out, raking across Myrah’s stomach in retaliation. She gasped, and her blood hit the floor in a sickening splash.

The sound crashed through Aurelie, drowning out all else.

“No!” She hobbled upright, desperate to close the distance, but it was too late. The passage’s gap shrank to a sliver as her mother’s dark eyes found hers a second before she collapsed to the floor.

Then the wall slammed shut, and the last sound Aurelie heard was her brother’s cry before the darkness consumed her.