

“Cerrie Korviridi, this is your final step. Turn back now or be forever bound. Will you take the vow?”

She had waited 14 years for this moment. Since age seven, Cerrie had been told of the wondrous powers that would unveil themselves after inculcation; she’d dreamed of the moment when she joined the ranks of the High Poets, the most powerful women in the whole of Breme.

Now, on the precipice of the Sigillum, Cerrie stared up into the kind, cruel face of her mentor with wet green eyes, every bone shaking in agonized expectation. Even before Irith opened the box of iron brands, she ducked her head and shivered, grimace hidden by her short mint bangs.

This would hurt more than anything Cerrie had experienced in her 21 years of life. Any torture before had been emotional pain, but this was physical. Given that she cried any time she got a splinter, she would suffer worse than most.

But she could not turn back now—not if she wanted to be something more than a housewife or farmhand. So many years of encouragement would have been wasted on her: so many kindnesses turned useless through fear. How could she join the ranks of failures and ever face her mentor again?

Every girl was drilled for a decade on what they would suffer. Many balked at the last moment and were forever barred from High Poetry, all their hard work for naught. Their words would never hold power, would never be used to build marvelous structures or protect their country from harm. Disgraces, derided for their cowardice amongst those who accepted the call.

Cerie Korviridi was not a brave woman, but her brother would be so disappointed. Her parents would be ashamed to call her a daughter—not that they were alive to see. So much heartbreak without the reward she so wanted. Inculcated Poets got only one chance.

Tears hot and flowing faster, she clenched her trembling teeth.

“Yes, teacher. I will.”