



MORGAN RICE

A COURT
FOR THIEVES

A THRONE FOR SISTERS (BOOK TWO)

A Throne for Sisters

Морган Райс

A Court for Thieves

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From #1 Bestseller Morgan Rice comes an unforgettable new fantasy series. In A COURT FOR THIEVES (A Throne for Sisters—Book Two), Sophia, 17, finds her world upside down as she is cast from the romantic world of aristocracy and back to the horrors of the orphanage. This time the nuns seem intent on killing her. Yet that doesn't pain her as much as her broken heart. Will Sebastian realize his mistake and come back for her? Her younger sister Kate, 15, embarks on her training with the witch, coming of age under her auspices, mastering the sword, gaining more power than she ever imagined possible—and determined to embark on a quest to save her sister. She finds herself immersed in a world of violence and combat, of a magic she craves—and yet one that may consume her. A secret is revealed about Sophia and Kate's lost parents, and all may not be what it seems for the sisters. Fate, indeed, may be turned on its head. A COURT FOR THIEVES (A Throne for Sisters—Book Two) is the second book in a dazzling new fantasy series rife with love, heartbreak, tragedy, action, adventure, magic, sorcery, dragons, fate and heart-pounding suspense. A page turner, it is filled with characters that will make you fall in love, and a world you will never forget.

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Morgan Rice

A COURT FOR THIEVES

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CHAPTER ONE

They made a spectacle of Sophia's punishment, as Sophia should have known they would. They dragged her back to the House of the Unclaimed, only pulling the hood from her head once they reached its confines, shoving her along with stumbling steps through the streets of Ashton.

Kate, help me! Sophia sent, knowing that her sister was her best option of getting through this.

Nobody helped her, not even those she passed by. They knew she wasn't some rich girl being kidnapped, just one of the indentured being taken back to face justice. Even hooded and wearing the rich dress of her disguise, it seemed that people could see that much. She could see their thoughts, with so many of them thinking she deserved it that she felt as though she were being spit on as they dragged her.

The masked nuns rang bells when her captors dragged her back. It might have seemed like a celebration, but Sophia knew it for what it was: a summons. They were dragging children from their beds to see what became of the ones who were stupid enough to run.

Sophia could see them now, clustered around the doorways and the windows of the orphanage. There were the older ones she knew, and younger ones who had only just come into what passed for the care of the place. All of them would watch what happened to her, and probably some of them would have nightmares about it afterward. The masked nuns wanted the children there to remember what they were, and to learn that there could be nothing better for them.

"Help me!" she called to them, but it made no difference.

She could see their thoughts. Some were too scared to move, some were still blinking with no understanding of what was happening. A few even thought that she deserved this; that she ought to be punished for breaking the rules.

The nuns pulled Sophia's outer dress from her. Sophia tried to struggle, but one of the nuns just slapped her for it while the others held her in place.

"Do you think you get to wear finery? A shameless thing like you deserves no rich clothes. You barely deserve the life the goddess chose to give you."

They stripped her down to her plain underdress, ignoring Sophia's shame at it. They ripped the braids of her hair into wildness, not allowing her even that much control over how she looked. Whenever she gave them the slightest resistance, they hit her with open hands, leaving her reeling from it. Still, they marched her forward.

Sister O'Venn was one of the most eager to do it. She marched Sophia forward, speaking all the time at a volume the watching inhabitants of the orphanage were sure to hear.

"Did you think that you would be out in the world for long?" she demanded. "The Masked Goddess demands that her debts are paid! Did you think that a shameless thing like you could avoid it just by giving herself to some rich man?"

Was that a guess, or did they somehow know what Sophia had been doing? If so, how could they?

"Look at her," Sister O'Venn called to the watching children. "Look at what happens to the ingrates and the runaways. The Masked Goddess gives you shelter here, asking only work in return! She gives you the chance of lives filled with meaning. Reject that and this is the price!"

Sophia could feel the fear of the orphans around her, so many thoughts together forming a wave of it. A few debated helping her, but there was never any real chance of it. Most were simply grateful that it wasn't them.

Sophia fought as they dragged her to the courtyard, but it made no difference. Perhaps Kate could have battled her way clear of them, but Sophia had never been a fighter. She'd been the clever one, only she hadn't been clever enough. She'd been caught, and now...

...now there was a post awaiting her at the center of the courtyard, its intention obvious.

There were jeers from some of the children there as the nuns led Sophia to that post, and that hurt almost more than the rest of it. She knew why they were doing it, because if she'd been up there she would have joined in, if only to ensure that she wouldn't be singled out for some punishment. Even so, Sophia felt tears in her eyes as she looked around at the anger in some of the young faces watching.

She was going to be a warning to them. For the rest of their lives, they would think about her anytime they thought about escaping.

Sophia called out with her powers as they tied her to the post, pressing her face to it and holding her in place with ropes of rough hemp.

Kate, help! They caught me!

There was no answer, though, as the nuns continued to tie Sophia in place like some sacrifice to the darker things people had worshipped before the Masked Goddess. She screamed for help with all the mental effort she could summon, but it didn't seem to make any difference.

The nuns took their time. This was obviously intended to be about theater as much as pain. Or maybe they just didn't want Sophia able to give with any of the blows that followed to reduce their sting.

Once Sophia was tied in place, the nuns led some of the younger children in, making them look at her as though she were some wild beast caught in a menagerie.

"We must be grateful," Sister O'Venn said. "We must be humble. We must repay the Masked Goddess what we owe her for her gifts. Fail, and there is a price. This girl ran. This girl was arrogant enough to set herself above the goddess's will. This girl was wanton and proud."

She said it like a judge passing sentence, even before she moved close to Sophia. It was starting to rain now, and Sophia could feel the cold of it in the dark.

"Repent," she said. "Repent your sins, and pay the goddess the price for your forgiveness!"

She'll suffer either way, but she must choose.

Sophia could see the same sentiment in the thoughts of the others. They meant to hurt her just as much regardless of what she said. There was no point in trying to lie and beg forgiveness, because the truth was that even the meekest of the sisters there wanted to hurt her. They wanted to do it as an example to the others, because they genuinely believed that it would be good for her soul, or simply because they liked watching people hurt. Sister O'Venn was one of the latter.

"I'm sorry," Sophia said. She could see the others there, drinking in her words. "I'm sorry I didn't run twice as fast! You should all run," she shouted to the children there. "They can't stop all of you. They can't *catch* all of you!"

Sister O'Venn slapped her head against the wood of the punishment post, then shoved a length of dowel between Sophia's teeth so roughly it was a miracle she didn't snap any.

"So that you don't bite your tongue screaming," she said with a mock sweetness that had nothing to do with the things Sophia could see in her mind. Sophia could understand Kate's urge for revenge then, her wish to burn it down around them. She would have set light to Sister O'Venn without a second thought.

The masked sister brought out a whip, testing it where Sophia could see. It was an evil-looking thing, with multiple strands of leather, all with knots along their length. It was the kind of thing that could bruise and tear, far harsher than any of the belts or rods that had been used to beat Sophia in the past. She tried to struggle clear of her bonds, but it made no difference. The best she could hope for was to stand there defiantly as they punished her.

When Sister O'Venn struck her for the first time, Sophia almost bit through the wooden dowel. Agony exploded through her back, and she could feel it tearing open under the blows.

Please, Kate she sent, please!

Again, there was the sensation of her words floating off without connection, without answer. Had her sister heard them? It was impossible to know, when there was no reply. Sophia could only hang there, and hope, and call for her.

Sophia tried not to scream at first, if only to deny Sister O'Venn what she really wanted, but the truth was that there was no holding it at bay when pain like fire burned across her back. Sophia screamed with every impact, until it felt as though there was nothing left within her.

When they finally pulled the dowel from her mouth, Sophia tasted blood on it.

"Do you repent now, you evil girl?" the masked sister demanded.

Sophia would have killed her if there had been even a moment's opportunity, would have run a thousand times if she thought that there was a chance she could get away. Even so, she forced her sobbing body to nod, hoping that she could look contrite enough.

"Please," she begged. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have run."

Sister O'Venn leaned in close enough to laugh at her then. Sophia could see the anger there, and the hunger for more.

"Do you think I can't tell when a girl is lying?" she demanded. "I should have known from the moment you came here that you were a wicked thing, given where you came from. I'll make you properly penitent, though. I'll beat the wickedness out of you if I have to!"

She turned to the others there, and Sophia hated the fact that they were still just watching, still as statues, frightened into immobility. Why weren't they helping her? Why weren't they at least recoiling in horror, running from the House of the Unclaimed to get as far away from the things it did as they could? They all just stood there while Sister O'Venn stalked in front of them, her bloodied scourge hanging in her hand.

