

BLOOD
and
MOONLIGHT

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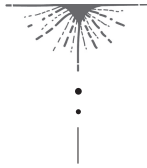
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*This book I write day and night
For Dear Reader's thrill and fright.
If treated low, you must know,
Ill winds through your life will blow.*

For Natalie, who wanted a murder mystery



CHAPTER 1



I'm waiting for the moon.

All other ground-level windows in the neighborhood are shuttered for the night as I lean out of ours to look. A breeze whisks up the deserted street, carrying the scent of rain and the distant rumble of thunder from the west. The city of Collis covers a large hill rising from the flat plains, but my view of the approaching storm is blocked by angled roofs. If I balance on my hips and crane my neck as far as it will go, the rose window and towers of the Holy Sanctum to the east are just visible through a gap between houses. Even without moonlight, the white facade glows against the ebony blanket of sky, washing out all the stars.

Not high enough yet.

I sigh and lever myself back inside as Magister Thomas comes down the stairs into the workroom behind me. The architect pauses when he sees me, his eyebrows so high they disappear in the chestnut hair peeking out from under his cap. "Catrin?" he says. "I thought you went to bed hours ago."

"No, Magister." I remove the angled support and lower the shutter, sliding the bolts into the frame before turning to face my employer's frown.

“If I didn’t know better,” he observes, “I’d say you’re dressed for climbing.”

After dinner I’d traded my calf-length working skirt for a much shorter one over a man’s breeches and bound and pinned my dark curls into submission. “I am,” I admit. “I wanted to check on a bowed crossbeam I noticed this morning on the southern scaffolds.”

The master architect’s frown deepens, creasing his forehead. “Why didn’t you do it earlier?”

“Well . . .” I count the reasons on my fingers. “Between showing the Comte de Montcuir around the work site all morning, verifying the alignment of the drainage system, writing up the stone orders for you to sign, and visiting the market in search of fresh rosemary for Mistress la Fontaine, I ran out of time.” I drop my hands and shrug. “Besides, it’s easier to inspect when the scaffolds aren’t crawling with workers.”

“Hmmpf.” The architect eyes my belt, which doesn’t hold the small hammer I usually carry. “And no wandering hands to smash. How many this week?” he asks severely.

His ire isn’t directed at me, so I smile. “Only three or four.”

If the apprentices—and some of the older craftsmen—would just keep their hands to themselves, they wouldn’t have to worry about their fingers. I don’t hit hard enough to break bones the first time, and once is usually enough.

“Show me where your concern is, then.” Magister Thomas nods to the scale replica of Collis’s Sanctum which dominates the room. The model is as old as the Sanctum itself, started decades ago.

I walk around to the far end of the table, and the architect joins me from the opposite side. Really, to call this representation a “model” doesn’t do it justice. Every stone, window, and shingle of the structure is perfectly and proportionally rendered,

from the two square towers at the western entrance and down its long nave, to the arms extending north and south from the altar at the center—or rather, what will be the center once the holy building is finished. Our expansion project now underway will lengthen the building far beyond its current T shape. The transept wings mark the beginning of the work area, all of which is also portrayed and updated with our progress, including the scaffolding.

“Right here.” I point to a scarlet thread I’ve tied as my own reminder of the location, then back away so he can see. It’s in a support section as complicated as a spider’s web, tucked within the shadow of the high tower at the end of the southern transept.

As Magister Thomas leans closer to look, the parchment nailed to the wall behind him flutters. The light is too dim for me to read the names written on it, but I know them all by heart: fourteen fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons lost in the collapse of scaffolding and wall five years ago. Above the list rests the gold-plated hammer used in setting the markers of the latest construction project as it was blessed by the high altum.

The placement of those two items is significant: The master architect will never look at the symbol of his greatest achievement without also seeing an account of his greatest failure.

To prevent such a thing from ever happening again, the scaffolds must be as safe and reliable as the limestone walls themselves, and the only way to ensure that is to have someone climbing around them regularly, checking for cracks and warps.

That someone is me. It’s a job I take very seriously.

Magister Thomas is still studying the model, measuring distances with his fingers, when the gentle toll of the Sanctum’s bells drifts through the cracks in the shutters. It’s nearly midnight, which is when a full moon peaks, meaning its light will finally be where I need it to be to see by. While I wasn’t trying to

hide my plan to go out tonight, now I feel like I need to wait for permission, but with the storm coming I can't afford to waste time.

