

THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING

HIS FAIR ASSASSIN

A TRILOGY

ROBIN LAFEVERS

Why be the sheep when you can be the wolf?

GRAVE MERCY



BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS

Vengeance is divine.

DARK TRIUMPH

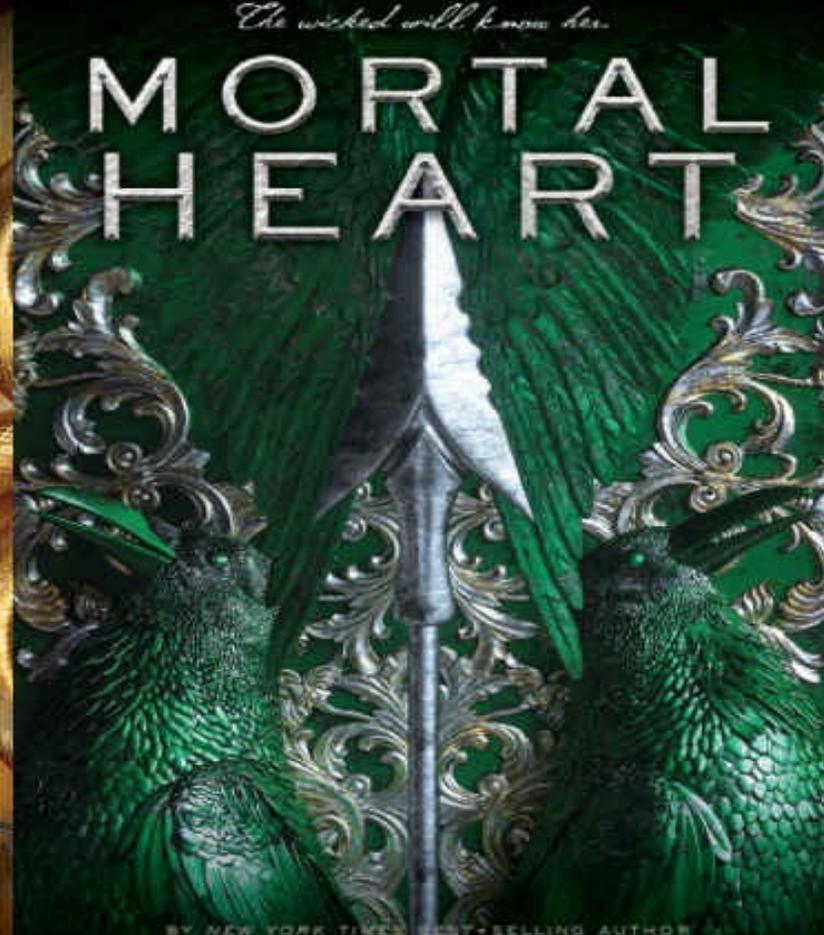


BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS

The wicked will know her.

MORTAL HEART



BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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HIS FAIR ASSASSIN

A TRILOGY

ROBIN LA FEVERS

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT

BOSTON

NEW YORK

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Contents](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Map](#)

[Grave Mercy](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Dramatis Personae](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty-One](#)
[Chapter Forty-Two](#)
[Chapter Forty-Three](#)
[Chapter Forty-Four](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Fifty](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)
[*Epilogue*](#)
[*Additional Scenes*](#)
[*Author's Note*](#)

[Dark Triumph](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Dramatis Personae*](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Forty](#)
[Chapter Forty-One](#)
[Chapter Forty-Two](#)
[Chapter Forty-Three](#)
[Chapter Forty-Four](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Fifty](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)
Epilogue
Author's Note

Mortal Heart

Dedication
Dramatis Personae
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Q & A with Author Robin LaFevers](#)

[Coming Soon: COURTING DARKNESS](#)

[More Books from HMH Teen](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with HMH on Social Media](#)

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For Mark,
who first showed me what
true love looked like.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ISMAE RIENNE

HER FATHER

GUILLO THE PIG FARMER

THE HERBWITCH

At the Convent

THE ABBESS

SISTER THOMINE, martial arts instructor

ANNITH, a fellow novitiate

SISTER SERAFINA, poisons mistress and convent healer

SYBELLA, a fellow novitiate

SISTER WIDONA, stable mistress

SISTER BEATRIZ, instructor in womanly arts

SISTER EONETTE, convent historian and archivist

SISTER ARNETTE, arms mistress

SISTER CLAUDE, sister in charge of the rookery

SISTER VEREDA, the ancient seeress

RUNNION, traitor to Brittany and Ismae's first kill

MARTEL, French spy and Ismae's second kill

The Privy Council

VISCOUNT MAURICE CRUNARD, chancellor of Brittany

MADAME FRANÇOISE DINAN, the duchess's governess

MARSHAL JEAN RIEUX, marshal of Brittany and the duchess's tutor

CAPTAIN DUNOIS, captain of the Breton army

The Breton Court and Nobility

ANNE, Duchess of Brittany, Countess of Nantes, Montfort, and Richmond

DUKE FRANCIS II (deceased)

BARON LOMBART, a Breton noble

GAVRIEL DUVAL, a Breton noble

BENEBIC DE WAROCH, the Beast of Waroch and knight of the realm

RAOUL DE LORNAY, a knight of the realm

BARON GEFFOY, a Breton noble

LADY KATERINE GEFFOY, his ladywife

MADAME ANTOINETTE HIVERN, mistress of the late Duke Francis II

FRANÇOIS AVAUGOUR, a knight of the realm

ALAIN D'ALBRET, a Breton noble with extensive holdings in France, and one of Anne's suitors

CHARLES VIII, king of France

ANNE DE BEAUJEU, regent of France

NORBERT GISORS, ambassador for the French regent

FEDRIC, Duke of Nemours, one of Anne's suitors

MAXIMILIAN OF AUSTRIA, the Holy Roman emperor, one of Anne's suitors

Chapter One

BRITTANY 1485

I BEAR A DEEP RED stain that runs from my left shoulder down to my right hip, a trail left by the herbwitch's poison that my mother used to try to expel me from her womb. That I survived, according to the herbwitch, is no miracle but a sign I have been sired by the god of death himself.

I am told my father flew into a rage and raised his hand to my mother even as she lay weak and bleeding on the birthing bed. Until the herbwitch pointed out to him that if my mother had lain with the god of death, surely He would not stand idly by while my father beat her.

I risk a glance up at my husband-to-be, Guillo, and wonder if my father has told him of my lineage. I am guessing not, for who would pay three silver coins for what I am? Besides, Guillo looks far too placid to know of my true nature. If my father has tricked him, it will not bode well for our union. That we are being married in Guillo's cottage rather than a church further adds to my unease.

I feel my father's heavy gaze upon me and look up. The triumph in his eyes frightens me, for if he has triumphed, then I have surely lost in some way I do not yet understand. Even so, I smile, wanting to convince him I am happy—for there is nothing that upsets him more than my happiness.

But while I can easily lie to my father, it is harder to lie to myself. I am afraid, sorely afraid of this man to whom I will now belong. I look down at his big, wide hands. Just like my father, he has dirt caked under his fingernails and stains in the creases of his skin. Will the semblance end there? Or will he, too, wield those hands like a cudgel?

It is a new beginning, I remind myself, and in spite of all my trepidations, I cannot extinguish a tiny spark of hope. Guillo wants me enough to pay three silver coins. Surely where there is want, there is room for kindness? It is the one thing that keeps my knees from knocking and my hands from trembling. That and the priest who has come to officiate, for while he is naught but a hedge priest, the furtive glance he sends me over his prayer book causes me to believe he knows who and what I am.

As he mutters the ceremony's final words, I stare at the rough hempen prayer cord with the nine wooden beads that proclaim him a follower of the old ways. Even when he ties the cord around our hands and lays the blessings of God and the nine old saints upon our union, I keep my gaze downcast, afraid to see the smugness in my father's eyes or what my husband's face might reveal.

When the priest is done, he pads away on dirty feet, his rough leather sandals flapping noisily. He does not even pause long enough to raise a tankard to our union. Nor does my father. Before the dust from my father's departing cart has settled, my new husband swats my rump and grunts toward the upstairs loft.

I clench my fists to hide their trembling and cross to the rickety stairs. While Guillo fortifies himself with one last tankard of ale, I climb up to the loft and the bed I will now share with him. I sorely miss my mother, for even though she was afraid of me, surely she would have given me a woman's counsel on my wedding night. But both she and my sister fled long ago, one back into the arms of death, and the other into the arms of a passing tinker.

I know, of course, what goes on between a man and a woman. Our cottage is small and my father loud. There was many a night when urgent movement accompanied by groans filled our dark cottage. The next day my father always looked slightly less bad tempered, and my mother more so. I try to convince myself that no matter how distasteful the marriage bed is, surely it cannot be any worse than my father's raw temper and meaty fists.

The loft is a close, musty place that smells as if the rough shutters on the far wall have never been opened. A timber and rope bed frame holds a mattress of straw. Other than that, there are only a few pegs to hang clothes on and a plain chest at the foot of the bed.

I sit on the edge of the chest and wait. It does not take long. A heavy creak from the stairs warns me that Guillo is on his way. My mouth turns dry and my stomach sour. Not wanting to give him the advantage of height, I stand.

When he reaches the room, I finally force myself to look at his face. His piggish eyes gorge themselves on my body, going from the top of my head down to my ankles, then back up to my breasts. My father's insistence on lacing my gown so tight has worked, as Guillo can look at little else. He gestures with his tankard toward my bodice, slopping ale over the sides so that it dribbles to the floor. "Remove it." Desire thickens his voice.