"You come to us as nothing, as evidence of another's sin, or as drains upon the world!" the masked nun called. "You leave here shaped into boys and girls ready to serve the world as you are required. This one sought to run before her indenture. She took years of safety and instruction here, and she tried to run from what it costs!"

Because what it cost was the rest of the orphans' lives, spent indentured to whoever could afford the cost of their upbringing. They might theoretically be able to repay the cost, but how many did that, and what did they suffer in the years it took them?

"This one should have been indentured days ago!" the masked nun said, pointing. "Well, tomorrow, she will be. She will be sold as the ungrateful wretch that she is, and there will be no easy time for her now. There will be no kind men looking for a bought wife, or nobles looking for a servant."

That was what passed for a fine life, an easy life, in this place. Sophia hated that fact almost as much as she hated the people there. She hated the thought of what might happen to her too. She'd been about to become the wife of a prince, and now...

"The only ones who will want a wicked thing like this," Sister O'Venn said, "are cruel men with crueler aims. This girl brought it upon herself, and now she will go where she must."

"Where you choose to send me!" Sophia countered, because she could see from the masked nun's thoughts that she had sent for the worst people she could think of. There was a kind of torment just in being able to see that. She looked around again at each of the masked nuns there, trying to stare through the veils to reach the women beneath.

"I'm only going to people like that because you choose to send me. You *choose* to indenture us. You sell us as though we're nothing!"

"You are nothing," Sister O'Venn said, shoving the dowel back into Sophia's mouth.

Sophia glared at her, reaching out to try to find some speck of humanity somewhere in there. There was nothing that she could find, only cruelty masquerading as necessary firmness, and evil pretending to be duty, without even real belief behind it. Sister O'Venn just liked to hurt the weak.

She hurt Sophia then, and there was nothing Sophia could do except scream.

She threw herself against the ropes, trying to tear free, or at least find some iota of room in which to escape the scourge ripping out penitence from her. There was nothing she could do, though,

except scream, begging mutely into the wood she bit into while her power sent her screams out into the city, hoping that her sister would hear them somewhere in Ashton.

There was no reply except the steady whistle of braided leather through the air and the slap of it against her bloodied back. The masked nun beat her with a seemingly interminable strength, long past the point where Sophia's legs could hold her up, and past the point where she even had the strength left to scream.

At some point after that, she must have passed out, but that made no difference. By that point, even Sophia's nightmares were things of violence, bringing back old dreams of a burning house and men she had to outrun. When she came back to herself, they were done, the others long gone.

Still tied in place, Sophia wept while the rain washed away the blood of her beating. It would have been easy to believe that it couldn't get worse, except that it could.

It could get so much worse.

And tomorrow, it would.

CHAPTER TWO

Kate stood above Ashton and watched it burn. She had thought that she would be happy to see it gone, but this wasn't just the House of the Unclaimed or the spaces where the dock workers kept their barges.

This was everything.

Wood and thatch caught light, and Kate could feel the terror of the people there within the wide circle of houses. Cannon roared over the screams of the dying, and Kate saw swathes of buildings falling as easily as if they were made from paper. Blunderbusses sounded, while arrows filled the air so thickly it was hard to see the sky beyond them. They fell, and Kate walked through the rain of them with the strange, detached calm that could only come from being in a dream.

No, not a dream. This was more than that.

Whatever the powers of Siobhan's fountain, they ran through Kate now, and she saw death all around her. Horses ran through the streets, riders cutting downward with sabers and backswords. Screams came from all around her until they seemed to fill the city as surely as the fire did. Even the river appeared to be on fire now, although as Kate looked, she saw that it was the barges that filled the broad expanse of it, fire leaping from one to another as men fought to get clear. Kate had been on a barge, and she could guess at how terrifying those flames must be.

There were figures running through the streets, and it was easy to tell the difference between the panicked citizens of the city and the figures in ochre-colored uniforms who followed with blades, hacking at them as they ran. Kate had never seen the sack of a city before, but this was something awful. It was violence for the sake of it, with no sign of stopping.

There were lines of refugees beyond the city now, heading out with whatever possessions they could carry in long rows heading out into the rest of the country. Would they seek refuge in the Ridings or go further, out to towns like Treford or Barriston?

Then Kate saw the riders bearing down on them, and she knew that they wouldn't make it that far. There was fire at the back of them, though, so there was nowhere to run. What would it be like to be caught like that?

She knew, though, didn't she?

The scene shifted, and now Kate knew that she wasn't looking at something that might be, but something that *had* been. She knew this dream, because it was one that she had far too often. She was in an old house, a grand house, and there was danger coming.

There was something different this time though. There were people there, and Kate looked up at them from so far below that she knew she must have been tiny. There was a man there, looking worried but strong in a nobleman's velvet, hastily thrown on, and a curled black wig discarded in his rush to deal with the situation, revealing cropped gray hair below. The woman with him was lovely but disheveled, as if it normally took her an hour to dress with the aid of servants and now she'd done it in minutes. She had a kind look to her, and Kate reached out to her, not understanding why the woman didn't pick her up, when that was what she usually did.

"There's no time," the man said. "And if we all try to break free, they will just follow. We need to go separately."

"But the children – " the woman began. Kate knew now without being told that this was her mother.

"They will be safer away from us," her father said. He turned to a servant, and Kate recognized her nurse. "You need to get them out, Anora. Take them somewhere safe, where no one will know them. We will find them when this madness is done."

Kate saw Sophia then, looking far too young, but also looking ready to argue. Kate knew that look far too well.

“No,” their mother said. “You have to go, both of you. There is no time. Run, my darlings.” There was a crash from somewhere else in the house. “*Run.*”

Kate was running then, her hand held firmly in Sophia’s. There was a crash, but she didn’t look back. She just kept going, out along corridors, pausing only to hide as shadowy figures passed. They ran until they found an open set of windows, heading out of the house, out into the darkness...

Kate blinked, coming back to herself. The morning light above her seemed too bright, the shine of it dazzling. She tried to grab for the dream as she woke, tried to see what had happened next, but it was already fleeing faster than she could hold to it. Kate groaned at that, because she knew that the last part hadn’t been a dream. It had been a memory, and it was one memory that Kate wanted to be able to see more than all the others.

Still, she had her parents’ faces in her mind now. She held them there, forcing herself not to forget. She sat up slowly, her head swimming with the aftermath of what she’d seen.

“You should take it slowly,” Siobhan said. “The fountain’s waters can have aftereffects.”

She was sitting on the edge of the fountain, which looked ruined again now, not bright and fresh as it had been when Siobhan had drawn water from it for Kate to drink. She looked exactly the same as she had what must have been a night ago, even the flowers twined into her hair looking untouched, as though she hadn’t moved in all that time. She was watching Kate with an expression that said nothing about what she was thinking, and the walls that she kept around her mind meant that she was a total blank, even to Kate’s power.

Kate tried to stand simply because she wouldn’t be stopped from it by this woman. The forest around her seemed to swim as she did, and Kate saw a haze of colors around the edges of trees, stones, branches. Kate stumbled, having to rest her hand against a broken column to steady herself.

“You will have to learn to listen to me if you’re to be my apprentice,” Siobhan said. “You can’t expect to be able to simply stand up after that many changes in your body.”

Kate gritted her teeth and waited for the sensation of dizziness to pass. It didn’t take long. Judging by her expression, even Siobhan was surprised when Kate stepped away from the support of the column.

“Not bad,” she said. “You’re adjusting quicker than I might have thought. How do you feel?”

Kate shook her head. “I don’t know.”

“Then take the time to think,” Siobhan snapped back with just a hint of annoyance. “I want a student who thinks about the world, rather than just reacting to it. I think that’s you. Do you want to prove me wrong?”

Kate shook her head again. “I’m getting... the world seems different when I look at it.”

“You’re starting to see it as it is, with the currents of life,” Siobhan said. “You will get used to it. Try moving.”

Kate took a faltering step, then another.

“You can do better than that,” Siobhan said. “Run!”

That was a little too close to Kate’s dreams for comfort, and she found herself wondering how much of it Siobhan had seen. She had said that she and Kate weren’t the same, but if they were close enough for the other woman to want to teach her, then maybe they were close enough for Siobhan to see into her dreams.

There was no time to think about that right then, because Kate was too busy running. She sprinted through the woods, her feet skimming over the moss and the mud, the fallen leaves and the broken branches. It was only as she saw the trees whipping by that she realized just how fast she was moving.