"Do you ever wonder why the brethren even bother going to bed before their last devotions?" I ask, mostly to call the magister's attention to the hour. The holy men who make up the religious order attached to the Sanctum have probably only slept two hours before being wakened for midnight liturgy.

"Seeing as they're up again at dawn for the next series of chants, I imagine they catch sleep whenever they can," is his absentminded reply. He tilts his head to look at the indicated beam from several angles. Though the architect is two years past forty—old enough to be my father—two white streaks running back from his temples are the only obvious signs of his age. The one on the left appeared after the accident five years ago, but the other is more than a decade old according to the housekeeper. Given the tragedy associated with the more recent one, I've never had the courage to ask what caused the first.

Magister Thomas shakes his head. "I can see how a problem there could have gone unnoticed, but it's going to be a difficult spot to reach, even for you."

The scaffold supports are set at unusual angles due to the carved statues that stick out from the walls. Gargoyles are part of the drainage system, which makes them necessary, but working around them is likely the reason a problem has developed. It *is* high, and I'm not quite sure how I'll reach it yet, but I've been climbing trees and scaling the sides of buildings for nearly all of my seventeen years.

"I'm not worried," I say.

"You never are." He stands straight to look at me again. "Maybe I should go along. I can hold the lantern."

I doubt I'll need his help—or the light—but a sharp pounding on the door in the kitchen interrupts us. That's odd. Who would call at this hour, and from the alley rather than the street?

Mistress la Fontaine shortly appears in the doorway to the kitchen. The housekeeper's gray-white hair is halfway escaped from the bun at the top of her neck after a full day of baking bread and chopping vegetables, and she wears a sour, disapproving expression as she wipes weathered hands on her apron. "There's someone here to see you, Magister."

The architect's jaw tightens as he narrows his gray eyes suspiciously. "Who is it?"

"Perrete Charpentier."

A daughter of one of the fourteen builders killed in the accident, about my age. Nothing good comes of her visits, but the architect feels responsible for her father's death, and so he's tried to make sure she had enough to live on. Lately, however, it's been obvious she earns plenty—doing exactly what Magister Thomas had wanted to prevent—and sees him only as a source of free money.

"Tell her to come back tomorrow," he says.

The housekeeper shakes her head. "She says if you don't talk to her now, she'll go straight to the high altum."

It's easy to picture the stance Perrete took as she made her threat, hand on a hip jutted out, scarlet lips pouting, her face rouged to play up the natural beauty mark on her cheek. No doubt she waited until the midnight bells so she could actually carry out that threat and approach Altum Gervese as he walks back to his palatial home from the Sanctum after prayers.

"I'll be fine without you, Magister," I tell him. "I'd already planned on going alone."

He shakes his head, though I can tell he's torn. "Maybe we

could block off the area first thing in the morning and inspect it then.”

“You know it can’t wait,” I say. “The altum is already frustrated by our recent weather delays. He’ll be angry if we halt work tomorrow.”

Angry is an understatement. He’s been out to replace Magister Thomas for over two years, and his incessant, underhanded campaign from the pulpit is finally turning some people against him. As a result, donations have decreased, slowing our progress and seeming to back up the altum’s claim that it’s time for a new master architect to take charge.

Which was why I spent the entire morning showing the city provost and his sons around the expansion site. Fortunately, the Comte de Montcuir was impressed and promised a hefty contribution. I took him straight to the window maker, who then sketched his face as an inspiration for one of the stained glass pictures he’ll create. Nothing opens a man’s purse wider than public evidence of his generosity.

The master architect considers my argument for several seconds. At last he sighs. “Very well. I’ll speak with her, Mistress, in private. Let her in.”

Relieved, I open the door to the street. “I’ll be back before the rain starts.”

“Catrin,” calls the architect. “You’re forgetting something.”

I stifle a groan as I stop in the doorway. “Magister Thomas, I have never fallen.”

“Until last summer, the bell tower had never been hit by lightning,” he says sternly. The western facade tower, the shortest of the Sanctum’s four by a few feet, had been damaged by the severe strike. “Never only means ‘not yet.’”

