

Energy powers to control Winter, healing powers as a symbol for Spring, physical powers and superiority for the Guardians of Summer and degenerative functions as a sign for the dying of nature in Autumn.

The families were tasked with choosing a Guardian from their ranks for each new year, for every emerging cycle. Four Guardians, representing their families, to enable the dying and rising of the four seasons.

This task is passed from generation to generation. In order to remind the families that they, too, are transient, and will fall. Just like the blossoms of the first flowers of Spring, the Summer rain, the falling leaves in Autumn and the Winter snow when the cycle comes to its conclusion.

The Ostara Family, Guardians of Spring

The Flores Family, Guardians of Summer

The Chastain Family, Guardians of Autumn

The Kalinin Family, Guardians of Winter

**COLD**

I climb over the pile of clothes in my cousin's room, swearing all the way. I hate Sander for acting like a Prince in his dratted Kingdom. Whatever he happens to have in his hands – he just drops it or leaves it somewhere and then seems to believe that his things just magically move back to their allotted spots. I'm one hundred percent certain that Sander has no idea how many of our staff are occupied every day with clearing up after him.

Usually, I don't mind him being so self-involved. I've grown up with it and somehow I got used to it. But unfortunately the idiot borrowed my charger and I can't find it anywhere.

I've only got seven percent battery life left, and if I want to make it to the cinema on time, I'll have to leave in half an hour.

I silently cast a few curses against Sander into the air. If those gods that my family believe in really do exist, they probably won't punish their golden boy but I suppose it can't do any harm.

I'm running through the wide corridors of my parental home, letting my eye sweep over the countless paintings on the walls. I could probably draw all those faces from memory even though I've met hardly any of them in person. Every painting shows the face of a Winter Guardian, the stars of their generation. I realise that, as a member of the House of Winter, I should be a little bit more proud of them. They're my ancestors after all. When Sander, my aunt or my grandfather pass these paintings, they show a certain amount of reverence. But I don't. I'm not an active member of this family enterprise and therefore I don't really see the need to pretend that all this means something to me.

I stop in the stairwell and listen. How can a house with so many people in it be so damned quiet? Maybe I should just look for Märtha, our housekeeper. She usually knows a lot more about the whereabouts of any missing objects than the owners themselves.

“Sander?” I call, my own voice echoing around me. I really shouldn't shout inside the house. I shouldn't shout, run, make a mess – anything, basically that's fun. As a child I diligently kept to the rules because I wanted to please everyone and fit in. Now I really don't care.

When there's no reply, I sigh deeply and run down the stairs, taking two steps at a time. The basement is the only room in this building where you can have the tiniest little bit of fun. There's a table football and a screen where we watched movies as children, before

Netflix and co. Since Sander wasn't in his room or in any of the training rooms, this is my next best option.

When I reach the final staircase, I shudder briefly, wrapping my arms around my upper body. Winter may be coming to an end, but it's still damn cold. For me, personally, it can't be spring soon enough. But my family always feel a little wistful at this time of year because winter and therefore the time of our rule is coming to an end. For countless generations, the Kalinins have guided the cold season. And my family take this task very seriously. Well, everyone except me. I'm an illegitimate child, which wouldn't be so bad in itself, but my father was not a member of a House of the Seasons which means that my family didn't accept him. He disappeared before I was born, and I was sort of tolerated, but never fully accepted. Unlike all these boys and girls in the paintings who seem to look disdainfully at me from within their frames.

When I get to the foot of the wooden staircase, the temperature sinks again by what feels like another ten degrees. Which is strange because the walls are thick and the rooms are well heated, even in the basement. Maybe Sander or one of my other cousins left the skylights open.

Suddenly, I get a bad feeling. I can't tell where it comes from but an ice cold hand is gripping my heart. I stop on the last step and look around. There's nothing here except a small chest of drawers with a vase of flowers on it. I'm alone. And that's exactly how I feel. As if I was the only person in the world or as if someone put a glass dome over me that cuts me off from the world beyond.