I stare at the wall behind him, my fingers trembling as I raise them to my laces. But not fast enough. Never fast enough. He takes three giant strides toward me and strikes me hard across the cheek. "Now!" he roars as my head snaps back.

Bile rises in my throat and I fear I will be sick. So this is how it will be between us. This is why he was willing to pay three silver coins.

My laces are finally undone, and I remove my bodice so that I stand before him in my skirt and shift. The stale air, which only moments before was too warm, is now cold as it presses against my skin.

“Your skirt,” he barks, breathing heavily.

I untie the strings and step out of my skirt. As I turn to lay it on the nearby bench, Guillo reaches for me. He is surprisingly quick for one so large and stupid, but I am quicker. I have had long years of practice escaping my father’s rages.

I jerk away, spinning out of his reach, infuriating him. In truth, I give no thought to where I will run, wishing only to hold off the inevitable a little longer.

There is a loud crash as his half-empty tankard hits the wall behind me, sending a shower of ale into the room. He snarls and lunges, but something inside me will not—cannot—make this easy for him. I leap out of his reach.

But not far enough. I feel a tug, then hear a rip of cloth as he tears my thin, worn chemise.

Silence fills the loft—a silence so thick with shock that even his coarse breathing has stopped. I feel his eyes rake down my back, take in the ugly red welts and scars the poison left behind. I look over my shoulder to see his face has gone white as new cheese, his eyes wide. When our glances meet, he knows—*knows*—that he has been duped. He bellows then, a long, deep note of rage that holds equal parts fury and fear.

Then his rough hand cracks against my skull and sends me to my knees. The pain of hope dying is worse than his fists and boots.

When Guillo’s rage is spent, he reaches down and grabs me by the hair. “I will go for a real priest this time. He will burn you or drown you. Maybe both.” He drags me down the steps, my knees bumping painfully against each one. He continues dragging me through the kitchen, then shoves me into a small root cellar, slams the door, and locks it.

Bruised and possibly broken, I lie on the floor with my battered cheek pressed into the cool dirt. Unable to stop myself, I smile.

I have avoided the fate my father had planned for me. Surely it is I who has won, not he.

The sound of the bolt lifting jerks me awake. I shove myself to a sitting position and clutch the tattered remains of my chemise around me. When the door opens, I am stunned to see the hedge priest, the same small rabbit of a man who’d

blessed our marriage only hours before. Guillo is not with him, and any moment that does not contain my father or Guillo is a happy one by my reckoning.

The priest looks over his shoulder, then motions for me to follow.

I rise to my feet, and the root cellar spins dizzily. I put a hand to the wall and wait for the feeling to pass. The priest motions again, more urgently. “We’ve not much time before he returns.”

His words clear my head as nothing else can. If he is acting without Guillo’s knowledge, then he is most assuredly helping me. “I’m coming.” I push away from the wall, step carefully over a sack of onions, and follow the hedge priest into the kitchen. It is dark; the only light comes from the banked embers in the hearth. I should wonder how the priest found me, why he is helping me, but I do not care. All I can think is that he is not Guillo and not my father. The rest does not matter.

He leads me to the back door, and in a day full of surprises, I find one more as I recognize the old herbwitch from our village hovering nearby. If I did not need to concentrate so hard on putting one foot in front of the other, I would ask her what she is doing here, but it is all I can do to stay upright and keep from falling on my face in the dirt.

As I step into the night, a sigh of relief escapes me. It is dark out, and darkness has always been my friend. A cart waits nearby. Touching me as little as possible, the hedge priest helps me into the back of it before hurrying around to the driver’s bench and climbing in. The priest glances over his shoulder at me, then averts his eyes as if he’s been burned. “There’s a blanket back there,” he mutters as he steers the nag out onto the cobbled lane. “Cover yourself.”

The unyielding wood of the cart presses painfully into my bruised bones, and the thin blanket scratches and reeks of donkey. Even so, I wish they’d brought a second one for padding. “Where are you taking me?”

“To the boat.”

A boat means water, and crossing water means I will be far from the reach of my father and Guillo and the Church. “Where is this boat taking me?” I ask, but the priest says nothing. Exhaustion overwhelms me. I do not have the strength to pluck answers from him like meager berries from a thorny bush. I lie down in the cart and give myself over to the horse’s jolting gait.

And so my journey across Brittany begins. I am smuggled like some forbidden cargo, hidden among turnips or in hay in the back of carts, awakened by furtive voices and fumbling hands as I am passed from hedge priest to herbwife, a hidden chain of those who live in accordance with the old saints and are determined to keep me from the Church. The hedge priests, with their awkward

movements and musty, stale robes, are kind enough, but their fingers are unschooled in tenderness or compassion. It is the herbwitches I like most. Their chapped, raw hands are gentle as lamb's wool, and the sharp, pungent smell of a hundred different herbs clings to them like a fragrant shadow. Often as not, they give me a tincture of poppy for my injuries, while the priests merely give me their sympathy, and some begrudgingly at that.

When I awake on what I reckon to be the fifth night of my journey, I smell the salty tang of the sea and remember the promise of a boat. I struggle to sit up, pleased to find my bruises pain me less and my ribs do not burn. We are passing through a small fishing village. I pull the blanket close against the chill and wonder what will happen next.

At the very edge of the village sits a stone church. It is to this that the latest hedge priest steers our cart and I am relieved to see the door bears the sacred anchor of Saint Mer, one of the old saints. The priest reins his horse to a stop. "Get out."

I cannot tell if it is fatigue or disdain I hear in his voice, but either way, my journey is almost done, so I ignore it and clamber out of the cart, sure to keep the blanket clutched tight around me lest I offend his modesty.

Once he secures the horse, he leads me toward the beach, where a lone boat waits. The inky black ocean spreads out as far and wide as my eye can see, making the vessel seem very small.

An old sailor sits hunched in the prow. A shell bleached white as bone hangs from a cord at his neck, marking him as a worshiper of Saint Mer. I wonder what he thinks of being woken in the middle of the night and made to row strangers out into the dark sea.

The sailor's faded blue eyes skim over me. He nods. "Climb in. We en't got all night." He thrusts an oar at me, and I grasp it to steady myself as I get into the boat.

The small vessel dips and rocks and for a moment I am afraid it will tip me into the icy water. But it rights itself and then the priest steps in, causing the hull to sink even lower.

The old sailor grunts, then returns the oar to its pin and begins rowing.

We reach the small island just as dawn pinkens the eastern horizon. It looks barren in the early, spare light. As we draw closer, I see a standing stone next to a church and realize we've come to one of the old places of worship.

Gravel crunches under the hull of the boat as the old sailor rows right up onto the beach. He jerks his head toward the stone fortress. "Get out then. The abness of St. Mortain be expectin' ye."

Saint Mortain? The patron saint of death. A tremor of unease washes through me. I look at the priest, who averts his eyes, as if looking at me is too great a mortal temptation.

Clutching the blanket close around me, I climb awkwardly from the boat and step into the shallows. Torn between gratitude and annoyance, I curtsy slightly, careful to let the blanket slip from my shoulder for the merest of seconds.

It is enough. Satisfied at the priest's gasp and the old sailor's cluck of his tongue, I turn and slog through the cold water to the beach. In truth, I have never flashed so much as an ankle before, but I am sorely vexed at being treated like a temptress when all I feel is bruised and broken.

When I reach the patchy grass that grows between the rocks, I look back toward the boat, but it has already put out to sea. I turn and begin making my way to the convent, eager to see what those who worship Death want of me.

Chapter Two

TWO ANCIENT STANDING STONES MARK the entrance to the convent. The chickens in the courtyard are just now beginning to stir, scratching in the dirt for their breakfast. At my approach, they cluck and flutter away.

I pause at the door, wishing I could find a corner and sleep until my head clears, but the sailor said the abbess is expecting me, and while I do not know much about abbesses, I suspect they are not fond of waiting.

My heart beats wildly as I raise my hand and knock. The heavy door opens at once, revealing a short, plain woman covered in black from head to toe. Without saying a word, she motions me inside.

I follow her through a sparsely furnished room, then down an equally austere corridor that leads into the heart of the convent. My guide knocks once on a closed door.

“Enter,” a voice commands.

My guide opens the door and motions me inside. The furnishings are simple but sturdy, and early-morning light pours in through the east-facing window. My eyes are immediately drawn to the woman who sits at the large desk in the middle of the room. She wears a black gown and wimple, and her pale face is striking in its beauty.

Without looking up, she motions me toward one of the chairs. My footsteps echo lightly among all that space as I approach her desk. I clutch the blanket tight around me, then sit.

The abbess lifts her gaze from her work, and I find myself staring into a pair of eyes as cool and blue as the sea. “Ismae Rienne.”

I flinch, startled she knows my name.

“Do you know why you’re here, child?”

I do not know what answer she is looking for, I only know that I am overcome with a sudden desire to earn her approval. “Because I displeased my new husband?”

“Displeased him?” The abbess gives a delicate snort that makes me like her even more. “From what I hear he practically wet his braies in fear of you.”

I feel the familiar shame rise up in my cheeks and I look down at my lap.

“The fault lies not with you, daughter.” She says this so gently it makes me want to cry. I have never shed a tear, not throughout all my father’s beatings or

Guillo's mauling, but a few kind words from this woman and it is all I can do not to bawl like a babe.

"So tell me," she says, drawing a quill and ink pot close. "Do you know the circumstances of your birth?"