Kate leapt, and suddenly she was springing into the lower branches of one of the trees around her, as easily as if she’d stepped up from a boat to a dock. Kate balanced on the branch, seeming to feel every breath of wind that moved it before it could shake her off. She hopped back down to the ground and, on impulse, moved to a heavy fallen branch that she could never have hoped to lift before.

Kate felt the roughness of the bark against her hands as she gripped it, and she lifted it smoothly, hoisting it above her head like one of the strongmen at the fairs that came to Ashton every so often. She threw it, watching the branch disappear into the trees to land with a crash.

Kate heard it, and for a moment, she heard every other sound around her in the forest. She heard the rustle of leaves as small things moved under them, the chirp of birds up in the branches. She heard the scuff of tiny feet against the ground, and knew the spot where a hare would appear before it came. The sheer panoply of sounds was too much at first. Kate had to clamp her hands to her ears to keep out the drip of water from leaves, the movement of insects along bark. She clamped down on it the way she'd learned to with her talent for hearing thoughts.

She returned to the spot where the ruined fountain stood, and Siobhan was there, smiling with what seemed to be a hint of pride.

"What is happening to me?" Kate asked.

"Only what you asked for," Siobhan said. "You wanted strength to defeat your enemies."

"But all of this..." Kate began. The truth was that she'd never believed so much could happen to her.

"There are many forms that magic can take," Siobhan said. "You will not curse your enemies or scry on them from a distance. You will not call down lightning or summon the spirits of the restless dead. Those are paths for others."

Kate raised an eyebrow. "Is any of that even possible?"

She saw Siobhan shrug. "It doesn't matter. You have the strength of the fountain running in you now. You will be faster and stronger, your senses will be sharper. You will see things that most people cannot. Combined with your own talents, you will be formidable. I will teach you to strike in battle or from the shadows. I will make you deadly."

Kate had always wanted to be strong, but even so, she found herself a little scared by it all. Siobhan had already told her that there would be a price for all of this, and the more wonderful it seemed, the greater she suspected that price was going to be. She thought back to what she'd dreamed, and she hoped that it wasn't a warning.

"I saw something," Kate said. "I dreamed it, but it didn't feel like a dream."

"What did it feel like?" Siobhan asked.

Kate was about to say that she didn't know, but she caught Siobhan's expression and thought better of it. "It felt like the truth. I hope not, though. In my dream, Ashton was in the middle of being razed. It was on fire, and the people were being slaughtered."

She half expected Siobhan to laugh at her for even mentioning it, or maybe she hoped for it. Instead, Siobhan looked thoughtful, nodding to herself.

"I should have expected it," the woman said. "Things are moving faster than I thought they would, but time is one thing even I cannot do anything about. Well, not permanently."

"You know what's happening?" Kate asked.

That earned her a smile that she couldn't decipher. "Let's just say that I have been expecting events," Siobhan replied. "There are things that I have anticipated, and things that must be done in only a short amount of time."

"And you aren't going to tell me what's going on, are you?" Kate said. She tried to keep the frustration out of her voice by focusing on everything that she had gained. She was stronger now, and faster, so should it matter that she didn't know everything? It did though.

"Already, you're learning," Siobhan replied. "I knew I didn't make a mistake in choosing you for an apprentice."

In choosing her? Kate had been the one to seek out the fountain, not once, but twice. She'd been the one to ask for power, and the one to decide to accept Siobhan's terms. She wasn't going to let the other woman persuade her that it had been any other way.

"I came here," Kate said. "I chose this."

Siobhan shrugged. “Yes, you did. And now, it is time for you to begin to learn.”

Kate looked around. This wasn’t a library like the one in the city. It wasn’t a training field with fencing masters like the one where Will’s regiment had humiliated her. What could she learn, here in this wild place?

Even so, she prepared herself, standing in front of Siobhan and waiting. “I’m ready. What do I have to do?”

Siobhan cocked her head to one side. “Wait.”

She went to a spot where a small fire had been laid in a pit, ready to light. Siobhan tossed a flicker of flame into it without bothering with a flint and steel, then whispered words Kate couldn’t catch as smoke rose from it.

The smoke started to twist and writhe, forming itself into shapes as Siobhan directed it the way a conductor might have directed musicians. The smoke coalesced in a shape that was vaguely human, finally burning away to leave something that looked like a warrior from some long gone age. He stood holding a sword that looked wickedly sharp.

So sharp, in fact, that Kate had no time to even react when he thrust it through her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

They left Sophia to dangle in place for the night, held up only by the ropes they'd used to tie her to the punishment post. The sheer immobility of it was almost as much of a torture as her ravaged back, as her limbs burned with the lack of movement. She couldn't do anything to ease the pain of her beating, or the shame of being left out there in the rain as a kind of warning to the others there.

Sophia hated them then, with the kind of hatred she had always chided Kate for holding too close. She wanted to watch them die, and the wanting of it was a kind of pain too, because there was no way that Sophia would ever be in a position to make it happen. She couldn't even free herself now.

She couldn't sleep either. The pain and the awkward position saw to that. The closest Sophia could come was a kind of half-dreaming delirium, the past mixing with the present while the rain continued to plaster her hair to her head.

She dreamed of the cruelty she'd seen in Ashton, and not just in the living hell of the orphanage. The streets had been almost as bad with their predators and their callous lack of care for those who ended up on them. Even in the palace, for every kindly soul, there had been another like Milady d'Angelica who seemed to revel in the power her position gave her to be cruel to others. She thought of a world that was filled with wars and human-wrought cruelty, wondering how it could have turned into such a heartless place.

Sophia tried to turn her thoughts to kinder things, but that wasn't easy. She started to think about Sebastian, but the truth was that it hurt too much. Things had seemed so perfect between them, and then, when he'd found out what she was... it had fallen apart so quickly that now Sophia's heart felt like ash. He hadn't even tried to stand up to his mother or to stay with Sophia. He'd just sent her away.

Sophia thought about Kate instead, and thoughts of her brought with them the need to cry for help once more. She sent another call into the first glimmers of the dawn light, but still, there was nothing. Worse, thinking about her sister mostly brought with it memories of hard times in the orphanage, or other, earlier things.

Sophia thought about the fire. The attack. She'd been so young when it had happened that she barely remembered any of it. She could recall her mother's and father's faces, but not what they had sounded like outside of those few instructions to run. She could remember having to flee, but could only pull together the faintest glimpses of the time before that. There had been a wooden rocking horse, a large house where it had been easy to play at getting lost, a nanny...

Sophia couldn't dredge up more than that from her memory. The House of the Unclaimed had covered it almost completely with a miasma made from pain, so that it was hard to think past the beatings and the grinding wheels, the enforced subservience and the dread that came from knowing what it all led to.

The same thing that awaited Sophia now: being sold like an animal.

How long did she hang there, held in place no matter how she tried to get away? Long enough that the sun was over the horizon, at least. Long enough that when the masked nuns came to cut her down, Sophia's limbs gave way, leaving her to collapse to the courtyard's stones. The nuns made no move to help her.

"Get up," one of them ordered. "You don't want your debt to be sold looking like that."

Sophia continued to lie there, gritting her teeth against the pain as feeling crept back into her legs. She only moved when the nun lashed out, kicking her.

"Get up, I said," she snapped.

Sophia forced herself to her feet, and the masked nuns took her by the arms the way Sophia imagined a prisoner might be escorted to her execution. She didn't feel much better at the prospect of what was due to come for her.

They took her to a small stone cell, where there were buckets waiting. They scrubbed her then, and somehow the masked nuns managed to turn even that into a kind of torture. Some of the water was so hot that it scalded Sophia's skin as it washed away the blood, making her scream with all the pain that she'd experienced when Sister O'Venn had beaten her.

More of the water was icy cold, in a way that made Sophia shiver with it. Even the soap the nuns used stung, burning at her eyes as they scrubbed her hair and bound it back in a rough knot that had nothing to do with the elegant designs of the palace. They took away her white underdress and gave her the gray shift of the orphanage to wear. After the fine clothes Sophia had worn in the previous days, it scratched at her skin with the promise of biting insects. They didn't feed her. Presumably, it wasn't worth it, now that their investment in her was at an end.

That was what this place was. It was like a farm for children, fattening them up just enough with skills and fear to make useful apprentices or servants and then selling them on.

"You know that this is wrong," Sophia said as they marched her toward the door. "Can't you see the things you're doing?"

Another of the nuns cuffed her at the back of the head, making Sophia stumble.

"We provide the Masked Goddess's mercy to those who need it. Now, be silent. You'll fetch a worse price if your face is bruised from being slapped."