With a heavy sigh, I take the coiled safety rope from its hook next to his cloak by the door. I’m about to walk out with it in

my hand, but I catch the architect's glare and pause long enough to knot one end around my waist. "Better?"

His beard shifts with the skeptical tilt of his lips. "Will you use it?"

"Yes, Magister," I assure him, though it will probably be in the way more than anything.

"Be careful," he says, waving for me to go. "Mother Agnes would come at me with her bare hands if anything happened to you."

I grin as I sling the rope over my shoulder. Despite the fact that the prioress of Solis Abbey just celebrated her seventieth birthday, I'm not sure it's a fight she'd lose.

Perrete sweeps into the workroom then, wearing the simpering, one-sided smile that hides the rotten gap in her teeth. A wave of perfume from her dress wafts over me, and I grimace as I pull the door shut. Last time she was here, it took a whole day of airing to get that lingering scent out of the workroom.

From the street, I can see enough sky ahead of the approaching storm clouds to assure me I'll have time for my inspection, but I still have to hurry. I turn and trot uphill toward the Sanctum, the wind at my back.



CHAPTER 2



The problem is shockingly easy to see by moonlight. Something about the way the shadows play across the lines and angles of the supports nestled against the new stone structure. It's almost as if the darkness coaxed the flaw into revealing itself when it thought no one would be looking—which is nonsense.

Observing it from the ground isn't enough, though. I have to inspect it up close if I'm to justify stopping work tomorrow.

There's nothing nearby to support my weight other than a stone gargoyle extending three feet from the Sanctum wall. The doglike creature is designed to spew channeled rainwater from its mouth, away from the building. Like most sculptures, it's supposed to look fierce, but the circular opening between this one's teeth makes it appear comically surprised. Wind whistling across the mouth creates a shrieking sound, like a housewife who's spotted a mouse, adding to the effect. With the scaffolds built around it, I have to balance across the statue's back and stretch out to reach the warped pole. My fingers immediately find a split in the wood which is invisible from every vantage above and below.

Falling Skies, it's *huge*. It's a miracle it hasn't failed already. By

day, the scaffolds above are crawling with dozens of workers. Had they collapsed, few would have survived the six-story fall onto the stones in various stages of cutting and shaping below.

I angle myself to feel along the length of the crack. The gap is almost as wide as my forearm—too large to simply reinforce with lashing—and the tiny, fresh splinters I encounter mean it's expanding rapidly. As much trouble as this will cause, I'm relieved to have such a clear answer: The entire scaffold here will have to come down and be reassembled.

Two days of construction, lost. One more reason for the high altum to complain.

A sharp sliver of wood jabs my middle finger, and I reflexively yank my hand back. Blood wells from under the nail as I bring it to my mouth. The coppery taste hits my tongue with startling intensity, but it's not bleeding that badly. After a few seconds, I raise the wound up to the moonlight to look for any remaining fragments of the splinter. Fortunately, there are none.

My arm, still extended to hold the beam, begins to tremble from bearing so much weight alone. Before I can reach back with the other, a strong gust of wind causes the gargoyle's whistling to pitch higher and louder, and the shrill screaming sound sends a jolt of lightning down my spine and out to my limbs. All the muscles in my body contract, and my already precarious grip on the pole slips.

Suddenly I'm plunging headfirst toward the stones below, tumbling and twisting as sky and scaffold and Sanctum and moon streak across my vision. An arc of blood splashes the wall in front of me, and in that instant, I think—I *know*—I'm going to die.

I never thought it would end like this.

My vision fades on the edges, and I arch my back and grab at my throat in a desperate attempt to stop the bleeding. The other

hand claws at the wall with equal futility until an impact across my stomach rips me open.

Pain is the only thing left in my world. All I can do is wait for the last of my consciousness to drain away.

Until it doesn't.

My surroundings slowly come back into focus. It takes several seconds for me to understand I'm not lying dead on the ground but dangling about thirty feet above it, the safety line agonizingly tight around my waist. Dazed, I look up to the gargoyle where the rope angles back to the place I'd attached it to the scaffolding on the other side—rather reluctantly, I might add. The whistling sound continues as though it had never changed. Did that horrible shriek come from the statue's mouth? It had sounded . . . human. Like someone terrified or about to die, or both. If I wasn't absolutely positive the noise came *before* I fell, I would've thought it was me who screamed.