I risk a glance at her face, but she is focused on what she is writing on her parchment. "Only that my mother did not wish to bear me. She went to an herbwitch for poison, hoping to purge me from her womb."

"And yet you lived." She looks up. The words are quiet but hold the power of a shout in the stillness of this room.

I meet the abbess's steady gaze. "And yet I lived."

"Do you have any idea what that means?"

"You mean other than having to spend my life in the shadows, dodging blows and staying out of sight so as not to cause others undue fear?"

"Yes, other than that." Her voice is dry as bone. She leans forward, her eyes alight with some purpose. "Did they not claim, Ismae, that you were sired by Death Himself?"

I nod cautiously.

"Well and so. After many trials, you are now here."

"Trials?" I ask. "Is that what my life has been? A series of trials to be passed?"

"You come to us well tempered, my child, and it is not in my nature to be sorry for it. It is the well-tempered blade that is the strongest."

"And who exactly is *us*?" My whole body stills, waiting for her answer.

"You have found refuge at the convent of St. Mortain. Although in truth, Mortain is older than any saint, older even than Christ."

"One of the old gods we now call saints," I murmur.

"Yes, one of the old gods. One not easily cast aside by the Church. And so we call Him saint, but as long as we serve Him, He cares not what He is called."

"How does one serve Death?" Am I to spend my life collecting bodies in the bone cart?

The reverend mother does not flinch. "We carry out Mortain's will when He wishes to alter the warp and weft of life's weave for some purpose of His own."

I look at her blankly, not understanding what weaving has to do with Mortain. She sighs and pushes away from her desk. "Perhaps some refreshment is in order."

I want to beg her to tell me more of what being Death's daughter might hold, but I suspect this woman does not suffer fools gladly, so I hold my tongue.

She takes a flagon of wine and two crystal goblets from the cupboard behind her desk. She pours the wine into the goblets and hands one to me. The cut

crystal is finer than anything I have ever seen, and I hold it gingerly, afraid it will shatter in my hands.

“Here at the convent, it is our job to train those who are sired by the god of death. We teach them to perform their duties quickly and efficiently. Usually, we find that He has given His daughters some special skill or art. Abilities that will aid you as you carry out His work.”

His work. The words are ripe with possibility. I take a sip of wine to steady myself. It is sweet and crisp on my tongue.

“If I may guess a little about you?” the reverend mother asks. I nod, and she continues. “You never get sick with the ague or the chills or the flux. Even the plague leaves you untouched, is that correct?”

I feel my eyes widen at her uncanny knowledge. “How do you know such things?”

She smiles. “And I know you can survive harsh beatings and heal within days. Do you also have dreams that foretell death?”

“No.” I shake my head, sorry to disappoint her. “But sometimes I can tell when people are going to die.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Go on.”

I look down and study the wine in the goblet. “I can see them fading sometimes. It’s like watching a flame grow dim in a lantern. And once, I saw a mark. On the blacksmith. He had a faint black smudge on his forehead in the shape of a horseshoe. Three days later he was dead.”

She leans forward in her chair, eager now. “How did he die?”

“He was kicked in the head by one of the horses as he worked.”

“Ah.” A pleased smile hovers at the corners of her mouth. “Mortain has given you powerful gifts.” She takes up the quill and makes a notation on the parchment in front of her. Small beads of perspiration begin to form on my forehead and I take another sip of wine to steady myself. It is hard to air old secrets.

“So,” she says, looking back up at me. “You are well equipped for our service.”

“Which is?”

“We kill people.” The reverend mother’s words fall like stones into the quiet of the room, so shocking that my body goes numb. I hear the splintering of crystal as my goblet hits the floor.

The abbess ignores the shattered goblet. “Of course, many die without our help. However, there are those who deserve to die but who have not yet encountered the means to do so. At Mortain’s bidding, we help them on their way.”

“Surely He does not need our help?”

Anger flares in the abbess and for the first time I feel the iron will I have only vaguely sensed before. “Who are you to say what the god of death needs or doesn’t need? Mortain is an old god and has no desire to be forgotten and fade from this world, which is why He chooses to bestir Himself in the affairs of man.” She stares at me for a moment longer, then the tension leaves her, like a wave going out to sea. “What do you know of the old gods?” she asks.

“Only that they were once the nine old gods of Brittany but now we call them saints. And we must leave them an occasional offering or prayer if we do not wish to offend them or incur their wrath.”

“You are close,” the abbess says, leaning back in her chair, “but that is not the whole of it. The old gods are neither man nor God, but something in between. They were the first inhabitants of our land, sent to do God’s bidding in this new world He had created.

“At first, the relationship between gods and man was a difficult one, the gods treating us much as we treat cattle or sheep. But soon we learned to honor them with prayer and offerings, which led to harmony between us. Even the early Church, when it arrived, was content to let us honor the old gods, although we learned to call them saints then. But lately, that has been changing. Just as France has gobbled up most of the smaller kingdoms and duchies so it may claim all their power for its own, so too does this latest pope work to extinguish any trace of the old ways, wanting all the prayers and offerings for his own church.

“So now more and more put aside the old ways and traditions that honor the gods of Brittany. But not all. Some still raise their voices in prayer and make their offerings. If not for that worship and supplication, the old gods would fade from this world. Surely you can understand why Mortain would not wish that. He feeds off our belief and worship much as we feed off bread and meat and would starve without it.

“So, it is our job to believe and to serve. If you choose to stay here and take the vows, you will be sworn to serve Mortain in any way He asks of you. In all things. In all ways. We carry out His will. Do you understand?”

“Is that not murder?”

“No. You would not expect a queen to wash her own clothes or lace her own gown; she has her handmaidens for that. And so it is with us; we serve as handmaidens to Death. When we are guided by His will, killing is a sacrament.”

She leans forward then, as if eager to tempt me with what Mortain offers. “If you choose to stay, you will be trained in His arts. You will learn more ways to

kill a man than you imagined possible. We will train you in stealth and cunning and all manner of skills that will ensure no man is ever again a threat to you.”

I think of my father and of Guillo. I think of all those in the village who worked so hard to make my life a misery. The young boys who threw stones at me, the old men who spat and stared at me with terror in their eyes, as if they expected me to snatch the souls from their old, wrinkled bodies. The younger men who fumbled clumsily at my skirts in dark corners, guessing correctly that my father cared not for my safety or reputation. It would be no hardship at all to kill the likes of them. I feel like a cat who has been dropped from a great height only to land on her feet.

As if plucking my thoughts from my head, the abbess speaks again. “They won’t all be like them, you know.”

I look up in surprise and she continues. “Those Mortain sends you to kill. They won’t all be like the pig farmer.”

My ears are deaf to her warning. I am certain all men are like that, and I would kill them all gladly.

But she presses further, to be sure I fully understand. “He will ask for sacrifices, but it is not your role to question. Only to serve with love and obedience.” A whisper of emotion crosses her face, a memory of some pain I can only guess at. “That is the nature of our service,” she says. “Unquestioning faith. Can you do that?”

“What if I say no?”

“Then you will be taken far from here and given to a kind, gentle man in need of a wife.”

I weigh the choice that is no choice at all. To be removed from the world of men and trained to kill them, or to be handed to one like a sheep. “If you think I am fit to serve, Reverend Mother, I will do so gladly.”

She smiles and leans back in her chair. “Oh, you are fit to serve. You have already passed the first test.”

Something about her smile makes me uneasy. “I have?”

The abbess nods to the shattered goblet on the floor. “Your wine was laced with poison. Enough that a sip would kill a man twice your size. You experienced slight discomfort, nothing more.”

I am shocked into silence as she so easily confesses to poisoning me, and I remember the warm, dizzy feeling I had earlier.

“Now come.” The abbess stands, walks over to the door, and opens it. “Annith will get you settled. Welcome to the convent.”

Chapter Three

WHEN I STEP OUT OF the reverend mother's office, a girl just slightly younger than I am is waiting. Just like the abbess, she is strikingly fair, with eyes the color of the shifting sea and wisps of pale hair escaping from her veil. Next to her I feel shabby and tattered, as if my very presence is a sacrilege in a convent full of beauty. But the girl smiles at me and tucks my arm through hers as if we have been friends since birth. "I am Annith," she says. "Let's get you to the infirmary."

As much as I want to go with her, as much as I want to embrace this new life set before me, I hesitate. There is something I need to understand first. "Wait."

Annith tilts her head to the side. "What?"

"If I hadn't passed the test, would she have let me die of poison?" A chill scuttles across my shoulders at how close I came to meeting Death face to face.

Annith's face clears in understanding. "But no! The abbess would have fetched a bezoar stone to neutralize the poison or called for a tincture of amaranth to revive you. Now come." She tugs gently at my arm, and she is so certain and reassuring that it chases away my last remaining doubt.

Our footsteps echo faintly off the stone walls as Annith leads me down a corridor. Doors line the walls on either side of us, and I wonder what secrets these rooms hold and how soon I will be allowed to learn them.

Annith stops when we reach a long chamber with clean, white walls and a row of beds. Fresh air pours in from the window and I hear the sound of waves casting themselves upon the rocky shore beyond. A nun in a midnight blue habit works at a table with a mortar and pestle. At our arrival, she carefully puts her task aside before turning to greet us.

She is of middle years, and her black wimple does not flatter her olive skin. It does, however, match the faint mustache on her upper lip. I am filled with relief that she is not beautiful like the others. At least I will not be the ugliest one here.