Sophia swallowed at that thought. It hadn't occurred to her quite how carefully they'd hidden the marks of her beating beneath the dull gray of her shift. Again, she found herself thinking of farmers, although now it was about the kind of horse trader who might dye a horse's coat for a better sale.

They took her along the corridors of the orphanage, and now there were no watching faces. They didn't want the children there to see this part, probably because it would remind too many of them of the fate that was to come for them. It would encourage them to run, when the beating last night had probably terrified them into never daring it.

In any case, they were heading into the sections of the House of the Unclaimed where the children didn't go now, into the spaces reserved for the nuns and their visitors. Most of it was plain, although there were notes of wealth here and there, in gilded candlesticks, or in the shine of silver around a ceremonial mask's edges.

The room they led Sophia to was practically plush by the standards of the orphanage. It looked a little like the receiving parlor of some noble house, with chairs set around the edges, each with a small table holding a goblet of wine and a plate with sweetmeats. There was a table at one end of the room, behind which Sister O'Venn stood, a length of folded vellum beside her. Sophia guessed that it would be the tally for her indenture. Would they even let her know the amount before they sold it on?

"Formally," Sister O'Venn said, "we are required to ask you, before we sell on your indenture, if you have the means to repay your debt to the goddess. The amount is here. Come, you worthless thing, and find out what you're *actually* worth."

Sophia didn't get a choice; they took her to the table and she looked down at it. She wasn't surprised to find every meal, every night of lodging annotated. It came to so much that Sophia recoiled from it instinctively.

"Do you have the means to pay this debt?" the nun repeated.

Sophia stared up at her. "You know I don't."

There was a stool in the middle of the floor, carved from hard wood and completely at odds with the rest of the room. Sister O'Venn pointed to it.

"Then you will sit there, and do so demurely. You will not speak unless required to. You will obey any instruction instantly. Fail, and there will be punishment."

Sophia hurt too much to disobey. She went to the low stool and sat, keeping her eyes downcast enough that she wouldn't attract the attention of the nuns. Even so, she watched as figures came into the room, men and women, all with the sense of wealth around them. Sophia couldn't see much more

of them than that, though, because they wore veils not unlike those of the nuns, obviously so no one would see who was interested in buying her like chattel.

“Thank you for coming in at such short notice,” Sister O’Venn said, and now her voice held the smoothness of a merchant extolling the virtues of some fine silk or perfume. “I hope that you will find it worthwhile. Please take a moment to examine the girl, and then make your bids with me.”

They surrounded Sophia then, staring at her the way a cook might have examined a cut of meat at the market, wondering what it would be good for, trying to see any trace of rot or excessive sinew. A woman ordered Sophia to look at her, and Sophia did her best to obey.

“Her coloring is good,” the woman said, “and I suppose she might be pretty enough.”

“A pity they won’t let us see her with a boy,” a fat man said with a trace of an accent that said he’d come from across the Knifewater. His expensive silks were stained with old sweat, the stink of it disguised by a perfume probably better suited to a woman. He glanced over to the nuns as if Sophia wasn’t there. “Unless your opinion on that has changed, sisters?”

“This is still a place of the Goddess,” Sister O’Venn said, and Sophia could pick out the genuine disapproval in her voice. Strange that she would balk at that, when she didn’t at so much else, Sophia thought.

She reached out with her talent, trying to pick out what she could from the minds of those there. She didn’t know what she hoped to accomplish, though, because there was no way she could think of to influence their opinions of her one way or another. Instead, it just gave her an opportunity to see the same cruelties, the same harsh ends, again and again. The best she could hope for was servitude. The worst made her shiver with fear.

“Hmm, she does quiver beautifully when she’s afraid,” one man said. “Too fine for the mines, I guess, but I’ll put in my bid.”

He walked to Sister O’Venn, whispering a figure to her. One by one, the others did the same. When they were done, she looked around the room.

“Currently, Meister Karg has the highest bid,” Sister O’Venn said. “Does anyone wish to raise their offer?”

A couple seemed to consider it. The woman who had wanted to look into Sophia’s eyes walked over to the masked nun, presumably whispering another figure.

“Thank you, all of you,” Sister O’Venn said at last. “Our business is concluded. Meister Karg, the contract of indenture now belongs to you. I am required to remind you that should it be repaid, this girl will be free to go.”

The fat man snorted beneath his veil, pulling it away to reveal a ruddy face with too many chins and not improved by the presence of a bushy moustache.

“And when has that ever happened with my girls?” he shot back. He held out a pudgy hand. Sister O’Venn took the contract, placing it in his grip.

The others there made small sounds of irritation, although Sophia could sense that several of them were already thinking about other possibilities. The woman who had raised her bid was thinking that it was a pity she had lost, but only in the way it irritated her when one of her horses lost a race against those of her neighbors.

All the while, Sophia sat there, unable to move at the thought of having her entire life handed over to someone so easily. A few days ago, she’d been about to marry a prince, and now... now she was about to become this man’s property?

“There is just the matter of the money,” Sister O’Venn said.

The fat man, Meister Karg, nodded. “I will deal with it now. It is better to pay in coin than bankers’ promises when there is a ship to catch.”

A ship? What ship? Where did this man plan to take her? What was he going to do with her? The answers to that were easy enough to snatch from his thoughts, and just the idea of it was enough to make Sophia half rise, ready to run.

Strong hands caught her, the nuns clamping their grips around her arms once more. Meister Karg looked over at her with casual contempt.

“Have her taken to my wagon, would you? I will settle things here, and then...”

And then, Sophia could see that her life would become a thing of even worse horror. She wanted to fight, but there was nothing she could do as the others led her away. Nothing at all. In the privacy of her head, she screamed for her sister’s help.

Yet it seemed that Kate either hadn’t heard – or didn’t care.

CHAPTER FOUR

Again and again, Kate died.

Or “died” at least. Illusory weapons slid into her flesh, ghostly hands strangled her into unconsciousness. Arrows flickered into existence and shot through her. The weapons were only things formed from smoke, pulled into existence by Siobhan’s magic, but every one of them hurt as much as a real weapon would have.

They didn’t kill Kate, though. Instead, each moment of pain merely brought a sound of disappointment from Siobhan, who watched from the sidelines with what seemed to be a combination of amusement and exasperation at the slowness with which Kate was learning.

“Pay attention, Kate,” Siobhan said. “Do you think I’m summoning these dream fragments for my entertainment?”

The figure of a swordsman appeared in front of Kate, dressed for a duel rather than an all-out battle. He saluted her, leveling a rapier.

“This is the Finnochí derobement,” he said in the same flat monotone the others seemed to have. He thrust at her and Kate went to parry with her wooden practice sword, because she’d learned to do that much, at least. She was fast enough to see the moment when the fragment changed direction, but the move still caught her off guard, the ephemeral blade slipping through her heart.

“Again,” Siobhan said. “There is little time.”

In spite of what she said, there seemed to be more time than Kate could have imagined. The minutes seemed to stretch out in the wood, filled with opponents trying to kill her, and as they tried, Kate learned.

She learned to fight them, cutting them down with her practice sword because Siobhan had insisted that she set her real blade aside to avoid the risk of real injury. She learned to thrust and cut, parry and feint, because every time she made a mistake, the ghostly outline of a blade slid into her with a pain that felt all too real.

After the ones with swords were the ones with sticks or mauls, bows or muskets. Kate learned to kill a dozen ways with her hands, and to read the moment when a foe would fire a weapon, throwing herself flat. She learned to run through the forest, jumping from branch to branch, fleeing from foes as she dodged and hid.

She learned to hide and move silently, because every time she made a noise, the ephemeral enemies descended on her with more weapons than she could match.

“Couldn’t you just *teach* me?” Kate demanded of Siobhan, shouting it into the trees.

“I am teaching you,” she replied as she stepped from one of those nearby. “If you were here to learn magic, we could do that with tomes and gentle words, but you are here to become deadly. For that, pain is the greatest teacher there is.”

Kate gritted her teeth and kept going. At least here, there was a point to the pain, unlike in the House of the Unclaimed. She set off back into the forest, sticking to the shadows, learning to move without disturbing the least twig or leaf as she crept up on a fresh set of conjured foes.

Still she died.

Every time she succeeded, a new foe appeared, or a new threat. Each was harder than the last. When Kate learned to avoid human eyes, Siobhan conjured dogs whose skin seemed to billow into smoke with every step they took. When Kate learned to slip past the defenses of a duelist’s sword, the next foe wore armor so that she could only strike at the gaps between the plates.

Whenever she stopped, it seemed that Siobhan was there, with advice or hints, encouragement or just the kind of maddening amusement that spurred Kate on to do better. She was faster now, and stronger, but it seemed as though it wasn’t enough for the woman who controlled the fountain.