There's no blood on the wall next to me, either, and as I raise my shaking hands into the moonlight, they, too, are clean.

But I'd *seen* the blood. I'd *felt* it.

I was going to die. I'm not entirely sure I didn't.

Someone who was dead wouldn't hurt this much, however. Grunting, I wriggle into a position where I can brace my feet against the stone wall. My leather boots are specially made for climbing, and the ascent is fairly easy, even with trembling hands and bruises forming across my middle. The hardest part is heaving myself over the gargoyle so I can stand and jump back to the woven-reed platform.

I collapse against the smooth limestone of the Sanctum as soon as I'm safe, promising myself never to complain about using a safety line again. As I work the length into a loose coil, I notice my fingertips and nails aren't ravaged from clawing at the wall. Other than the clotted splinter wound, which has expanded into

a perfectly round bruise, they're undamaged. Shaking my head, I untie the line from my sore waist and gaze out over the homes and shops which ring the paved area around the Sanctum. Most of my view is blocked by rooftops three and four stories tall. All is quiet but for the scream still echoing in my brain.

Did that sound come from out there?

Throwing the rope over my shoulder, I stand and begin climbing the scaffold to the top of the Sanctum, bothering with ladders only half the time. The uppermost level is even with the main gutter along the edge of the new section's roof, and the wind snaps and pushes me along the length of the expansion to the far east end, where the leonine form of a chimera watches over his domain.

"Good evening, Pierre," I say, dropping the coiled line behind the statue. Unlike gargoyles, these serve no purpose but decoration. I name each of them as I watch them take form over several weeks under the master carver, but this one is my favorite so far. Its face resembles that of a snub-nosed bat, with long fangs that curve all the way around its mouth, which is open wide in a snarl. I pat one of the wings stretching vertically from its muscled back and continue speaking, though I'm not silly enough to expect an answer. "Have you seen or heard anything strange tonight?"

From this vantage I can see the entire hill Collis is built on and miles of countryside beyond. My childhood home, Solis Abbey, nestles near the bottom of the southern slope. Beyond it lies the ivy-covered walls of the Selenae Quarter, home to the reclusive religious sect whose members keep the hours of the moon rather than those of the Blessed Sun. A glow too steady to be a bonfire comes from the open plaza in the center of that neighborhood. Even at this distance, the haunting melodies of their midnight hymns reach my ears.

Outside the Quarter, the city is devoid of nighttime revelers, probably in anticipation of the storm, quiet as the dead except for the rapid rhythm of footsteps ricocheting off walls and paving stones. I lean forward, unthinking, to look, and Pierre's outstretched arm almost seems to point at a lone figure below. A cloaked form—definitely a man—moves too quickly and purposefully to be a drunkard stumbling home from a tavern. The direction he's moving suggests he came from Madame Emeline's or another similar establishment, but he almost seems to be running *from* something.

As I watch, the shadowed figure darts into a side street, out of sight, and in the quiet that follows, a ghostly voice cries out.

Someone help me. Please.

The words flutter through my head, weightless as moonlight, yet carrying a despair so heavy I struggle to breathe in its wake. What Mother Agnes always called my wayward imagination connects the voice and its pain to the fleeing man. Perhaps he robbed someone, leaving them sobbing and injured in the street. Would the city's night watchmen find them before the storm, or am I the only one who can help this person? How would I even begin to search for them?

“Go home, little Cat.”

I spin around, heart pounding, pressing my back to the statue. Those words I actually *heard*. Someone speaking that softly would have to be nearby, if not right behind me, but there is only empty air. I search the nearby portico, roof, and scaffolds with wide eyes, unable to find the source of the gravelly whisper even as it continues.

“This is not a night to be out.”

It feels more like a warning than a threat, and between the weather and seeing a strange man running through the streets,

I'm inclined to agree with this phantom voice. Until the silent cry comes again.

Please. Anyone.

Suddenly, I'm hurrying back the way I came, climbing down poles and hopping across reed and wicker platforms, driven by a compulsion I cannot explain. Once on the ground, I jog in the direction the cloaked man came from. In the back of my mind, I know this is stupid to do alone. But while Perrete is surely gone by now, Magister Thomas would never agree to prowl the streets at this hour, especially with such flimsy reasoning.