"The reverend mother sends a new patient?" The note of eagerness in the nun's voice strikes me as unseemly.

"Yes, Sister Serafina," Annith says. "She has had a bad beating, with many bruises. Possible broken ribs and injuries to her internal organs."

I stare at Annith with new respect. How has she learned all this? Did she listen at the door? Looking at her fresh, delicate face, I find it hard to imagine her doing anything so deceitful.

The nun wipes her hands on a linen cloth and goes to a plain wooden cupboard to retrieve a glass flask. It is not as elegant or ornate as the crystal goblet, but it is every bit as fragile. Even so, she thrusts it into my hands and motions me to a wooden screen in the corner of the room. "Evacuate into that, if you please."

I stare stupidly at the flask. The nun looks at Annith. "Was her hearing affected, do you think?"

"No, Sister." Annith's face is solemn, the picture of dutiful respect, and yet I am sure I can sense a faint spark of humor.

Sister Serafina turns back to me. "Piss," she says, a little loudly in case Annith is wrong about my hearing. "I need you to piss into the flask so I can tell if you have any internal injuries."

Mortification fills me at this request, but Annith gives me an encouraging nudge. I hurry over to the privacy of the screen and find a chamber pot. I lift my skirts, position myself, and pray I will hit the flask.

The nun speaks again. Her voice is low, but my hearing is sharp from so many years spent listening for my father's moods.

"Did the reverend mother test her?"

"Yes," Annith tells her. "With the wine."

"Praise Mortain!" She sounds well and truly grateful, and I cannot for a moment imagine why. When I emerge from behind the screen, there is a look of exultation on her plain face. As she takes the flask from me, admiration shines in her eyes, as if she's just discovered I am not simply a plow horse, but a finely blooded mare. "Annith will settle you in one of the beds while I mix a tisane to hasten your healing." She is still smiling as she turns back to her worktable.

"Over here." Annith's hand is gentle on my elbow as she guides me to one of the beds. It is covered in clean white linen, and I am terrified of sullyng it.

"Take off your clothes," Annith orders. "I'll get you a clean shift."

I remember the reverend mother's command for obedience, but I find I cannot bring myself to do what she asks. Just as the dust from my ragged gown will mar the clean linens, I am sure the sight of my hideous scar will mar Annith's view of me. I have known her for mere minutes, but already I am afraid to lose her affection.

She returns to my side holding a shift that bears the clean, crisp scent of lavender. Seeing me still clothed, her face softens. "Do you need help?"

"No." I wrap my arms around myself. "It is just . . . I . . . my flesh is scarred and ugly and I don't wish to offend."

"Nonsense," she says, and pats my arm. "Here at the convent of St. Mortain, we all have scars." As she turns away to give me a moment of privacy, I cannot

help but wonder what her scars might be.

I slip out of my old, torn chemise, certain I can still smell the reek of pigs where Guillo touched it.

“Matrona’s curse, was it?”

I flinch at Sister Serafina’s voice. Desperate to cover myself, I yank the new shift over my head so quickly that I become dizzy. I wait for the sensation to pass before turning to the nun. “Pardon me?”

She gestures to my back. “What your mother used, child. When you were in her womb.”

“I do not know the name of the herbwitch’s poison.”

“I do.” Her eyes are full of compassion. “Only Matrona’s curse would leave such a scar. Now, into bed with you.”

Annith hovers as I climb into bed, then leans over and tucks the covers around me. When she is done, Sister Serafina hands me a small cup of foul liquid she swears will make me feel better. I drink the tisane—which tastes of rotten berries and old hay—then hand the cup back. This feeling of being fussed over is new and I cannot tell if I like it or not.

Annith settles herself on the stool next to my bed, then glances over her shoulder to assure herself the nun has returned to her worktable. “You may not be able to tell,” she says in a low voice. “But Sister Serafina is delighted by your arrival. Other than herself, no one here is immune to the effects of poison, and she can scarce keep up with supplying the convent. It will most likely be one of your primary duties when you are healed, helping her in the workroom.”

“With poisons?” I ask, not sure I understand her correctly.

Annith nods, and I glance back at the nun, who is busy once again at the worktable. My head is full of more questions, but as I turn back to ask one, I realize that the bed against the farthest window is occupied.

At first, I am glad, glad I’m not the only one for them to fret over. And then I see that the other girl’s wrists are tied to the bed.

Panic rises in my chest, sharp and hot. It must show on my face because Annith turns and follows my gaze. “It is only so she won’t hurt herself,” she hurries to explain. “She was brought here three nights ago, thrashing and screaming. It took four nuns to restrain her.”

My eyes are drawn back to the girl. “Is she mad?”

“Mayhap. Certainly those that brought her here thought so.”

“Was she given the same test as I was?”

“She isn’t well enough to be tested yet, but she will be once she is better.”

When I look back at the girl, I see her eyes are open and she is staring at us. Slowly, she smiles. It is even more disturbing than her bound wrists.

Chapter Four

I AWAKE SOMETIME LATER TO a hand stroking my hair. The touch is gentle and comforting and I marvel at the sensation, a touch that doesn't hurt. Clearly the tisane has worked.

"Poor poppet," a low, throaty voice croons. Because I am half asleep, it takes me a moment to realize the voice is not Annith's nor even Sister Serafina's. I come fully awake then. The far bed is empty, the wrist ties dangling loose to the floor.

"Poor poppet," the girl kneeling by my bed murmurs again, and fear stirs in my breast.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

She leans in closer. "Your sister," she whispers back. Her words sear away the last dregs of sleep. Her hair is a wild tangle of midnight black falling down her back and shoulders. The faint moonlight reveals a bruise high on her cheek and a cut on her lip. I wonder if she got those from the nuns or if she had them when she arrived.

"Do you mean you were sired by Saint Mortain as well?"

She laughs softly, a terrifying sound that sends goose bumps scuttling across my skin. "No, I mean we have been sired by the very devil himself. So says my lord father."

It is exactly what the villagers have claimed about me all my life, but I find the words no longer ring true. The reverend mother's revelation has altered something deep inside me, awakened some hope that slumbered hidden all these years. Suddenly, I am eager to convince the girl that she is wrong, just as the reverend mother has convinced me. I push myself up so that I am sitting rather than lying. Her hand falls from my hair.

"Your lord father is wrong." My whisper is so fierce it scratches my throat. "We have been sired by Mortain. Chosen by Him to do His bidding. Your father, the Church, they all lied." As I stare into her haunted, broken face, I grow desperate to convince her, to take this small flame of promise from my chest and light it in hers.

A spark of interest flares in her eyes, then is quickly quenched. She cocks her head toward the door. "They are making the rounds. Farewell." She jumps to her feet, then onto the bed next to me, and begins leaping her way down the row.

"Stop!" Sister Serafina cries from the doorway. The note of command freezes

the blood in my veins, but the girl does not even pause. She leaps gracefully as a young deer, making her way to the open window, an almost playful glint in her eye.

Two more nuns appear behind Sister Serafina, all of their attention focused on the escaping girl. “Stop, Sybella,” the tallest one calls out. Her voice is low and musical and as soothing as I imagine a mother’s caress would be. The fey girl falters, as if that voice has some power over her. With an effort, she leaps to the next bed, but her movements are slower, clumsier.

“If you stay,” the lovely voice continues, “we will find a way to give you back your life.”

The girl turns and anger flares in her eyes. “You lie!” She takes the last three beds in as many leaps and arrives at the window. Without knowing why, I am afraid for her. I am certain that if she goes out that window, her madness will burn her up and leave nothing but bitter ashes behind.

“Wait!” I add my voice to the others. She stops, and the nuns grow still. Everyone holds her breath. “Don’t you wish to learn the arts of Mortain?” I ask. “How to kill those who have done this to you?” I do not know why I am so certain someone has caused this insanity in her, but I am.

She is quiet so long I am afraid she will not answer, and then she does. “What are you talking about?”

“She has not yet spoken to the abbess,” the musical-voiced nun says. “She was too wild when she first arrived.”

“May I tell her then? If it will keep her here?”

The nuns glance among themselves, an unspoken conversation in which options are weighed. Finally, one nods. I turn to the girl. “Are you so eager to go back to where you came from? To your lord father?”

In the darkness of the bedchamber, the shadows on her face seem to deepen. “No,” she whispers. “But I will not be held prisoner by a clucking passel of busybodies who pry and poke.”

I glance uneasily at the nuns, but they are unperturbed by her assessment of them. “They mean well,” I assure her.

Her quiet laughter is so full of scorn it nearly curdles the air between us. “Good intentions are only lies the weak tell themselves. I will not be caged.”

But where else will she go? “They have promised to teach me of poison,” I say, hoping I am not getting Annith in trouble by revealing this. “And other ways to kill a man.” I share what the abbess told me, her words still bright in my mind. “They will train us in stealth and cunning and give us such skills that no man will ever be a threat to us again.”

Sybella turns toward me, a glint of interest in her eyes, but that is all I know of this new life I've been promised. I look helplessly at the nuns.

Annith steps easily into the opening I have made. "They will teach you of all manner of weapons," she says, coming more fully into the room. "They will show you how to wield a dagger and a stiletto. How to shoot an arrow and draw a sword."

"That is a lie," Sybella says. "No one would teach a woman such deadly skills." But I can see how much she wants to believe.

"It is not a lie," Annith swears.

It is working. With her eyes on Annith, Sybella steps down from the bed. "Tell me more," she demands.

"They will teach you how to caress a man's throat with a garrote so that when he expects your soft lips, he will feel the deadly bite of wire instead."