She had the feeling that Siobhan was preparing her for something, but the other woman wouldn't say what, or answer any questions that weren't about what Kate needed to do next.

"You need to learn to use the talent that you were born with," Siobhan said. "Learn to see the intent of a foe before they strike. Learn to pick out the location of your enemies before they find you."

"How do I practice that when I'm fighting illusions?" Kate demanded.

"I direct them, so I will allow you to look at a fraction of my mind," Siobhan said. "Be careful though. There are places you do not want to look."

That caught Kate's interest. She'd already come up against the walls the other woman kept in place to stop her from looking at her mind. Now she was going to get to peek? When she felt Siobhan's walls shift, Kate plunged inside as far as the new boundaries would let her.

It wasn't far, but it was still far enough to get a sense of an alien mind, as far from any normal person's as Kate had ever seen. Kate recoiled from the sheer strangeness of it, pulling back. She did so just in time for an ephemeral foe to thrust a blade through her throat.

"I told you to be careful," Siobhan said while Kate gagged. "Now, try again."

There was another swordsman in front of Kate. She focused, and this time she caught the moment when Siobhan told it to attack. She ducked, cutting it down.

"Better," Siobhan said. It was as close to praise as she came, but praise didn't stop the constant testing. It just meant more foes, more work, more training. Siobhan pushed Kate until even with the new strength she had, she felt ready to collapse from exhaustion.

"Haven't I learned enough?" Kate asked. "Haven't I *done* enough?"

She watched Siobhan smile without amusement. "You think that you are ready, apprentice? Are you really that impatient?"

Kate shook her head. "It's just – "

"That you think you have learned enough for one day. You think that you know what is coming, or what is needed." Siobhan spread her hands. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps you have mastered what I want you to learn."

Kate could hear the note of annoyance then. Siobhan didn't have the kind of patience as a teacher that Thomas had shown with her.

"I'm sorry," Kate said.

"It's too late for sorry," Siobhan said. "I want to see what you've learned." She clapped her hands. "A test. Come with me."

Kate wanted to argue, but she could see that there was no point to it. Instead, she followed Siobhan to a spot where the forest opened out into a roughly circular clearing bordered by hawthorns and brambles, wild roses and stinging nettles. In the middle of it, a sword sat, balanced across a tree stump.

No, not just a sword. Kate instantly recognized the blade that Thomas and Will had made for her.

"How..." she began.

Siobhan jerked her head toward it. "Your blade was unfinished, as you were. I have finished it, as I am trying to improve you."

The sword did look different now. It had a grip of swirling dark and light wood that Kate suspected would fit her hand perfectly. It had markings down the blade that were in no language she'd seen before, while now the blade shone with a wicked-looking edge.

"If you think you are ready," Siobhan said, "all you have to do is walk in there and take your weapon. But if you do, know this: the danger is real in there. It is no game."

If it had been another situation, Kate might have taken a step back. She might have told Siobhan that she wasn't interested, and waited a little longer. Two things stopped her from doing that. One was the insufferable smile that never seemed to leave Siobhan's face. It taunted Kate with the assurance that she wasn't good enough yet. That she would never be quite good enough to live up to the standards

Siobhan set for her. It was an expression that reminded her too much of the contempt the masked nuns had shown her.

In the face of that smile, Kate could feel her anger rising. She wanted to wipe the smile from Siobhan's face. She wanted to show her that whatever magic the woman of the forest might possess, Kate was up to the tasks she set. She wanted some small measure of satisfaction for all the ghostly blades that had plunged into her.

The other reason was simpler: that sword was hers. It had been a gift from Will. Siobhan didn't get to dictate when Kate got to take it.

Kate took a run up and leapt to a branch, then jumped over the ring of thorns surrounding the clearing. If this was the best that Siobhan could manage, she would take her blade and scramble back out as easily as walking along a country road. She dropped into a crouch as she landed, looking across to the sword that waited for her.

There was a figure holding it now, though, and Kate found herself staring at it. At *herself*.

It was definitely her, down to the last detail. The same short red hair. The same wiry liteness. This version of her, however, wore different clothes, dressed in the greens and browns of the forest. Her eyes were different too, leaf green from edge to edge and anything but human. As Kate watched, the other version of her drew Will's blade, slicing it through the air as if testing it.

"You aren't me," Kate said.

"You aren't me," the other her said, with exactly the same inflection, exactly the same *voice*. "You're just a cheap copy, not half as good."

"Give me the sword," Kate demanded.

The other her shook her head. "I think I'll keep it. You don't deserve it. You're just scum from the orphanage. No wonder things didn't work out with Will."

Kate ran at her then, swinging her practice blade with all the strength and fury she could muster, as though she might break apart this thing with power of her attack. Instead, she found her practice blade met by the steel of the live one.

She thrust and she cut, feinted and beat, attacking with all the skills that she'd built up through Siobhan's brutal teaching. Kate pushed to the edges of the strength the fountain had granted her, using all the speed she possessed to try to break through her opponent's defenses.

The other version of her parried every attack perfectly, seeming to know every move as Kate made it. When she struck back, Kate barely deflected the strokes.

"You're not good enough," the other version of her said. "You'll never be good enough. You're weak."

The words rattled through Kate almost as much as the impact of the sword blows against her practice weapon. They hurt, and they hurt most because they were everything Kate suspected might be the truth. How many times had they said it in the House of the Unclaimed? Hadn't Will's friends shown her the truth of it in their practice circle?

Kate shouted her anger and attacked again.

"No control," the other her said as she deflected the blows. "No thought. Nothing but a little girl playing at being a warrior."

Kate's mirror image lashed out then, and Kate felt the pain of the sword cutting across her hip. For a moment, it felt no different from the ghostly blades that had stabbed her so many times, but this time the pain didn't fade. This time, there was blood.

"How does it feel, knowing you're going to die?" her opponent asked.

Terrifying. It felt terrifying, because the worst part of it was that Kate knew it was true. She couldn't hope to beat this opponent. She couldn't even hope to survive against her. She was going to die here, in this ring of thorns.

Kate ran for the edge of it then, casting aside her wooden blade as it slowed her down. She leapt for the edge of the circle, hearing her mirror image's laughter behind her as she threw herself

at it. Kate covered her face with her hands, shutting her eyes against the thorns and hoping that it would be enough.

They tore at her as she plunged through them, tearing at her clothes and the skin beneath. Kate could feel the blood beading as the thorns ripped into her, but she forced herself through the tangle of them, only daring to open her eyes when she came out the other side.

She looked back, half convinced that her mirror image would be following, but when Kate looked, the other version of her was gone, leaving the sword sitting on its tree stump as if she had never been there.

She collapsed then, her heart hammering with the effort of all that she'd just done. She was bleeding from a dozen places now, both from thorn scratches and from the wound on her hip. She rolled to her back, staring up at the forest canopy, the pain coming in waves.

Siobhan stepped into her field of vision, looking down at her with a mixture of disappointment and pity. Kate didn't know which was worse.

"I told you that you weren't ready," she said. "Are you ready to listen now?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Lady Emmeline Constance Ysalt d'Angelica, the note read, *Marchioness of Sowerd and Lady of the Order of the Sash*. Angelica was less impressed by the use of her full name than by the source of the note: the Dowager had summoned her for a private audience.

Oh, she hadn't put it that way. There were phrases about being "delighted to request the pleasure of your company," and "hoping that it should prove convenient." Angelica knew as well as anyone that a request from the Dowager amounted to an order, even if the Assembly of Nobles made the laws.

She forced herself not to show the worry she felt as she approached the Dowager's chambers. She didn't check her appearance nervously or fidget unnecessarily. Angelica knew that she looked perfect, because she spent time in front of the mirror every morning with her servants, making sure that she did. She didn't fidget because she was in perfect control of herself. Besides, what did she have to worry about? She was going to meet one old woman, not walk into a shadow cat's den.

Angelica tried to remember that as she approached the doors to the old woman's chambers, a servant pushing them open and announcing her.

"Milady d'Angelica!"

She should have felt safe, but the truth was that this was the queen of the kingdom, and Sebastian's mother, and Angelica had done too much in her life to ever feel certain that she would avoid disapproval. Still, she walked forward, forcing herself to project a carefully crafted mask of confidence.

She had never had cause to be in the Dowager's private chambers before. To be honest, they were something of a disappointment, designed with a kind of plain grandeur that was at least twenty years out of date. There was too much dark wood paneling for Angelica's tastes, and while the gilt and silks of the rest of the palace were present in patches, it was still nowhere near the extravagance Angelica might have chosen.