I turn down the road connecting the Sanctum Square to the centuries-old Temple of the Sun, a relic of the Hadrian Empire which established our Faith. While the street's official name is the Pathway of Prayer, it's more commonly known as Pleasure Road due to the high number of brothels along the way. Many of Collis's orphaned or foundling girls are raised in convents, but those who decline to take vows as Sisters of Light unfortunately often have trouble finding reputable employment. Many end up here.

I'm panting as I pass the fourth block of row houses, and a sudden assault on my senses makes me stop to look around. The brightness of the moon creates harsh, angular shadows that cut the scene into jagged pieces, but it's the sweet metallic tang hanging in the air which makes me shudder. The last time I smelled it this strongly was when passing a butcher shop as a hog was being slaughtered on the front steps.

Blood. Lots of it.

But I don't see any.

A chilling gust blows dead leaves past my ankles, drawing my eyes down to a large, muddy footprint. Several more continue in the direction of the Sanctum, fading at some point not far away,

but they came from the dark alley on my right. I slide under the awning of the building next to it and peer cautiously around the corner.

“Hello?” I call softly.

There is no answer. A slash of moonlight shines on the opposite wall, so bright I can see nothing outside it. I can’t recall ever being here, but a strange familiarity draws me forward into the shadowed mouth of the alley.

Darkness closes around me like a curtain. The smell of blood is now overwhelming, and I cover my mouth and nose with one hand and stretch the other out in front of me into the pitch black. I take one hesitant step toward the light, then another, my toes pushing aside what I hope is rubbish. When I reach the illuminated wall, I find an arc of crimson spatter at eye level, eerily similar to what I saw as I fell from the gargoyle’s back.

That’s impossible. Yet now I also recall my vision then hadn’t been of the immaculate limestone of the Sanctum—it was rough and grimy. Like the wattle and daub in front of me.

There is also one place where the pattern differs. It’s smeared in the middle, like a grasping hand was dragged across the wet stain. The fingertips on my left hand ache as though they had done this, and I reach out, hypnotized, needing to know if the feel of the wall matches my memory.

When I’m only inches away, the alley suddenly bursts into light with the strength of a thousand candles. Everything around me becomes visible—walls, crates, barrels spilling over with refuse, scurrying rats . . . and the shape of a woman lying on the ground.

She’s on her back with her feet toward me, with pale, white calves and worn, wooden heeled shoes exposed beneath a rumpled skirt. Blood pools like black ink around her head and shoulders, so much that the packed dirt can’t absorb it all, leaving a

flat liquid surface which reflects the stars and scudding clouds above. Her stomach is a mess of torn fabric and internal parts I've only seen in butchered animals.

All that is horrible, but it's not the worst.

The woman's jaw hangs open in a silent scream, half the teeth missing or broken. Her face has collapsed inward, crushed, and her eyes are a hollow mess of ravaged tissue. A stream of blood trails from the gory sockets, running like a tear past the beauty mark on her cheek.

I gasp, inhaling so deeply that the floral perfume layered under the thick scent of blood becomes recognizable, but I already know who this is.

Perrete.



CHAPTER 3



My arm is frozen in midair, reaching for the wall, and still the entire scene is bathed in light as bright as day—brighter, perhaps, for it is a place the sun rarely shines.

I've seen dead bodies before. I've seen death from sickness, from accidents, and even from violence.

I've never seen anything like this.

Please. Anyone. Help me.

A wetness seeps into the toes of one of my leather boots. When I realize my right foot is standing in a puddle of blood, I recoil, drawing my hand back just as the alley plunges into darkness once again. Unseeing and disoriented, I trip over my own feet and fall in my haste to get away.

Help me . . .

The jolt from hitting the ground jars my teeth and sends a painful shock around my already-bruised waist, but I don't care. I know what soaks the ground and into my clothes. Rolling over, I push to my hands and knees, scrambling for the entrance to the alley.

. . . someone . . .

Screams echo off the walls, and I only realize the shrieking is

mine when I reemerge onto the street and the sound expands to fill the open space. I collapse to my knees and vomit on the cobblestone, heaving and sobbing until I'm empty of everything but the memory of what lies behind me.

As I sit back on my heels, a shutter on the second floor several buildings away crashes open, and a woman I can see with startling clarity peers out. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles and the top of her dress is loose. From behind her comes a soft wailing.

"Silence, you drunkard!" she shouts. "My babe was just asleep!"