Sister Serafina speaks next. "We will teach you to make poisons." Her voice is as gentle as the lulling waves. "Poisons that grip the gut and force a man's life to dribble from him into a slop pail. Poisons to stop the heart or squeeze the humors from the body. Bloodwort to congeal the blood so it can no longer move through the veins. We will show you subtle poisons that take days to fell a man, and those that kill within seconds. And that is just to start."

There is a long pause and we all hold our breath, wondering what Sybella will choose. When she speaks, her voice is so faint I have to lean forward to hear it. "Is there a poison that will make a man's member shrivel and fall off?" she asks.

When Sister Serafina answers, her voice is full of a grim determination that makes me love her. "We will create one, you and I. Now, come. Get back into bed and we will tell you of all this and more."

Sybella studies us for a long moment, then shrugs, as if staying here is of no consequence to her one way or the other. But we are not fooled. She comes to stand next to my cot. "Scoot over," she orders.

Surprised, I look at Sister Serafina, who indicates it is up to me. I glance back at Sybella. Our hold on her is so fragile, I cannot say no. Besides, the convent bed is finer than any pallet I have ever slept on, and it is almost wide enough for two. I make room for her, and she crawls under my covers to lie down next to me. As we lie together in the narrow bed, the nuns lull us to sleep with gentle voices, singing their song of darkness and death.

When I wake, there is pale golden sunlight streaming into the room. I sit up, surprised to find I am alone. Not only is Sybella gone, but there is no nun clucking at the worktable or fussing with the beds.

Just as I am wondering what I am supposed to do next, Annith appears, as bright and lovely as the morning itself. She smiles when she sees I am awake and sets the tray she is carrying on the worktable. “How do you feel?” she asks.

I flex my arms, my toes, raise my shoulders against the soft linen of my shift. “Fine,” I reply, surprised that this is true. The healing tisane of Sister Serafina’s is indeed a small miracle.

“Would you like to break your fast?”

I find that I am starving. “Yes,” I say, and she brings the tray over to me. She hands me a tankard of small ale and a loaf of bread fresh from the convent ovens. There is even a pot of goat cheese. I spread the cheese on the bread and take my first bite. It is the most delicious food I have ever eaten. My hunger, which has been asleep for my entire trip across the kingdom, rises up now, and I devour the breakfast in a matter of seconds. Annith looks at me in concern. “Do you want more?”

I start to say yes, for I have learned never to say no to food, then realize I am already full. “No,” I say, pleased when I remember to add “thank you.”

Annith smiles and lowers herself onto a stool by my bed. As she smooths her skirts around her knees, I long to ask her about Sybella, but I am afraid. Afraid of what might have become of her during the night. I feel a pang of guilt at my own peaceful slumber.

“Once you are feeling up to it,” Annith says, “you are to join Sister Serafina in her poisons workshop.”

Poisons. The word makes me throw back my covers and swing my feet to the floor. “I am ready now.”

Annith’s brow wrinkles in concern. “Are you certain? You’ve been here only a short while.”

“Yes, but I had five days to recover from my injuries during my journey, and in truth the tisane and the breakfast have done much to restore me.” I am as hungry for this work I have been promised as I was for the bread. “I would love to begin now, if it is allowed.”

“Of course! To rest or to work, the choice is left to you.” Annith fetches me a gown from the wooden cupboard. It is a dove gray habit, like hers, and as I slip it over my head, I can feel myself slipping into this new life that I have been given.

Annith helps me comb my hair, her fingers gentle even among all the tangles. When I am presentable, she leads me from the room and down the confusing maze of corridors. She opens a thick door and we step outside. I blink against the bright sun, then hurry to follow her. She leads me to a small stone cottage downwind from the convent. “I am not to go in,” she explains, “as I do not have your gift. But you may enter; the good sister is expecting you.”

“She is?”

Annith’s eyes sparkle. “She suspected you would want to start right away.” Then she bids me goodbye and heads back toward the convent. Alone on the doorstep, I knock.

“Who is it?” a voice calls out.

“It is Ismae,” I say, wondering if I need to explain further who I am since I am not sure if she knows my name.

“Come in!” the voice says cheerfully.

I open the door and step inside.

The maids in my village talked of falling in love with a man at first sight. That has always seemed naught but foolishness to me. Until I enter Sister Serafina’s workshop. It is unlike anything I have ever seen, full of strange sights and smells, and I tumble headlong into love.

The ceiling is high, and the room has many windows. Two small clay ovens sit on the floor. In front of the fireplace is a range of kettles, from one big enough to cook a goat whole all the way down to one so small it could belong to the fey folk of hearth tales. A large wooden press takes up an entire corner of the room. Fragile glass containers and globes sit beside squat earthenware jars and silver flasks. The most striking thing in the room—a writhing mass of glass vessels and copper tubes—sits alone on one of the worktables. Two flames burn beneath it, and the whole thing hisses and bubbles and steams like a large, deadly viper getting ready to strike.

“My still,” Sister Serafina says with great pride. “I use it to boil and reduce substances to their essence, removing all the extra matter until nothing but the poison remains.” She motions me over to the table, and I come eagerly, ducking under a low-hanging clutch of roots drying in the rafters. A strange and pungent combination of smells reaches my nose, rich, earthy notes combined with a cloying, sickly sweetness, and a strong acrid smell lurking underneath.

On the table is a bowl of withered black seeds and a pile of shiny red ones. Large round pods the size of rosary beads are scattered next to drying tubers that look like a man’s organ. Seeing those brings Sybella’s question of last night back to me.

Sister Serafina studies me closely. “How are you feeling?”

I start to tell her that I can hardly feel my injuries any longer, then I realize she means how am I feeling among all the poisons. “Fine,” I say. To my surprise, I am smiling.

“Then let’s get to work.” She shoves a bowl of round green pods in front of me. They are misshapen lumps covered in soft, flexible prickles. She takes up a small pointed knife. “Cut them open and extract the seeds, thus.” With a deft

flick of the blade, she guts one of the pods, and three fuzzy seeds spill out. She pinches one between her fingers and holds it up to me. "One of these will make a man so sick, he will wish to die. Three of these will kill him." Then she hands me the knife, places the seed back on the table, and returns to her distillery.

The knife handle is smooth and well balanced, a thing of beauty, but the seed pod is tough and fibrous, and my hand is not as skilled as the nun's. It takes a long time before the point of my knife pierces the hard shell and breaks it open. I glance up to find Sister Serafina watching me. Unable to help myself, I flash a smile of victory at her.

She gives me a toothy grin, and then she turns back to her work and I turn back to mine.

That night, I attend dinner in the refectory with the others. It is a large stone chamber with arched doorways and long wooden tables. I see there are less than a dozen girls in all. At thirteen and fourteen, Annith and I appear to be the oldest. The youngest looks to be no more than five, although Annith assures me they do not learn anything of the killing arts until they are older. All of them bear a fair measure of beauty. Perhaps Mortain sires only comely daughters.

"There are even more of us," Annith tells me. "We have half a dozen full initiates of Mortain, but they are all away, carrying out His wishes."

Eight nuns file in and head for a large table set apart on a dais. As we eat our dinner, Annith tells me of the nuns I have not yet met. There is the horse mistress and the weapons mistress and the mistress of martial arts, as well as an ancient nun whose only duty is to tend the crows in the rookery. Another nun is charged with teaching history and politics. The last one, a woman who may have been pretty once but now reminds me of a peahen, instructs us in courtly manners and dancing. "And," Annith adds, her eyes growing bright and her cheeks pink, "womanly arts."

I turn to stare at her in surprise. "Womanly arts? Why do we need instruction in *that*?" I hope the small flicker of panic I feel does not come through in my voice.

She shrugs. "So we may get close to our victims. How else are we to see if they have a *marque*? Besides, all our talents and skills must be well honed so we may serve Mortain fully." It sounds like a lesson she has been made to memorize.

"Is that all of them, then?" I ask.

"Sister Vereda is not only old but blind as well. She never eats with us and keeps to her rooms. She is our seeress and speaks with us only when she has had a vision."

I feel someone watching, and look up to find the reverend mother's cool blue gaze on me. When our eyes meet, she lifts her goblet in private welcome. The immensity of it all surges through me, leaving me dizzy with my unexpected good fortune. This is my new life. My new home. The one I have prayed for ever since I was old enough to form words. A deep sense of gratitude fills me. *I will make the most of this chance I have been given*, I vow, and I raise my goblet in return.

Chapter Five

IT IS A FULL WEEK before I see Sybella again. What they did to calm her, not even Annith has been able to find out.

She first appears among us at the dinner hour. The entire refectory falls silent when Sister Widona, the nun with the melodious voice and a talent for taming the convent's horses, appears in the doorway with Sybella at her side.

When the nun leaves to join the other sisters at the main table, Sybella stands for a long moment looking down at our table, proud and scornful. The younger girls are too awed by her to do anything but stare, but Annith scoots over on the bench to make room for her. Sybella ignores her and instead sits next to me. I am exquisitely uncomfortable at this. Annith has been so kind to me, I cannot bear for her to be shunned like that. And yet . . . there is something about this new girl, and I am filled with a dark joy that she has chosen to sit next to me. I glance down at my plate so Annith will not see my secret pleasure.

Sybella is thinner than when I last saw her, but her eyes are less wild, and the shadows are nearly gone. Her haughtiness, however, is untouched. She sits on the bench, her back rigid, and looks neither to the right nor to the left.

