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Sweet jasmine perfumed the air, carried with the drifting dustmotes in arched sunbeams throughout the courtyard. Terra cotta brick bounced the light in the hall, illuminating the tiled ceilings above in a pleasant glow. Along one such archway was Pelagos, mist swirling contently in slow pulls as he perched along the lip of the architecture, neck curved down as he studied the tome before him.

The sun had warmed its weathered pages until they felt almost alive. He turned each one with care, mindful of the brittle paper beneath his claws. It smelled of old leather, of the tincture his father used to keep the pages as supple as they could be. The ink had faded to a mule-brown, its original dark pigment remaining only where it kissed the binding along the spine.

It probably should not be in the sun at all. His father disagreed.

*Knowledge left in a sealed book is no knowledge at all*, he had said as he unshelved the ancient tome and passed its heft to Pelagos. The young tortuvina was inclined to agree. He had never understood the near-neurotic protectiveness with which certain libraries guarded their oldest volumes like covetous drakes. Books existed to teach. They could only do so once opened.

Pelagos squinted at the fine, handwritten script as it chronicled the earliest Lightkeepers and their campaigns against the Wither. Victory had not always been theirs. Solemn passages recorded heroes who had fallen long before their work was finished, among them a lone tortuvina. One feather brushed gently across her illustrated likeness.

*Your ancestor*, his family had proudly told him.

Exactly how many generations separated them had long since been lost amidst the chaos of the Ruptour War. The following pages grew darker, their borders curling with painted tendrils of the Wither that seemed to swallow the very light from the parchment. Generations vanished into that darkness, names and histories consumed, yet somehow their people had always endured.

Pelagos continued to read, shifting slightly in his seat.

*The Wither fears us*, the tome assured. It described its aversion to light, and the gift of luminance that each species had been bestowed with. Pelagos paused to jot down a small note in the margin.

*Fire remains the most effective deterrent. Burn it completely before corruption can spread.*

He thought then back to the raging forest fires. Not the careful, controlled burns sanctioned by the councils, but the panicked infernos kindled by frightened souls. Even as a child, he had helped extinguish those monstrous blazes that devoured not only the Wither, but forests, homes, and the livelihoods of those caught in their path.

*I need to become strong enough that people never have to resort to this again.*

The shame he felt at having needed a tome to activate his affinity still swirled at the pit of his stomach, a heavy stone that refused to be removed from his path. But he would carry its weight, flames of motivation stoked by the shame. He would become a Lightkeeper that others could depend upon, and then, the weight would be worth enduring.