Before I can react, she slams the window shut, and I'm alone again.

I look around. No one else appears disturbed by my noise, but I suppose if no one cared enough to investigate the screams of a woman being murdered, I shouldn't be surprised that no one is reacting to me now. The heavy taste of blood in my mouth tells me I bit my tongue when I fell, and I wipe my face with the back of my hand, leaving a trail of scarlet from my wrist to my knuckles.

What should I do? Perrete is dead. No one can help her now, yet leaving her feels wrong. Magister Thomas would know the right course of action.

Grace of Day! If anyone knows Perrete went to see the magister tonight, he'll fall under suspicion. His innocence won't matter. Just the taint of accusation and his association with her could cost him his position as master architect. I need to warn him.

The scattered clouds of the storm finally cross over the moon, briefly extinguishing its light. A cold wind sprinkles the ground in front of me with the first drops of rain. I put my hands down to push myself to a stand, and one brushes my blood-soaked boot.

Please. Anyone. Help me.

“All right!” I shout back at the sky.

My voice is lost in a roll of thunder. I wipe my fingers clean, leaving bloody streaks on my short overskirt. Madame Emeline’s isn’t far. She’s likely one of the few who will even care what happened to Perrete.

I turn and run down the road as the moonlight vanishes again, making the world dark and muffled, this time for good. The downpour catches up to me just as I arrive on the madam’s doorstep. Emeline herself answers, and I push my way inside, half soaked.

“Perrete,” I gasp as she closes the door.

“Doesn’t work here,” Emeline finishes. Her hair, bleached to a shade of orange, is curled and mostly in place, and her face is fully painted. The makeup exaggerates the pinch of her thin lips as she raises a candle to peer at me. Concern quickly replaces irritation. “What about Perrete?”

“She’s dead,” I say. “I found her body.”

Some of Emeline’s alarm eases. “Are you sure she just wasn’t passed out from *skonia*? It wouldn’t be the first time.”

The madam’s own voice is husky from use of the euphoria-producing drug, which is burned and inhaled in its cheapest form.

“I’m sure. She was—” I choke, but manage to finish with, “It was horrible.”

Emeline sighs. “You can tell the night watchmen. They’ll inform the provost.” She turns to the stairs in the back of the room.

“I, ah, couldn’t manage to find any of them before the rain started,” I say, though I hadn’t searched for them at all. “That’s why I came here.”

The madam glances over her shoulder. “Then it’s fortunate that two of them are upstairs now.”



Madame Emeline assures the city guards she won’t disclose where they were as long as they sound the alarm to her satisfaction, which they do, rousing the whole neighborhood despite the storm.

While one watchman runs to the Palace of Justice, the other is unable to keep the first gawkers out of the alley until more guards arrive. Those lucky few tell everyone what they saw, and the story grows more gruesome with each telling. Most people huddle under the meager shelter offered by awnings and doorways, but I slink around the edges of the crowd, listening for anyone who knows where Perrete went tonight. So far I’ve heard nothing. Madame Emeline stands just outside the alley, arms crossed, her bloodshot eyes simmering with rage. The provost should’ve been here by now.

I’m worried the magister will come searching for me, but I don’t dare leave yet. My toes are numb with cold, and liquid squelches from my boots as I shift my stance, sending faint tendrils of blood spiraling out into the puddle at my feet.

... help me ...

My jaw clenches as the plea echoes through my mind. Perrete’s ghostly voice has been as constant as the rain dripping down my face. I brought attention to what happened to her. Isn’t that enough for her to leave me alone?

Within an hour the storm has passed, and the western half of the sky glows with the full moon behind thinning clouds. A number of people approach from up the street, and a tall, cloaked figure among them makes me freeze. Unlike the man

I saw from the scaffolding at the Sanctum, however, this one's cloak is a nondescript gray color, and the clothes beneath are a blue so dark as to be black. He glides between shadows like he's one of them until he catches sight of me and stops midstep.

"There you are."

He's too far away for his gruff whisper to reach me, yet it does. I know the voice, too. I heard it earlier, standing next to Pierre. "*Go home, little Cat.*"

My stomach plummets as I recognize the silver-ringed irises gleaming against the thick outline of black kohl from deep within the hood. He's Selenae.