Proving she is a saint, Annith offers the branch of friendship once more by asking, "May I get you some stew?"

Sybella glances disdainfully at the food in front of the rest of us. "I do not eat pig slop."

Her words are as shocking as a slap to Annith's face. Annith's cheeks pinken. "I assure you, neither do we. Sit there and starve for all I care." It is the first time I have seen Annith provoked into a temper.

Sybella does exactly that; she sits and stares at the wall while the rest of us eat our dinners. It has a severe dampening effect on everyone's appetite, except mine. Having eaten only turnips for years—and old, rotten ones at that—I am always hungry.

After a few minutes of this, Sister Widona rises from the main table, goes to the stew pot that hangs in the hearth, and ladles up a portion. She carries it over to our table and sets it in front of Sybella. "Eat," she orders. Sybella looks up, and the power of their gazes clashing is nearly audible.

When Sybella makes no move toward her bowl, Sister Widona leans over and speaks softly into the girl's ear. "Eat, or I will force it down your throat."

Her words shock me, for I cannot see these gentle nuns doing anything as

heavy-handed as that, but the threat works. Staring mulishly at the nun, Sybella begins shoveling the stew into her mouth. Satisfied, the nun returns to the dais.

And so our training at the convent begins, and everything the nuns promised Sybella and me on that first night comes to pass. We study the human body as thoroughly as the physicians at the great universities, poring over drawings of human anatomy that make us blush. But despite our modesty, we learn where the weakest parts of the body hide. How skin is attached to muscle, and muscle bound by sinew to bone, and how these connections can best be severed.

We become well versed in all manner of fighting, with our hands and feet, our elbows, even our teeth. We are trained in every weapon imaginable: knives and daggers, garrotes. We practice with throwing rondelles—small, razor-edged disks—until we can strike our targets accurately. We shoot short bows and longbows—if we can draw them. If we cannot, we are forced to strengthen our arms until we can. Crossbows too are part of our training, for they are highly accurate when one needs to strike from a distance.

Where I truly excel is in the poison workshop with Sister Serafina, the soaking and stewing, pressing and distilling, learning the nature of all the deadly substances and how best to coax their poisons from them and combine them for the desired effect.

But of course, not all are lessons are so compelling. There are long, boring stretches spent studying history and politics and memorizing the noble families of Brittany. We also study the royal houses of France, for according to the nuns, France is the biggest threat to our country's independence, especially since our duke banded together with other great lords in an attempt to depose the French regent. The deed has not gone unpunished, and hostilities have broken out once again between our countries.

We novices must also learn how to dress in finery and maneuver without tripping. We practice smiling mysteriously and become masters of the seductive glance, peering out from beneath our lashes, our eyes full of promise. These particular lessons make me feel so ridiculous that I often dissolve into fits of laughter and am sent from the room in disgrace.

I alone of the older girls must have extra lessons. Since I am new to the convent and not noble born, I do not know how to read or write, skills the nuns assure me are required to serve Mortain, for how else will I read Sister Serafina's recipes or the instructions that tell me who to kill? I spend long, frustrating hours alone in the scriptorium practicing my letters over and over again.

While the nuns are strict taskmistresses, they are kind too, rarely raising their voices or shaming us. Mayhap they know that treating us well makes us want to please them all the more, or mayhap they suspect we have had too much shame in our lives already.

I take to this new life like a fish to water, Sister Serafina says. Within the passing of a season, my nightmares grow infrequent and I find myself thinking less and less of the realm of man beyond the convent's walls. Indeed, it is as if that whole world has ceased to exist.

Chapter Six

THREE YEARS LATER

NOVEMBER IS KNOWN AS THE blood month, the time of year when animals are slaughtered for winter. How apt, I think, that my first assignment comes now.

Not wanting to announce my presence to the stablekeep, I steer my horse to a copse of trees just beyond the tavern, then dismount. I pull my cloak tight against the chill wind coming off the sea and slip Nocturne a carrot pilfered from the convent kitchens. "I will be back soon," I whisper in her ear.

I turn from my horse and make my way through the trees and shadows to the tavern. Anticipation bubbles through me, so strong it is all I can do to keep from running to the door and throwing it open. Sybella was first sent out nearly a year ago, and I had despaired of ever getting an assignment of my own. At least I am better off than Annith, who is still waiting. I had thought she would surely be given an assignment before me.

I shove that puzzle aside and focus on the task at hand. This is a true test of all I have learned at the convent. I must be ready for anything and know that I will be judged accordingly.

When I reach the door, I pause, listening to the murmur of voices mingling with the clatter of crockery on the other side. The tavern is doing a brisk business this evening, with the men in from the fields early and the fishermen back with their day's catch. Good. It is easier to go unnoticed in a crowd. I slip inside. At this late hour, the men are well into their tankards and are far more interested in the dicing going on in front of the fire or in catching the attention of some serving wench than they are in me.

The room is poorly lit, which suits my purposes well. Keeping close to the shadows near the wall as I have been taught, I make my way to the stairs that lead to the second floor, where rooms can be had for the night.

First door on the right, Sister Vereda said.

I am so focused on reaching the stairs and on the instructions going through my head that I do not see the big oaf who has risen from his bench until I run into him.

“Oho!” he cries as he grabs my arms to keep me from falling. “I’ve found a tasty morsel for my dinner.”

His hood is drawn close around his head, shadowing his face, and his straw hat hangs down his back, marking him as one who toils in the fields. Annoyance flickers in my chest. I have no time for delays; I am eager to try my wings. I start to tell him to get out of my way then realize that he could be part of the test the abbess has set for me. I cast my eyes downward. “Someone waits for me upstairs.”

It works too well, for I can feel his gaze on me growing warm. Interested. Instead of stepping aside, he draws closer, backing me up against the wall. My heart beats frantically at being trapped like this, but I force my mind to calm, reminding myself that he is likely just a peasant who is nothing to me. I shove against the oaf’s chest, which is as hard as iron from days spent pushing a plow in the fields. “I will get in much trouble if I am late.” I am sure to make my voice waver slightly so he will think I am afraid.

After a long moment, he steps aside. “Hurry back down to Hervé when you are done, eh?” he whispers in my ear. His big, greedy hand slides down and slaps my rump, and test or no, it is all I can do to keep from gutting him then and there. Keeping my eyes down so he cannot see my fury, I nod, then hurry on my way as he returns to his bench.

At the top of the stairwell, a serving maid struggles with a heavy tray. By the time I reach the landing, she has paused in front of a door. First door on the right.

Jean Runnion’s door.

Use the tools and opportunities Mortain places in front of you. It is one of the first lessons we learn at the convent. “Is that for Monsieur Runnion?” I call out.

Startled, the maid turns her head. “Yes. He asked for his dinner to be served in his room.”

As well he might. He has good reason to stay hidden. Bretons have long memories where traitors are concerned, and we do not forgive easily. I hurry forward. “I will take the tray to him,” I offer. “He is in a foul mood tonight.”

The maid is suspicious and frowns at me. “How do you know this?”

I give her a cold smile. “Because his man warned me of such when he came to fetch me for the evening.”

A look of contempt appears on her face. I am torn between pride that she finds my pretense believable and annoyance that she thinks me a harlot. It is exactly as Sister Beatriz said it would be: People hear and see what they expect to hear and see. But just because we have been trained to use that to our advantage does not mean I like it.

The maid shoves the tray into my hands and I have to grab quickly to keep it from tumbling to the ground.

With one last swish of her skirts, she clatters down the stairs, leaving me alone with only a thick oaken door between me and my first assignment.

Three years of lessons crowd my head at once, bumping into each other like an unsettled flock of pigeons. I remind myself that there is nothing to fear. I mixed the poison with my own hand. It contains a slow-acting toxin, one especially chosen so that I will be far away before the traitor dies, giving me enough time to escape should something go wrong. To everyone else, it will merely appear as if he is in a deep, wine-sodden sleep.

But nothing will go wrong, I tell myself. Shifting the weight of the tray, I rap on the door. "Your dinner, monsieur."

"*Entré*" comes the muffled voice.

I open the door, then juggle the tray again so I can close it firmly behind me. Runnion doesn't even look up. He is sprawled in a chair in front of the fire, drinking from a cup of wine. A jug sits on the floor next to him. "Just put it on the table," he instructs.

The years have not been kind to him. His face is deeply lined and his hair lank and gray. Indeed, he looks almost ill, as if his guilty conscience has eaten away at his soul.

If so, I am surely about to do him a favor. I set the tray down. "Would monsieur like me to refill his cup before I go?" I ask.

"Yes. Then leave," he commands. His dismissive manner makes me even happier that he will not be able to order anyone else around after tonight.

As I move toward his chair, I lift a hand to the finely woven net around my hair and slip one of the pearls from it. I bend over to pick up the wine jug, pausing to look at his face. There is a great dark smudge around his lips, as if Mortain has pressed His thumb into the blackness of the man's soul and smeared it along his mouth to say, *Here, this is how he will die.*

Thus reassured, I slip the pearl into the wine, swirl the jug twice, then pick up Runnion's cup and fill it.

I hand it to him, and he takes a sip, then another. As I watch, Runnion looks up from his cup and scowls at me. "Where is the other girl?"

I have overstayed my welcome. "She was busy downstairs and asked me to come."

Even as his bleary eyes move to my traveling cloak, I begin heading toward the door. I want to be away from here before his wine-soaked mind begins to draw any conclusions.

"Wait!" he calls out, and I freeze, my heart beating wildly in my chest.