"You were expecting something more elaborate, my dear?" the Dowager asked. She was seated by a window that looked out over the gardens, on a chair of dark wood and green leather. A marquetry table stood between her and another, only subtly less tall, seat. She was wearing a relatively simple day dress rather than full finery, and a circlet in place of a full crown, but there was still no doubt about the older woman's authority.

Angelica dropped into a curtsey. A proper court curtsey, not one of the simple things a servant might have bothered with. Even in something like this, the subtle gradations of status mattered. The seconds dragged out as Angelica waited for permission to rise.

"Please join me, Angelica," the Dowager said. "That is what you prefer to be called, isn't it?"

"Yes, your majesty." Angelica suspected that she knew very well what she ought to be called. She also noted that there was no corresponding suggestion of informality on the part of Sebastian's mother.

Still, she was pleasant enough, offering a raspberry tisane from a pot that had obviously been freshly brewed and serving Angelica a slice of fruited cake with her own delicately gloved hand.

"How is your father, Angelica?" she asked. "Lord Robert was always loyal to my husband when he lived. Is his breathing still poor?"

"It benefits from the country air, your majesty," Angelica said, thinking of the sprawling estates she was only too happy to stay away from. "Although he no longer rides to the hunt as much as he did."

"The young men ride in the vanguard of the hunt," the Dowager said, "while more sensible souls wait behind and take things at a pace to suit them. When I have attended hunts, it has been with a falcon, not a pack of charging hounds. They are less reckless, and they see more."

"A fine choice, your majesty," Angelica said.

“And your mother, does she continue to cultivate her flowers?” the Dowager asked, sipping her drink. “I have always envied her the star tulips she produces.”

“I believe she is working on a new variety, your majesty.”

“Splicing together lines, no doubt,” the Dowager mused, setting her cup down.

Angelica found herself wondering at the point of all of this. She sincerely doubted that the kingdom’s ruler had called her here just to discuss minor details of her family’s life. If *she* ruled, Angelica certainly wouldn’t care about something so pointless. Angelica barely paid attention when letters came from her parents’ estates.

“Am I boring you, my dear?” the Dowager asked.

“No, of course not, your majesty,” Angelica said hurriedly. Thanks to the civil wars, the days might have gone when the kingdom’s royalty could simply imprison nobles without trial, but it still wasn’t a good idea to risk insulting them.

“Because I was under the impression that you found my family fascinating,” the Dowager continued. “My younger son in particular.”

Angelica froze, unsure what to say next. She should have guessed that a mother would notice her interest in Sebastian. Was that what this was then? A polite suggestion that she should leave him alone?

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Angelica replied, deciding that her best option was to play the part of the coy young noble girl. “Prince Sebastian is obviously very handsome, but – ”

“But your attempt to sedate him and claim him for your own didn’t go as planned?” the Dowager asked, and now there was steel in her voice. “Did you think I wouldn’t hear about that little ploy?”

Now, Angelica could feel the fear inside her building. The Dowager might not simply be able to order her death, but that was what an assault like that on a royal person could mean, even with a trial of her noble peers. Maybe *especially* with them, since there would undoubtedly be those who wanted to set an example, or get her out of the way, or settle some score with her family.

“Your majesty – ” Angelica began, but the Dowager cut her off with a single raised finger. Instead of speaking, though, she took her time draining her cup, then tossed it into the fireplace, the porcelain shattering with a crack that made Angelica think of breaking bones.

“An attack upon my son is treason,” the Dowager said. “An attempt to manipulate me, and to steal my son into marriage, is treason. Traditionally, that is rewarded by the Mask of Lead.”

Angelica’s gut clenched at the thought of it. It was a horrific punishment from another time, and not one that she’d ever seen enacted. It was said that people killed themselves just at the thought of it.

“Are you familiar with it?” the Dowager asked. “The traitor is encased in a metal mask, and molten lead is poured inside. A terrible death, but sometimes terror is useful. And, of course, it allows for a cast of their face to be taken and displayed for all to see afterwards as a reminder.”

She took something from beside her chair. It looked like just one of the many masks that were always around the court with the worship of the Masked Goddess. This one could have been the impression of a face though. A terrified, agonized face.

“Allan of Courcer decided to rise against the crown,” the Dowager said. “We hanged most of his men cleanly, but with him, we made an example. I still remember the screams. It’s funny how these things linger.”

Angelica fell from her chair to her knees almost bonelessly, looking up at the other woman.

“Please, your majesty,” she begged, because right then, begging seemed like her only option. “Please, I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” the Dowager said. “Anything is a big word. What if I wanted you to hand over your family lands, or serve as a spy in the courts of this New Army that seems to be coming out of the continental wars? What if I decided that you should go and serve your penance in one of the Far Colonies?”

Angelica looked at that terrified death mask, and knew that there was only one answer.

“Anything, your majesty. Just please, not that.”

She hated being like this. She was one of the foremost nobles in the land, yet here and now she felt as helpless as the lowest cottar.

“What about if I wanted you to marry my son?” the Dowager asked.

Angelica stared at her blankly, the words making no sense. If the other woman had said that she was giving her a chest of gold and sending her on her way it would have made more sense than this did.

“Your majesty?”

“Don’t just kneel there opening and closing your mouth like a fish,” the other woman said. “In fact, sit back down. At least *try* to look like the sort of refined young lady my son should be marrying.”

Angelica forced herself back into her chair. Even so, she felt faint. “I’m not sure I understand.”

The Dowager steepled her fingers. “There is little enough to understand. I am in need of someone suitable to marry my son. You are beautiful enough, from a family of sufficient standing, well connected at court, and it seems obvious enough from your little plot that you are interested in the role. It is an arrangement that seems highly beneficial to all concerned, wouldn’t you agree?”

Angelica managed to collect herself a little. “Yes, your majesty. But – ”

“It is certainly preferable to the alternatives,” the Dowager said, her finger brushing the death mask. “In every sense.”

Put like that, Angelica had no choice. “I would be happy to, your majesty.”

“Your happiness is not my primary concern,” the Dowager snapped back. “The well-being of my son and the safety of this realm are. You will not jeopardize either one, or there will be a reckoning.”

Angelica didn’t have to ask what kind of reckoning. Right then, she could feel the thread of terror running through her. She hated that. She hated this old hag who could make even something she wanted feel like a threat.

“What about Sebastian?” Angelica asked. “From what I saw at the ball, his interests are... elsewhere.”

With the red-haired girl who claimed to be from Meinhalt, but who didn’t behave like any noble Angelica had met.

“That will no longer be a problem,” the Dowager said.

“Even so, if he’s still hurt...”

The other woman fixed her with an even gaze. “Sebastian will do his duty, to both the realm and his family. He will marry who he is required to marry, and we will make it into a joyous occasion.”

“Yes, your majesty,” Angelica said, lowering her gaze demurely. Once she was married to Sebastian, perhaps she wouldn’t have to bow and scrape like this. For now, though, she behaved as she had to. “I shall write to my father at once.”

The Dowager waved that away. “I have already done so, and Robert has been delighted to accept. The arrangements for the wedding are already underway. I understand from the couriers that your mother fainted at the news, but then, she always was of a delicate disposition. I trust that it is not a trait you will pass to my grandchildren.”

She made it sound like a disease to be expunged. Angelica found herself more annoyed by the way everything had just been put in place without her knowledge. Even so, she did her best to show the gratitude she knew was expected of her.

“Thank you, your majesty,” she said. “I will strive to be the best daughter-in-law that you could hope for.”

“Just remember that becoming my daughter buys you no special favor,” the Dowager said. “You have been selected to perform a task, and you will do so to my satisfaction.”

“I will strive to make Sebastian happy,” Angelica said.

The Dowager stood. “See that you do. Make him so happy that he can think of nothing else. Make him happy enough to drive thoughts of... others from his mind. Make him happy, give him

children, do all that the wife of a prince should do. If you do all that, your future will be a happy one as well.”

Angelica’s temper wouldn’t allow her to let that go. “And if I do not?”

The Dowager looked at her as if she were nothing, rather than one of the greatest nobles in the land.

“You are trying to be strong in the hopes that I will respect you as some kind of equal,” she said. “Perhaps you hope that I will see something of myself in you, Angelica. Perhaps I even do, but that is hardly a good thing. I want you to remember one thing from this moment on: I own you.”

“No, you – ”

The slap wasn’t hard. It wouldn’t leave a mark that would show. It barely even stung, except in terms of Angelica’s pride. There, it burned.

“I own you as surely as if I had bought the indenture of some girl,” the Dowager repeated. “If you fail me in any way, I will destroy you for what you tried to do to my son. The only reason you are here and not in a cell is because you are more useful to me like this.”