I wouldn't call it fear, but I'm as wary of them as anyone in Collis. Selenae are among our most skillful physicians, so much so that many consider them magicians. Only the richest citizens can afford their services, but it's said they extract a price only worth paying if one is on the edge of death. And, if rumors are true, the People of the Night are also the source of *skonia*, the drug many use in an effort to bear their terrible lives. The reclusive sect rises and sleeps as the moon does, rather than the Sun, and they govern their own members—not outside of Gallian law, but not precisely within it, either. Above all, they have two unbreakable rules: Keep strictly to the Quarter at night and shun all non-Selenae matters. Something has made this man disregard both.

From his actions, that something could only be me.

I'm still as a Sanctum statue as his gaze sweeps down and up. When his eyes refocus on mine, he nods ever so slightly. His broad shoulders relax, causing a silver chain to shift and glitter against his neck. Despite the darkness, I can see the face within the hood is marred by a number of scars, and his nose sits decidedly off-center. If Selenae weren't such strict pacifists, I

would presume him to be a former soldier, or at least a barroom brawler.

The Selenae man steps back, deeper into the shadows, never relinquishing my gaze. “Go home,” he whispers.

As before, it feels more like a warning than a threat, and I’m tempted to obey, until I see the Comte de Montcuir coming.

By his appearance, it seems the provost did make some effort to hurry—his clothes are wrinkled and his russet beard and mustache aren’t oiled into their usual shapely arrangement. Trailing behind him is a tall, unfamiliar young man in an even more disheveled state, though he’s dressed in fabrics as fine as the nobleman’s own, tailored to fit his lanky frame. He—like most people present—was obviously roused from bed. His dull, blond curls are flat on one side and flying wildly on the other, and his expression is trancelike.

The pair brush past the Selenae man like he’s invisible. Perhaps he is, because he vanishes as soon as they cross between us. When I find him again, he’s half a block away, leaving as silently as he came.

There’s no chance I’m going home now. I join the crowd swelling in response to the Comte de Montcuir’s arrival and the easing rain. Relief is plain on every face. The king’s appointed executor of justice is here. Order will be restored.

“What goes on here?” Montcuir booms, throwing the weight of his authority into his voice. He and his companion step into the circle of torchlight, the latter slowly blinking pale blue eyes against the relative brightness. There’s something odd about the left one, but I can’t see what from this angle.

A watchman steps forward. “The body of a woman was found, your Grace, about one hour ago.”

The provost grunts. “Any sign of the perpetrator?”

“No, your Grace.” The guard shakes his head. “He was gone long before the alarm was raised.”

Montcuir isn’t impressed by the watch’s failure. “Who was she?” he asks no one in particular. Then, spying Madame Emeline, the comte raises a rust-colored eyebrow. “One of your girls, madam?”

She bristles. “If you’re asking if we share the same profession, the answer is yes.” Her makeup runs in trails down her cheeks from standing in the rain and perhaps a few tears, but the madam’s voice is clear and unapologetic. “That doesn’t make her worth less than anyone else under law. And what was done to her will shock even you.”

The provost holds her accusing stare for several seconds but doesn’t address her subtle insolence. “Who discovered the body? You?”

Emeline’s eyes find me, questioning whether I want to admit my part or not. She will allow me to escape involvement, should I wish. I rub my palms against my breeches in indecision.

... help ... me ...

“I did,” I say, startling myself.

Montcuir and dozens of other faces swing around to stare at me, and I swallow to keep my voice steady.

“I heard her scream.”

The comte recognizes me, of course. Only this morning I was showing him and his sons around the Sanctum. He curls a meaty finger at me in a command to come forward. “Bring a light and follow me.”

I don’t want to go back in there. My hands shake so badly I nearly drop the torch someone thrusts at me. Montcuir also gestures to the stranger. “Simon, you come, too.”

The young man balks. “Why?”

“You know why.”

I'm confused. The comte has been provost of Collis for over two decades, while this Simon doesn't even look to have twenty years in age. What does Montcuir think the young man can observe that he cannot?

Simon's pale eyes spark in anger, and his face twists in defiance before suddenly going blank again. Then he steps forward, his movements stiff and mechanical. I let him go ahead of me, wanting any excuse to keep my distance from the body. Madame Emeline also follows, and no one tries to prevent her. The alley feels darker than before, even with the light I carry.