Trembling, I reach for the door handle and try to expel those strange thoughts. This is my basement. I've been here a thousand times before and nothing every happened. My hand

turns the handle while the pressure on my heart spreads to my lungs. Suddenly, my breath comes out of my mouth in small white puffs.

I laugh nervously. I'm used to strange things happening in this house. That's unavoidable when the majority of the inhabitants have magical powers. But these events never had anything to do with me. I don't have any powers. I'm nothing special.

I open the door a little more resolutely. Maybe Sander is experimenting with his own powers in there right now.

But there's no Sander inside the room. The TV is off, there's no music and all the lights are out which turns the entire room into one weird shadow. So nothing out of the ordinary really apart from the fact that it is so damn cold in here. I look around, shivering. But maybe my charger is down here after all.

Only after I take a few more steps into the room do I realise with some consternation, that several cushions are no longer on the couch and a small side table has been thrown onto the floor. I cautiously walk around the couch.

And there I stop, rooted to the ground.

From one second to the next, my heart starts racing like crazy, my breath slows down and hangs in front of my face like an impenetrable fog.

My brain seems to be taking its time to analysing the scene. But when it kicks in, a blood curdling scream comes out of my throat. I hardly recognize my own voice.

Lying on the ground in front of me, his limbs spread out at an unnatural angle, is Sander.

My knees buckle under me. I drop to the floor next to him and for a moment I don't know what to do.

“Sander“, I whisper, touching his forehead with my fingertips.

The energy from his skin jumps into my fingers like an electrical shock. I recoil. He is ice cold. His eyes are blank. No response. No life. I could check his pulse but for some reason I know he’s dead.

Sander is dead.

“Oh my God“, I sob, although I’m sure my words are drowned out by my heartbeat. I can’t tear my eyes away from Sander. The cold takes possession of me, more and more, until I feel as if I’m freezing to death. I can hardly breathe, I can’t think clearly. “Help!” I scream, looking around desperately. My voice reverberates through the basement, reflected by the stone walls around me. These walls are thick but I know they’ll hear me. This is death, and my family can feel it. They *have to* feel that one of us is lost.

I only register the voices at the edge of my consciousness. Footsteps on the old wooden staircase running in my direction, racing towards Sander, pushing me aside. I want to say something, to shout at people and ask them what this is supposed to mean. But I can’t. It is as if my muscles have lost all their strength and I’ve been left behind like a small blob of misery.

Sander is dead.

My cousin is dead. But he was young and healthy and... not ready to die.

The realisation slowly trickles into my awareness, as if it was wading through a thick fog. I have to do something. I have to get up and... no idea.

My hands make fists beside my body. I can feel the energy of the people around me, I can almost touch it even if I still don’t understand a word they’re saying.

As if on autopilot, I open my mouth and scream. A tremendous pain is building up behind my forehead, little lights appear in my line of sight, but I feel stronger. More powerful. I scream the suffering and the shock out of my soul, my eyes fixed firmly on Sander. Eventually, my voice subsides, I breathe in with a hiss, and then out again. It's still so cold in the room that my breath condensates immediately.

I look around, trembling. More lifeless bodies are lying all around me. I recognize the faces of some of our staff and that of my cousin Zara. All their eyes are closed and they're not moving.

„What the hell?“ I jump up, frightened. All the people who were just now milling around me, shouting at each other, are now unconscious. I've seen something like this before, when one of my uncles drew out people's energy like resin from a tree. Magical powers like these are not that unusual, but it makes no sense. Because the only person still standing in this room is me. But I don't have any powers. I never had any. It can't have been me, I can't...

I blink a few times and stumble backwards.

“Wake up!“, I whisper desperately. I have no idea what happened here and my brain is refusing to draw its conclusions.

As I storm out of the room, my eyes rest for a fraction of a moment on the flowers in the vase on that small chest in the corridor. The flowers that were blooming brilliant red just a few minutes ago.

They're dead now, as if someone sucked all life out of them.

## THE ENERGY OF DEATH

Twenty minutes later, I close the door behind me, trembling, and wrap my arms around my chest. No idea how long I'm standing there, without seeing anything, without moving. It's probably only a few minutes but it feels like hours. Sander's face keeps appearing in my mind, and I can't get rid of it, however much I try. A thousand questions are buzzing through my head like an aggressive swarm of bees. I want to scream it all out of me again. Or do something, anything to banish the images and voices from my thoughts.