“As a wife for your son,” Angelica pointed out.

“As that, and as a distraction for him,” the Dowager replied. “You did say you would do anything. Just let me know if you have changed your mind.”

And then there would be the most horrific death Angelica could imagine.

“No, I thought not. You will be the perfect wife. You will be the perfect mother in time. You will tell me of any problems. You will obey my commands. If you fail in any of these things, the Mask of Lead will seem tame in comparison to what will happen to you.”

CHAPTER SIX

They dragged Sophia outside, pulling at her even though she was walking under her own power. She was too numb to do anything else, too weak to even think about fighting. The nuns were delivering her on her new owner's orders. They might as well have wrapped her up like a new hat or a side of beef.

When Sophia saw the cart, then she tried to struggle, but it made no difference. It was a big, gaudy thing, painted like the wagon of some circus or troupe of players. The bars proclaimed it as what it was though: the holding wagon of a slaver.

The nuns dragged her to it and opened up the back, pulling back big bolts that couldn't be accessed from the inside.

"A sinful thing like you deserves to be in a place like this," one of the nuns said.

The other one laughed. "You think she's sinful now? Give her a year or two of being used by every man with the coin for her."

Sophia had a brief glimpse of cowering figures as the nuns threw the door open. Frightened eyes looked up at her, and she saw half a dozen other girls huddled on the hard wood. Then they shoved her inside, sending her tumbling among them with no room to gather herself.

The door slammed shut with a clang of metal on metal. The noise of the bolts was worse, proclaiming Sophia's helplessness in a scrape of rust and iron.

The other girls scrambled back from her while she tried to find a space there. Sophia's talent gave her their fear. They were worried that she would still be violent, the way the dark-eyed girl in the corner had been, or that she would scream until Meister Karg beat all of them, the way the girl with the bruises around her mouth had.

"I'm not going to hurt any of you," Sophia said. "I'm Sophia."

Things that might have been names were murmured back to her in the half light of the prison cart, too quiet for Sophia to catch most of them. Her power let her get the rest, but right then she was too wrapped up in her own misery to care much.

A day ago, things had been so different. She'd been happy. She'd been ensconced in the palace, preparing for her wedding, not locked in a cage. She'd been surrounded by servants and helpers, not frightened girls. She'd had fine dresses, not rags, and safety rather than the lingering pain of a beating.

She'd had the prospect of spending her life with Sebastian, not being used by a succession of men.

There was nothing she could do. Nothing but sit there, looking out of the gaps in the bars now, watching as Meister Karg walked out of the orphanage with a smug expression. He sauntered to the cart, then hauled himself up into the driving seat with a groan of effort. Sophia heard the crack of a whip, and she flinched instinctively after everything that had happened to her at the hands of Sister O'Venn, her body expecting pain even as the cart rumbled into life.

It crawled through Ashton's streets, the wooden wheels jolting as they found the holes between the cobbles there. Sophia saw the houses passing by at barely the pace of a walking man, the wagon in no hurry to get to its destination. That should have been a good thing, in a way, but it seemed then just like a way of drawing out her misery, taunting her and the others with their inability to escape the wagon.

Sophia saw people passing by, moving out of the way of the wagon only in the way that they moved aside for other large carts capable of crushing them. A few glanced at it, but they made no comment. They certainly made no move to stop it or to help the girls within. What did it say about a place like Ashton that this counted as normal?

A fat baker paused to watch them pass. A couple stepped back away from the tire ruts. Children were pulled close by their mothers, or ran up to stare inside on dares from their friends. Men looked in

with considering expressions, as though wondering if they could afford any of the girls there. Sophia forced herself to glare back at them, daring them to meet her eyes.

She wished that Sebastian were there. No one else in this city would help her, but she knew that even after everything that had happened, Sebastian would throw the doors open and get her out. At least, she hoped he would. She'd seen the embarrassment on his face when he'd found out what Sophia was. Maybe he would look away too and pretend not to see her.

Sophia hoped not, because she could see some of what was waiting for her and the others, waiting in Meister Karg's mind like a toad for her. He planned to pick up more girls on his way to a waiting ship that would ferry them across the water to his home city, where there was a brothel that dealt in such "exotic" girls. He always needed new ones, because the men there paid well for the chance to do what they wanted with the fresh arrivals.

Just thinking about it made Sophia feel nauseous, although maybe that had something to do with the constant rolling of the cart as well. Did the nuns know what they'd sold her into? She knew the answer to that: of course they did. They'd joked about it, and about the fact that she would never be free, because there would be no way for her to ever pay off the debt they'd imposed on her.

It meant a lifetime of slavery in everything but name, forced to do whatever her fat, perfumed owner wanted until she was no longer worth anything to him. He might let her go then, but only because it was easier to let her starve than to keep her. Sophia wanted to believe that she would kill herself before she let all of that happen to her, but the truth was that she would probably obey. Hadn't she obeyed for years while the nuns abused her?

The cart ground to a halt, but Sophia wasn't foolish enough to believe that they had reached any kind of final destination. Instead, they had stopped outside a hat maker's shop, and Meister Karg went inside without so much as a glance back at his charges.

Sophia rushed forward, trying to find a way to get to the bolts outside the bars. She reached through the gaps of the wagon's sides, but there was simply no way to reach the lock from where she was.

"You mustn't," the girl with the bruised mouth said. "He'll beat you for it if he catches you."

"He'll beat all of us," another said.

Sophia pulled back, but only because she could see that it wasn't going to do any good. There was no point in getting hurt when it wouldn't change anything. It was better to bide her time and...

And what? Sophia had seen what waited for them in Meister Karg's thoughts. She could probably have guessed it even without that there to make her stomach clench with the fear of it. The slaver's cart was not the worst thing that could happen to any of them, and Sophia needed to find a way out of it before it got worse.

What way, though? Sophia didn't have an answer to that.

There were other things she didn't have an answer to either. How had they found her in the city, when she'd managed to hide from hunters before? How had they known what to look for? The more Sophia thought about it, the more she was convinced that someone must have sent news of her departure to the hunters.

Someone had betrayed her, and that thought hurt worse than any of the beatings had.

Meister Karg came back, dragging a woman with him. This one was a few years older than Sophia, looking as though she had already been indentured for some time.

"Please," she begged as the slaver pulled her along. "You can't do this! Just another few months and I'd have paid off my indenture!"

"And until you pay it in full, your master can still sell it," Meister Karg said. Almost as an afterthought, he hit the woman. Nobody moved to stop him. People barely looked.

Or your master's wife can when she becomes jealous of you.

Sophia caught that clearly, understanding the horror of the situation in that moment through a combination of Karg's and the woman's thoughts. She was called Mellis, and had been doing well

in the profession she'd been indentured to. Well enough that she'd been about to be free, except that the hat maker's wife had been sure her husband would leave her for the indentured woman as soon as she paid off her debt.

So she'd sold her on to a man who would ensure she was never seen again in Ashton.

It was a terrible fate, but it was also a reminder to Sophia that she wasn't the only one there with a harsh story. She'd been so focused on what had happened to her with Sebastian and the court, but the truth was that probably everyone had some sorrowful tale behind their presence in the cart. No one would be there by choice.

And now none of them would have a choice about anything they did in their lives.

"In," Meister Karg snapped, throwing the woman in with the rest of them. Sophia tried to press forward in the moments the door was open, but it slammed shut again in her face before she could get close to it. "We've a lot of ground to cover."

Sophia caught the flicker of a route in his thoughts. There would be more meandering through the city, picking up servants who were no longer wanted, apprentices who had managed to anger their masters. There would be a journey out of the city, into the outlying villages and as far north as the town of Hearth, where another orphanage waited. After that, there was a ship moored on the edge of the Firemarsh.

It was a route that would take at least a couple of days of travel, and Sophia had no doubt that the conditions for it would be awful. Already, the morning sun was turning the wagon into a space of heat, sweat, and desperation. By the time the sun reached its zenith, Sophia doubted she would even be able to think with it.

"Help!" Mellis called out to the people on the street. She was obviously braver than Sophia was. "Can't you see what's happening? You, Benna, you know me. Do something!"

The people there kept walking past, and Sophia could see how useless it was. Nobody cared, or if they did, nobody felt as though they could actually do anything. They weren't about to break the law for the sake of a few indentured girls who were no different from all the others who had been sold from the city over the years. Possibly, at least a few of those there had their own indentured servants or apprentices. Simply calling for help wouldn't work.

Sophia had an option that might, though.