Comte de Montcuir stops next to Perrete's still form, which lies under a dingy linen sheet soaked with rainwater and blood. Bright red spots spread out from her middle and face. "Who covered the body?" he asks.

"I did," says Emeline. "You'll shortly see why."

Montcuir leans down to fling the sheet aside. Though much of the blood has washed away, Perrete's ravaged features are just as horrible as before. I don't expect much of a reaction from a veteran of the Second War of the Eclipse, but the comte seems shocked.

Simon barely flinches.

No one moves for several seconds. "Well?" Montcuir finally says as he stands straight. "What do you think, Simon?"

"She's dead," he replies dully.

"And?" The comte crosses his arms. "Is this madness or something much simpler?"

There's a long pause, during which neither Madame Emeline nor I breathe. "Yes," answers Simon quietly. "This was done by a madman."

Emeline exhales in relief, but I don't see how the acknowledgment changes anything.

Without another word, Comte de Montcuir turns and stalks

back to the street. The madam is on his heels, and I rush to follow, immediately returning the torch to the man who gave it to me. Simon lags behind and stops at the entrance of the alley, as though to block the way.

Outside, the comte's adult sons are just arriving. The older, Lambert, is about Simon's height, and he propels the much stockier Oudin along with a firm grip on his arm. Once they're in the cleared area, Oudin jerks his elbow free from Lambert's hold and stumbles another step before catching his balance.

"I was coming," he growls. His clothes and breath reek of alcohol from several feet away. Oudin is nearly always drunk and almost as often belligerent.

"Not fast enough," says Lambert calmly. I've never heard him raise his voice before, and tonight is no exception. "Father said we were to hurry."

"Yes," says Montcuir sourly. "You weren't at home when I left; where were you?"

"Enjoying the pleasures of the night." Oudin has no shame. Half a decade separates him from his older brother, but in maturity they're a lifetime apart.

Simon sighs. "Why did you bring Juliane, Cousin?"

The comte's daughter stands behind her brothers with a brass lantern in her frail hands and a guilty countenance on her face. Lady Juliane's loose overdress was obviously thrown over her nightgown, making her barely presentable. Auburn hair hangs in damp strings over her shoulders, and purplish circles ring her brown eyes like deep bruises in her painfully thin face. I haven't seen her in months, but her appearance makes me think she's been ill. Eight years ago she was considered one of the greatest beauties in all of Gallia. Now, at twenty-four, spinsterhood would appear to be her fate.

Lambert frowns at Simon's question. "She was already awake. I didn't want to leave her alone."

"What's happened?" says Oudin. "I heard someone was dead."

"Perrete Charpentier has been slain," hisses Madame Emeline. "Murdered and left to rot in an alley."

Almost all color drains from Oudin's face, leaving two clownish splotches of crimson on his cheeks—evidence that he's not just been drinking, he's been using *skonia*. Not as a smoke, however. He can afford a concentrated powder either sniffed or placed under the tongue. "Perrete?" he whispers in a strangled voice. "That's not possible."

"How is that not possible?" demands the comte. "Were you with her tonight?"

Oudin closes his mouth and tries to swallow. After several seconds of struggle, he nods. "Yes," he admits. "But . . . not in that way. And she left me hours ago saying she'd meet me later, but she never came back."

An alarm louder than the Sanctum's largest bell rings in my head. It's obvious Perrete visited Magister Thomas in that time, but does Oudin know that?

Montcuir glances around, no doubt noting the suspicious looks being cast on his younger son. He sets his jaw. "A formal inquiry will be opened immediately."

The crowd shifts and murmurs. Murder of a prostitute isn't generally considered worthy of such attention, but the nature of this crime and the comte's son's possible involvement have apparently changed that.

"Simon of Mesanus." Montcuir pauses dramatically as he turns to face him, and the young man tenses like he wants to flee. "You will conduct this investigation."

“Why me?” he spits back. “I have no official position in Collis.”

“No, but I’m the one who assigns such offices.” The comte turns away, waving his hand dismissively as he steps off, clearly done with the situation. “Put your experience to use.”

Madame Emeline frowns at Simon. “What reason could the comte have for giving you this task, sir?”

Simon’s fists clench like he’s gripping the rails of a ship in a storm as he glowers at the provost’s back. “Because I’m the resident expert in madness,” he whispers ruefully.