Sander is dead. I'm not a doctor but when I touched his face, his skin was ice cold, his eyes were blank. And I felt it. I felt death in that room like a disgusting smell. Just like my family. No one said it out loud but they all seemed shocked and bewildered.

Because one thing is clear. My cousin didn't just drop dead. He's a powerful member of one of the Houses of the Seasons. We have private doctors and our health is probably monitored more thoroughly than that of the royal family. So there has to be a good reason why his heart stopped beating.

I feel a deep unease and my body trembles again. My legs are tingling and threaten to buckle under me. I breathe deeply, try to calm down and cross my room to sit on my small reading bench in front of the window. The stark forest that surrounds our estate seems to stretch out its fingers towards me. Usually, I love these trees even if they look leafless and somehow bleak. But today, they seem like dark messengers firing questions at me that I cannot answer.

Sander is dead. These three words keep churning in my mind but they still don't make sense. My cousin can't just lie dead in our basement. These things don't happen just like that

on a normal Friday evening. And certainly not to a member of the Seasons. Completely impossible.

Just as impossible as the fact that a dozen people around me just dropped like flies. Because of me. I resolutely push the memory aside. If I think about that as well, I might lose my mind completely.

A soft knock makes me recoil in fear, as if someone was kicking the door in without warning. My heart stutters in my chest and I gasp for air as I hastily sit up a little bit straighter.

“Yes?” I call. I’m surprised my voice is barely trembling.

The door opens. It’s my mum. But instead of coming in, she just leans against the door frame. I know that posture. It’s usually followed by a little sermon about me having left my stuff lying around or something like that. But not today.

She looks at me silently for a bit. “How are you doing?” she asks eventually.

I shrug. „No idea. How are you doing?”

A half-smile appears on her lips then fades immediately. “No idea. Dr Sørensen is on his way. Hopefully he’ll be able to shed some light on the darkness.”

I nod, deep in thought. We don’t have our own doctor on the island but we do have a confidant on the mainland. He knows about us and I’m pretty sure my family forks out a lot of money so that he doesn’t share his knowledge with the next best reporter. A visit from Dr Sørensen is rare and just emphasises how serious this matter is. My heart jumps painfully again.

“Mum“, I say, hesitating, “I saw him. He didn’t look... good.”

My mum raises both her eye brows and presses her lips together. “That’s a bit of an understatement, Bloom.”

“I mean, he didn’t look as if he’d just hit his head. I think his legs were broken and his arms....”

“That’s enough“, mum interrupts harshly and closes her eyes for a moment. It’s almost as if she’s annoyed. As if I was a child discussing my bedtime with her. Not as if we’re talking about my cousin’s cause of death. “There’s no point in speculating, Bloom. Let’s wait for the doctor, he’ll be able to tell us more.”

I want to protest but then I shut my mouth again before uttering a single word. I don’t distrust my mother. There were times when she was my only ally in this family. But I know that this house often resembles a snake pit. There’s a lot of gossip and there are secrets around every corner. So it’s sometimes better to shut up and observe before you jump in.

“Okay but please let me know when you hear anything new”, I say, trying a conciliatory tone. “

Mum nods, checking me out again. “We’ll talk about everything, promise. When the time comes. Try to sleep a bit, okay? These next few days will be exhausting. I’m going to send Märtha up with some tea.”

As she closes the door behind her, I rest my tired head against the wall and close my eyes. The day and the events of the last few hours still haunt me. For the first time in my life, I used magic

Usually, every descendant of the Master, every descendant of that first Guardian chosen by the Gods, has magical powers. These powers are part of us, just like the colour of our eyes or our personalities. Most of the time, they show themselves very early on, when

we're toddlers or even earlier. In the beginning, our powers are quite weak and we can't control them yet. We learn to do it like we learn to walk or talk. It's a natural process.

But not for me. I wasn't extraordinary. I never even had even a hint of any kind of powers.

Until today.