“Leave the jug,” he orders.

I look down and see that I still carry the wine jug in my hand. Careless! “But of course, monsieur,” I say, then set the jug on the floor next to him. I risk another glance from under my lashes, but he’s turned back to the fire.

At the door, I pause one last time, waiting until he takes another sip of wine, then another. I cross myself and bow my head, commending the traitor’s soul into Mortain’s keeping. As I reach for the door, it bursts open. A large form stands there, outlined by the torchlight from the hallway. His hood is still pulled up close around his face, but I recognize the hulking figure of Hervé.

Merde! Could he not have waited till I went back downstairs?

I step away from the door and throw a look over my shoulder to gauge the distance to the window. Hervé follows my gaze and swears when he sees Runnion, who looks as if he has passed out in a wine-sodden stupor. While Hervé rushes to Runnion’s side, I take the opportunity Mortain has provided me and bolt for the window.

It is a long ride back to the convent, but my sense of triumph keeps me warm. I want to crow to the heavens that I have served my god and my convent well, but Sister Serafina has told me many times that pride is a sin, and so I do not.

Plus, it would frighten my horse. I reach down and pat Nocturne’s neck, just in case my exhilaration is making her uneasy.

The one sour note in my triumph is the oafish peasant who came upstairs. Part of me wishes I’d stayed to fight with him, tested my skills against his, for surely he would be no match for one trained such as I. We are allowed to kill in self-defense, whether the opponent has a *marque* or not, and I could have avenged myself for his overly familiar groping.

However, since the whole point of this first assignment is to demonstrate my obedience, I think I have made the right choice in walking away.

The thrill of success is still humming through my veins when I reach the ferryman—the same one who rowed me out to the convent when I first arrived. Tonight, he takes Nocturne and has his son—who is nearly as ancient as he is—return the horse to the stables. As I climb into the waiting boat, his eyes slide away from me, afraid that if he stares too long, he might come to know what I’ve been up to.

I cannot wait to lay my success at the reverend mother’s feet. I want to prove to her that she was right to take me in, that she chose wisely in offering me a home. I want her to see that I have passed her test.

That I was picked over Annith brings me joy, even as my heart breaks for her. But perhaps the abbess has seen some special skill or spark in me, one that

makes me shine brighter than Annith and the others.

The boat crunches up onto the stony beach and I step out, doing my best to keep my fine gown clear of the surf. "Thank you," I say; I wave goodbye to the ferryman, but he is already rowing back out to sea.

Eager to make my report to the abbess, I hurry toward the convent. As I pass the standing stone, I kiss the tips of my fingers and press them to the cold rough surface in a quick prayer of thanks to Mortain for guiding my hand.

The sun is just beginning to rise, but the chickens are already at their morning scratching. The reverend mother too is an early riser and already sits at her desk. I knock on her open door.

She looks up from her paperwork. "You're back."

"Yes, Reverend Mother."

She puts down the unopened letter she was holding and gives me her full attention. "It went well?"

I try not to preen. "Very well. It was exactly as you and Sister Vereda said. The marque was clear upon the traitor, and the poison was just beginning to work as I left."

"Good." She nods her head, satisfied. "You are safely returned to us before any will know he is dead. An easy, clean first kill, as it should be. No one saw you?"

"No one. Except for the maid, who thought exactly what Sister Beatriz told us she would think." I hesitate, filled with regret that Hervé has tainted my first assignment but knowing I cannot risk omitting him from my report, in case he is part of the test. "And a farmer from the fields who tried to delay me. For a dalliance, I think."

The corner of her mouth quirks up in amusement. "I trust you were able to take care of that?"

"But of course, Reverend Mother."

Her eyes narrow. "Did you kill him?"

"No! He was not assigned to me, nor did he bear a marque."

"Good." She seems pleased with my account. "Do you wish to rest for a few hours before joining the others?"

"No, thank you." I am far too excited to even think of sleep.

She smiles, as if she knows full well why I cannot sleep. "Very well. Once you have changed, report to Sister Thomine in the courtyard. Leave your clothes on the bed, and Sister Beatriz will fetch them shortly." She gives a nod of dismissal, then cracks open the seal on the letter in front of her. Just before I step into the hall, she calls out, "Ismae?"

"Yes, Reverend Mother?"

“Your second test will come soon,” she says, not looking up from her correspondence. “It will not be this easy.”

I cannot tell if her words are meant as a promise or a warning, so I take them as both. In the dormitory, I change quickly and leave my finery on the bed. As I lace up my plain gray habit, I glance out the window. Sister Thomine is leading the others in evasive techniques. Well and good, as I need to discharge some of this pent-up excitement. I hurry out to join them.

Four of the younger girls are grappling together, and Sister Thomine has paired herself with Annith. When she sees me, she waves me over, glad to pass off this duty to someone else.

Annith is highly skilled in this art.

As she steps away, I bow formally to Annith. She returns the bow, then takes her stance. As I take mine, I suppress a snort of laughter. If only that oaf from the tavern could see me now.

And then Annith comes at me in a quick flash of supple muscles and sleek limbs as she steps inside my guard and wraps her arms around my neck. “How did it go?” she whispers.

“Perfectly.” I bring both my arms up and jerk them outward, breaking her grip. “As smooth as Sister Beatriz’s finest silk.”

Annith feints to the side, then grabs my arm and twists it behind my back. “There were no difficulties?”

I grit my teeth against the pain. “None. Except for bit of lip from a serving maid and a grope from a drunken oaf, but that was all. I even saw the marque of Mortain,” I whisper.

“But you have not yet received the Tears of Mortain!” she says, relaxing her hold.

“I know.” I try to keep the smugness from my voice, but it is there all the same. To distract her, I step sharply back to knock her off balance, then spin out of her loosened grip and continue moving until I am behind her with my right arm tight against her throat. “Don’t worry, though. I’m sure it will be your turn soon.”

“Girls!” Sister Thomine calls out. “Enough chatter, unless your plan is to talk your victims to death.”

Annith reaches up and pinches a spot at the base of my wrist. My hand goes numb and she slides out of my grasp. I try to hold on to her with one hand, but she is slippery as an eel and evades my hold. “No news of Sybella yet?” I ask as I shake off the numbness.

Annith springs behind me. Like a whipcord, her arm comes around my neck. “No, none of the sisters will breathe a word. And if Reverend Mother talks of

her, she does so only when I am asleep and cannot listen at the door. It is as if Sybella has ceased to exist,” she says just before she tries to choke me.

I tuck my chin under to block her attempt. “I’m sure she’ll be fine.” My words are thick and garbled under her grip at my throat. “This is her third assignment, after all.”

Annith grunts, and I know her thoughts turn to their familiar concern—why others have been chosen and she has not. She grabs my arm, spins around in front of me, then levers my body over her shoulder. For one brief moment I fly through the air. The painful landing on my back forces all the breath from my lungs, and I gasp like a caught fish.

“Fourth,” Annith says, looking down at me. “It is her *fourth* assignment.”

Chapter Seven

“CAREFUL!” SISTER SERAFINA SCOLDS. “Don’t let it boil or it will turn to resin and be of no use.”

“Yes, Sister.” I keep my eyes fixed on the small flask I hold over the flame. Tiny bubbles have begun to form along the sides of the glass, but it is not boiling. Not yet.

“Excellent,” she says from just behind my shoulder. “Now put it over here to cool.”

Using iron tongs, I lift the flask and set it on a cooling stone. We are brewing up a fresh batch of night whispers. In its current volatile state, it will kill anyone who breathes its fumes, causing the lungs to harden and become rigid and brittle as glass.

Anyone except for Sister Serafina and me. We are immune.

“Once it cools,” she says, “we’ll add it to this candle wax, and then—” A knock on the door interrupts her. “Don’t come in!” she calls out in alarm.

“I won’t.” It is Annith, who surely knows better than to enter. “Reverend Mother has asked that Ismae come to her office right away.”

The thrill of this summons makes my heart flutter. The only time I have been called to her office since I arrived is to receive news of an assignment. Without waiting for the nun to dismiss me, I hurry to the stone basin, where I begin scrubbing the last traces of poison from my hands.

Sister Serafina heaves a sigh of annoyance. “How the holy mother expects me to supply all our poisons without help is surely one of Mortain’s great mysteries.”

I glance sideways at her. “You’d think she would send Annith instead.”

Sister Serafina pins me with a severe look. “The reverend mother has her reasons. Now go. Do not make her wait.”

I go, being sure to curtsy so as not to antagonize her further. She thinks she has told me nothing, but it is just the opposite. I now know that there is an actual reason that Annith has not been sent out. And if Sister Serafina knows what it is, surely Annith and I can find out as well.

On my way to the reverend mother’s office, I straighten my veil and brush a bit of dust from my skirts. I pause at the door, take a deep breath and compose my features, then knock.

“Enter.”

When I step into the office, the sight of a man sitting there is as shocking as a clap of thunder in the quiet room. His hair is white, as is his neatly trimmed beard. A heavy gold chain with a bejeweled pendant winks at me from the fur collar of his thick brocade robe.

“Come in, Ismae,” the abbess says. “I’d like you to meet Chancellor Crunard. He is a patron of our convent and acts as the liaison between us and the outside world.”

He is also head of one of the oldest and noblest families in Brittany and a hero of the last four wars. He has fought long and hard for our independence. Indeed, every one of his sons has died fighting against the French. I sink into a respectful curtsy. “Good day, my lord.”

He nods a brief greeting, his eyes giving away nothing of his thoughts.