"I know you don't want to interfere," she called out, "but if you take a message to Prince Sebastian and tell him that Sophia is here, I have no doubt that he'll reward you for –"

"Enough of that!" Meister Karg shouted, slamming the handle of his coachman's whip into the bars. Sophia knew what was waiting for her if she was silent, though, and she simply couldn't accept that. It occurred to her that the street people of the city might not be the right ones to ask for help.

"What about you?" Sophia called to him. "You could take me to Sebastian. You're just in this to make money, aren't you? Well, he could give you a profit on me easily, and you'd have the thanks of a prince of the realm. He wanted me for a fiancée two days ago. He'd pay for my freedom."

She could see Meister Karg's thoughts as he considered it. It meant that she shrank back the instant before the whip handle struck the bars again.

"More likely he'd take you and not pay a bent copper for you," the slaver said. "If he even wants you. No, I'll make my money off you the sure way. There's lots of men will want a turn on you, girl. Maybe I'll have a taste when we stop."

The worst part was that Sophia could see that he was serious. He was definitely thinking about it as the cart rumbled back into motion, heading into the outer spaces of the city. In the back of the cart, it was all Sophia could do to shut her mind to the prospect of it. She huddled down with the others, and she could feel their relief that it would be her and not them that the fat man chose tonight.

Kate, she begged for what seemed like the hundredth time. *Please, I need your help.*

As with all the other times, the sending went unanswered. It drifted off into the darkness of the world, and Sophia had no way of knowing if it even found its intended target. She was on her

own, and that was terrifying, because alone, Sophia suspected that she couldn't do anything to stop all the things that were going to happen next.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kate trained until she wasn't sure she could take any more deaths. She practiced with blades and sticks, fired bows, and threw daggers. She ran and she jumped, hid and killed from the shadows. All the time her mind was on the circle of trees and the sword that lay at their heart.

She could still feel the pain of her wounds. Siobhan had dressed the thorn scratches and the deeper puncture with herbs to aid healing, but they had done nothing to stop it hurting with every step.

"You need to learn to work through the pain," Siobhan said. "Let nothing distract you from your objectives."

"I know about pain," Kate said. The House of the Unclaimed had taught her that much, at least. There had been times when it had seemed like the only lesson the place had to offer."

"Then you need to learn to use it," Siobhan said. "You will never have the powers of my kind, but if you can touch a mind, you can distract it, you can calm it."

Siobhan summoned the ghostly forms of animals then: bears and spotted forest cats, wolves and hawks. They struck at Kate with inhuman speed, their claws as deadly as blades, their senses meaning that they could find her even when she hid. The only way to drive them off was to throw thoughts their way, the only way to hide from them, to soothe them into sleep.

Of course, Siobhan didn't teach her that with any patience, just had her killed again and again until Kate learned the skills that she needed.

She did learn though. Slowly, with the constant pain of failure, she learned the skills she needed the same way she'd learned to hide and fight. She learned to drive off the hawks with flickers of thought, and to still her thinking so thoroughly that it seemed to the wolves as though she was something inanimate. She even learned to soothe the bears, lulling them into sleep with the mental equivalent of a lullaby.

All through it, Siobhan watched her, sitting on nearby branches or following along while Kate ran. She never seemed to have Kate's speed, but she was always there when Kate was done, stepping from behind trees or within the shadowy recesses of bushes.

"Would you like to try the circle again?" Siobhan asked, as the sun rose higher in the sky.

Kate frowned at that. She wanted it, more than anything, but she could also feel the fear that came with it. Fear of what might happen. Fear of more pain.

"Do you think I'm ready?" Kate asked.

Siobhan spread her hands. "Who can tell?" she countered. "Do *you* think that you're ready? You find in the circle what you bring to it. Remember that when you're in there."

Somewhere in that, a decision had been made without Kate even realizing it. She was going to try the circle again, it seemed. Her still healing wounds hurt just at the thought of it. Still, she walked through the forest beside Siobhan, trying to focus.

"Every fear you have slows you down," Siobhan said. "You are on a path of violence, and to walk it, you must look neither left nor right. You must not hesitate, from fear, from pain, from weakness. There are those who will sit for years becoming one with the elements, or agonize over the perfect word with which to influence. On your path, you must *act*."

They reached the edge of the circle, and Kate considered it. It was empty save for the sword, but Kate knew how quickly that could change. She crept through the thorns, not disturbing the plants now as she slipped through them, moving silently into the circle. She slipped in with all the stealth she'd learned.

The other version of her was there waiting when she got through, the sword in her hand, her eyes fixed on Kate.

"Did you think that you could simply sneak in and take it?" the second self demanded. "Were you afraid to fight me again, little girl?"

Kate moved forward, her own weapon at the ready. She didn't say anything, because talking had done her no good last time. In any case, she wasn't good at talking. Sophia was better at that. Probably, if she'd been there, she would have already convinced the second version of herself to hand over the blade.

"Do you think that not talking does you any good?" her mirror image demanded. "Does it make you any less weak? Any less useless?"

Kate brought her weapon to bear, striking out high and low, keeping it moving.

"You've been training," her mirror image said as she parried. She struck back and Kate managed to deflect the blow. "It won't be enough."

She kept attacking and Kate gave ground. She had to, because the other version of her was exactly as fast, exactly as strong again.

"It doesn't matter how much you train, or how fast you get," her opponent said. "I will have all the same advantages and none of the weaknesses. I won't be a scared little girl, running from the pain."

She thrust at Kate, and Kate barely managed to dodge the worst of it, the blade cutting a line of fire along her ribs. Kate swayed back, cutting a wide slash with her practice sword in an attempt to keep the other version of herself at bay.

"Just a frightened, weak thing," her mirror self said. "How does it feel to know that you're going to die?"

Kate forced herself to smile. "You tell me."

She kept attacking, ignoring the fear, ignoring the voice that told her she wasn't enough.

"You're just trying to hide what you are," her other self said, although now there was a note that didn't sound as confident. Her parries weren't coming as fast either.

"You think I'm scared?" Kate asked. "You think I'm in pain? Let me show you what those *mean*."

She bundled it up then, all the pain that she'd felt in the House of the Unclaimed, all the fear that had come from being on the street alone. She took the hurt of not having her sister with her, and the loss of her parents, the fact that she'd had to leave Will. Kate took that pain and compressed it into a cannon ball of agony. She flung it at her mirror self.

The other her reeled back, clutching at her head. In that moment, Kate struck. Her practice blade was only wooden, so she didn't try to thrust it through the heart or open one of the big veins of the leg. Instead, she lunged with its tip for the throat, the wood slamming home and sending the mirror her sprawling.

"I am not weak," Kate said, striking again. "I have survived!"

The blade Will and Thomas had made tumbled from her opponent's hand. Kate snatched it up, testing the weight. The mirror self lay there, her hands scrabbling for the wooden sword, her eyes pleading for mercy.

Kate thrust the sword through her and she vanished.

For what seemed like forever, Kate stood there, breathing hard, her heart hammering in her chest. The blade in her hand had blood on it, and Kate wiped it clean with a handful of grass, trying to use the repetitive movement to calm herself. She could feel the grooves of the runes on the blade every time she passed over them, along with flickers of... something.

"You've done well," Siobhan said, walking through the thorns around the edge of the circle. They gave way for her like courtiers bowing out of the way of a queen. "You've pushed aside the things holding you back. The fear. The weakness. The mercy."

That last part scared Kate a little. She'd thrust her sword through the simulacrum without even hesitating. It hadn't been real, but even so, there had been blood on the sword. Kate might not have killed anything real there, but she had killed *something*. Guilt rose up in her with the inevitability of a rising tide.

"You say that as though it's a good thing," Kate said.

Siobhan put a hand on her shoulder. “You have sharpened yourself into the weapon you need to be.”

“For what?” Kate asked. She should have guessed that there would be a reason why Siobhan would help her to become a better fighter. There had obviously been a reason why Siobhan had demanded a yet to be named favor as part of the price for her help.

Siobhan didn’t answer. Instead, she tended to Kate’s wounds, applying fresh herbs and cooling salve where they had opened.

“For what?” Kate repeated.

Siobhan stood, looking Kate in the eye. “There are things that are coming. Things that threaten those like me. You have seen an army coming, and you think that it is just a human kind of war. It is that, and many will die if you fail, but it is more, it is far more.”

“How much more?” Kate asked.

“There are things in this world that destroy all they touch,” Siobhan said. “This is not the time to talk about them.”

That wasn’t good enough for Kate. She wanted to reach out and grab the other woman. She wanted to demand real answers. She knew that she was being used; she just wanted to know in what way, and why. She wanted to have the kind of choice that had never been given to her back in the House of the Unclaimed. She would force an answer from the other woman if she had to. She would —

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