And I have no idea what this means. I've never heard of anyone whose powers appeared so late. They're in my blood but I always assumed that I was the exception to the rule. Because my father isn't a member of the Houses of the Seasons and therefore can't perform any magic. I assumed that I had inherited that normal side from him.

But maybe it was just a one time thing. Maybe this tiny part of my magic of the Seasons just showed itself briefly, in an extreme situation. Just like a mother who fears for the life of her child suddenly finds the strength to lift a car. Maybe I'm normal after all.

After a few minutes, I get myself out of my ruminations and drag myself into the bathroom. Although I haven't eaten anything for hours, I have no appetite. I can barely think clearly let alone imagine that everything will be normal again tomorrow or in a few days' time and we'll all sit around the dinner table together. As I often do, I turn the heating up as high as it will go and put a few towels on it so that they're nice and warm. A deep cold has gnawed its way into my body that I can't expel. And that's although I'm a winter girl. The legends say that we're connected to cold and death which we symbolise in the cycle of the seasons. Every family stands for something different. Spring for life, Summer for power, Autumn for old age and decline and Winter for death. The tranquillity after life. I never believed it. But right now it feels as if the energy of death is sticking to my skin like a veil.

After sending my best friend Emma a short message cancelling our cinema night, I undress and get under the hot stream of water. As soon as it hits the tense muscles at the back of my neck, I close my eyes and let my head drop forward. The warmth and the monotonous pelting of water drops on my skin somehow calm me down. I wish I could just stay here, under the hot shower, forever, and pretend that the chaos around me didn't exist.

As if I was no part of it.

While I was still hoping, yesterday, that the situation would calm down by the next morning, I now know better. It's just as chaotic and weird as it was the night before. Because no one is calm enough to sit down, I have breakfast by myself at the big table in the dining room. I'm also still very distracted but unlike everyone else I don't seem to have a role to play. Usually I spend Sundays first in bed and then meeting friends. I surf the Internet or watch a few series. But it seems inappropriate to go to Oslo now and go out, and I simply don't have the patience for Netflix.

Märtha, our housekeeper, brought me a portion of *Røm megrøt* but I can hardly taste it. That's really worrying because semolina pudding with honey is usually one of my favourite dishes. But yesterday still haunts me and my thoughts are constantly churning over Sander's death. I hardly closed an eye all night.

After breakfast I briefly consider going back to my room but then I decide against it. I can't think inside this house. Some days, I find it hard to breathe here. So instead I slip into my winter jacket, drape a huge scarf around my head and slip out of a side entrance into the cold morning. Winter may be drawing to a close, but not on Kalinøya, the island where my family lives. Here we have winter all year round. It does get a little bit warmer temporarily,

but the trees are always bare and the landscape is always somehow icy. But I still love it.

Winter has its own charm and I like the thoughtful mood that comes with it.

Before I leave the house, I knock twice on my bag to check if I really have my phone with me. I only saw my mother briefly today, in passing. She said she would contact me when my grandfather had time and we could talk about my powers. Which is very urgent. Even if I'm still hoping that it was a one-off.

As I'm following the narrow path around our huge house, my thoughts go back to Sander. He was the current Guardian of Winter. To be a Guardian is one of the highest honours in our world. It's a kind of birth right, similar to the succession in a royal family. My great-great-great-great- no idea how many-great grandfather was the first Guardian of our family. The first one who was chosen, according to the legend, to rule Winter in the cycle of the Seasons. His son became Guardian after him, and his after him, and so forth, down the generations. My grandfather also became Guardian until, after the death of his own father, he became Master and the leader of our House and Representative of Winter. In my generation, Sander was the oldest child and therefore the current Guardian of Winter. Later, he would have had a good chance to become Master, the head of the family, if he hadn't died.

I can't help asking myself who would now take his place. Probably Zara, Sander's younger sister. She's younger than me but she has powers. She can see the future, although not always very reliably. That means she's a long way ahead of me.

When I reach the cliff that protects me from the restless fjord, I stop and drop down onto a big rock jutting out of the icy ground next to me. The water is so dark that it looks almost black. It rages back and forth as if it is angry. I let my gaze wander over the waves, to

the fuzzy skyline of Oslo. The city is rising majestically from the water, almost unrecognizable through the fog and the misty rain.

A sigh of longing escapes from my chest, immediately carried away by the wind.

When I was a child, I often wanted to live on the mainland instead of this island. The inhabitants of Oslo, just like the inhabitants of the rest of the world, have no idea of the magic my family and the other Families of the Seasons wield. Our courts are distributed all around the world but people have no idea that we are the ones to bring them Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter every year. And a part of me envies them that ignorance. Spending your life without far-reaching, world-changing duties. Because I, although growing up inside this world, never had a real place in it owing to my lack of magical powers and my normal father. So I learned early on how to be one of these other people. I'm going to a normal school, I have normal friends and I want a normal life. For me, personally, high school graduation can't come soon enough – and then I'm gone. Far away from the secrets, the Guardians and Masters and far away from magic, something I never had to engage with until now.

I'm looking at the outline of the city again. I know from our history lessons at school that, during the middle ages, Oslo had two castles and a royal court. And I often asked myself if one of these belonged to my family. Today, my family has a lot of influence in the city – we own big companies, we have a lot of money, we have people on the city council and are involved everywhere decisions are made. Sometimes it reminds me of the Mafia. So I wouldn't be surprised if the royal court played a role there too.

The vibration of my phone jerks me out of my thoughts. I wince. It's my mum informing me that there's going to be a family meeting in the parlour in ten minutes. Jumping up, I briefly confirm that I'm on my way. My heart moves up a gear as I'm running back to

the house. One part of me was sure they wouldn't contact me. I've been left out for so long that I couldn't really imagine why it would be different today.

I'm a bit out of breath when I reach the house. I briefly smooth my hair back behind my ears before I walk into the parlour. This room is mostly for representation and rarely used except for meetings and speeches. The double doors are ajar and I even from the corridor I can hear the buzz of voices. As I'm entering, about thirty people are looking at me at the same time – my family. Close relatives and more distant ones. I don't have an intimate relationship with any of them. My aunt and my uncle, Sander's and Zara's parents who live in this house like everyone else, are barely talking to me because they fell out with my mother many years ago. My cousin Zara and I are always at loggerheads. We simply can't stand each other. I kind of got on with Sander but he also definitely wasn't my favourite person.

A few seconds later I see my mum. I hurry over to her and I'm dropping into the small wing-backed chair next to her just as my grandfather enters the parlour. As soon as the others notice him, conversations die down and everyone seems to straighten up a bit. To me, they all seem like soldiers duty bound to salute their superior. Or like school children greeting their teacher. Whatever. My grandfather, the Master of Winter, wields an almost palpable power.

He stops and stands behind an armchair, supporting himself on its back with his big hands. He looks around the room, fixating me for a second, before turning away again. My mouth is dry.

“Thank you all for coming here so quickly.”, he says in a loud, firm voice, nodding to several people. “I promise you, it won't take long. But you all have a right to know what happened. My daughter and her husband are still on the mainland, attending to various matters. They asked me to express their gratitude for your thoughts and prayers on their

behalf.” He straightens his shoulder and looks even more serious, if that’s even possible. “I know you all have questions. I myself am in deep mourning but I also want answers about the sudden death of my grandson. Therefore, we had a medical specialist come over from the mainland last night who took Sander’s body away and performed an autopsy.”

My stomach contracts painfully. I lift my head and stare at my grandfather who is creating another dramatic pause.

“I was informed of the result about twenty minutes ago, and it saddens me deeply. Sander died from an allergic shock. His death is as tragic as it is senseless. His funeral will be next Saturday and I want to ask all of you...”

His next words are drowned out by the confused buzzing in my head. An allergic shock? Is he serious?

My mind immediately replays images of Sander, lying on the floor in front of me, his limbs twisted and splayed. Unless Sander was allergic to a hitman, his death was most certainly not caused by an allergy.

But why would my grandfather lie?

I turn my head and look at my mum standing next to me. For a fraction of a second, we look at each other, then she turns away again to focus on my grandpa.