“We have another assignment for you,” the reverend mother says, and a fierce triumph rises up in me at this newest opportunity to prove my worthiness.

The abbess leans back in her chair and folds her arms. “What has Sister Eonette told you of our political situation?” She asks the question lightly enough, but with the reverend mother, everything is a test. She will not care how many of Sister Eonette’s lectures I have missed because Sister Serafina needed my help or because I was stuck in the scriptorium, struggling with my letters.

I fold my hands primly in front of me. “Our beloved Duke Francis died nearly two months ago, harried unto death by the aggression of the French regent. He and the other nobles fought hard to halt France’s overreaching her authority, but they were defeated. Because of this defeat, our duke was forced to accept the Treaty of Verger, the terms of which are favorable to the French and make it difficult for our country to maintain its independence.”

The abbess looks pleased and casts a glance at the chancellor as if to say *See?* He nods, then raises his eyebrows in a question. At her assent, he speaks, the deep rumble of his voice jarring in this place where I have only ever heard women. “What of our young duchess? What do you know of her?”

I shift slightly, uncomfortable with this strange man quizzing me. “I know that her hand in marriage has been promised to half the princes in Europe and that she has vowed to keep our country’s independence.” I cannot help but feel sympathy for our poor duchess. “She has been sold to the highest bidder, for all that she is noble born.”

The chancellor’s eyes widen in surprise and he gives the abbess a quizzical look. “Is that what you teach them?”

“Not in so many words, Lord Chancellor, but you must understand that those who are drawn to Mortain’s work, by their very natures, have no love for the married state or for forced or arranged marriages. Indeed, many have joined our

convent to escape those very things.” The abbess’s cold blue gaze clashes against the chancellor’s tired brown one, and some unspoken thing passes between them. Chancellor Crunard looks away first, and the abbess turns back to me.

“We have reason to believe that the French are sending a spy to meet with Baron Lombart in an attempt to purchase his loyalty. The port Lombart controls will be critical should war break out again between our countries. We wish you to intercept this contact before he meets with Lombart. We cannot afford to lose another of our nobles to the French.”

My heart quickens at this new task. It is much more complex than the tavern, a true test of all I have learned, and I am eager to pass it.

“You will accompany Chancellor Crunard as his paramour at Lombart’s hunting lodge in Pont-Croix this evening,” the abbess says. I sneak another glance at the chancellor. He is so old, I am sure everyone will see through this deception. If anything, they will think I am his daughter. “Now,” the abbess continues, “there is much to prepare—ah! Here they are,” she says at the knock on her door.

Without waiting for an invitation, Sister Arnette and Sister Beatriz enter the room.

“Go with the sisters and they will see that you are given what you need for tonight. When they are done, they will take you to Sister Vereda. She has Seen this, Ismae, and will tell you all you need to know. Then you will meet Sir Crunard in the courtyard.”

“Yes, Reverend Mother.” I dip into another curtsy. As I follow the two nuns from the room, I struggle to keep from skipping in my excitement.

“We will go to the armory first,” Sister Arnette announces as we step into the hallway.

Sister Beatriz protests. “I think we should dress her first. How will you know what she can carry if you do not first see her gown?”

“True enough,” Sister Arnette says, but the sigh that escapes her makes me think she holds no greater love for Sister Beatriz’s womanly arts than I do.

Even so, when we enter Sister Beatriz’s inner chamber, I gape. It is the first time I have been here, and gowns of every sort hang from pegs or are folded in stacks, silk upon velvet, velvet upon brocade, in every color imaginable. Sister Beatriz’s eyes are already searching among the finery. “Ah. This one might work.” She plucks a russet velvet gown from a stack. It has a gold and green embroidered stomacher, and I have never seen anything so fine. She holds it up to me and squints, then shakes her head. “Makes you look sallow.” I am not sure

what sallow is, but it is a lovely gown and my eyes follow it longingly as she tosses it aside.

Next, she holds up a gown of vermilion brocade. Not caring for the brightness of the color, I mutter, “Why not just paint a sign on my forehead?”

“You think appearing in stark black like a crow among peacocks will aid your stealth?” she asks.

“No, Sister.”

She gives a snort of satisfaction that I have taken her point, then begins pulling down dozens of gowns from the pegs. But they are too loose or too short or the color does not suit her. Or me. At last she takes down a claret velvet gown and holds it up. She and Sister Arnette exchange a glance. “It is perfect for her, no?”

“Except it is missing a bodice,” I point out.

Sister Beatriz waves my concerns aside. “The bodice is just cut low, in the Venetian style, the better to display your womanly charms.”

Sister Arnette studies the gown, her fingers tapping against her chin while she thinks. “I can work with that,” she finally says, and my heart sinks. I am not sure I can work with it. Or *in* it, as the case may be.

But that is the end of the discussion, and Sister Beatriz shoves the gown at me. “Try it on so we may see if it fits.” She motions me to a dressing screen in the far corner. I hold the gown as gently as a newborn babe, afraid my fingers will crush the soft fabric.

Behind the screen, I quickly slip out of my habit.

“Here.” Sister Beatriz drapes a delicate piece of linen over the screen. “You will need a finer shift under that.”

Painfully aware of the two older women on the other side of the screen, I slip out of my old chemise, shivering in my nakedness. I am relieved when I finally have the new shift on, then I quickly step into the rich velvet skirt and tie the ribbons at my waist. I slide my arms into the tight sleeves and marvel at how perfectly they fit, as if they’d been made for me.

As I ease the bodice up over my shoulders, I see that Sister Beatriz is right. It does cover my bosom, but only barely. I have always known that I must on occasion pass as a noblewoman, but I am loath to dress as a harlot. “I don’t think this will work,” I call out, too embarrassed to emerge from behind the screen.

Then Sister Beatriz is there, swatting my clumsy fingers aside and doing up the lacings herself. “It is perfect. It will capture every man’s attention so that no one will bother to watch what your hands are doing. Now come with me, Sister Arnette is waiting in the armory. Here are your slippers and cloak. I’ll dress your hair when she is done with you.”

Even though the armory pales by comparison to Sister Beatriz's dressing room, I much prefer it. Indeed, it is one of my favorite rooms at the convent. In addition to every size and shape of knife and dagger, it holds razor-edged rondelles, used to kill from a distance. Crossbows of all dimensions hang from the rafters, and rows of bolts are lined up on trays. Garrote wires are looped from hooks, as are all manner of leather harnesses and sheaths for concealing the weapons on our bodies. A sharp metallic tang hangs in the air and mixes with the scent of goose fat used for polishing the blades.

Sister Arnette grabs my hand and pulls me to an entire wall lined with knives. She gives my tight sleeves a quick glance. "We'll never get blades under those. Here." She tosses an ankle sheath at me. As I bend over to strap it on, my womanly charms nearly tumble out of my bodice. *Merde*.

Once the ankle sheath is secure, I am handed a thin stiletto encrusted with jewels. I nearly drop it in surprise. "'Tis so fine."

"It is all the rage in Venice. But this will be your main weapon tonight." She produces a finely wrought bracelet that looks like heavy cord dipped in gold and wrapped round and round. She grasps the ends, then pulls, uncoiling it to reveal a length of thin, deadly wire.

"You have only to put your hands to his neck for an embrace. If you move quickly enough, he will not know what's happening until it is too late. If need be, you could even do it in the darkened corner of a crowded room."

She re-coils the bracelet and hands it to me. I slip it on my wrist.

Sister Beatriz studies me thoughtfully. "Perhaps I should rouge her nipples with red ocher."

"Sister!" I am well and truly shocked. Annith has warned me that Sister Beatriz has the makings of a fine lightskirt, but I have missed too many of her classes to see this side of her.

"Don't be tiresome." She dismisses my distress with a wave of her hand and turns to Sister Arnette. "If she raises her arms like so"—the old nun raises hers as if putting them around someone's neck—"her bodice will gape. Since Venetian women rouge their nipples, we should do the same to hers, don't you think? To keep the disguise complete?"

Sister Arnette gives me a sympathetic grin. "I think if he catches sight of her nipples, it won't matter whether they're rouged or not. He'll be dead within seconds."

It is Sister Arnette who leads me to the convent's inner sanctum, where Sister Vereda resides, and I am glad, for I am heartily sick of Sister Beatriz. At the seeress's door, the nun pats my arm. "Good luck," she says, and I do not know if

she means for my assignment tonight or my visit with the ancient nun. Sister Arnette leaves and I turn back to the door. Before I even knock, a voice calls out, “Come in.”

I step into the seeress’s quarters, which are as dark and warm as a womb. There is a faint reddish glow from a charcoal brazier. Sister Vereda has no need of light, but her old joints are fond of heat. I peer into the darkness to try to see her better. She cocks her wimpled head to the side and studies me with her blind eyes. It is unsettling. “Come closer,” she says.

I fumble my way across the darkened room, the heavy, unfamiliar skirts hampering me as much as the lack of light. “Reverend Mother says you have Seen my assignment this evening and can give me directions so I may strike true.”

“Strike true? Is that your heart’s desire then?”

“But of course! Mortain and His convent have raised me up from a root cellar and given me a more glorious life than I could ever have imagined. I will repay that debt in every way I can.”

She stares at me in silence, her milky white eyes unnerving. “Remember, true faith never comes without anguish.”

Before I can respond, she reaches into a small pouch at her waist, pulls out a handful of something—it looks to be small bones and a tangle of feathers—and tosses it on the brazier.

Flames spring to life and an acrid tang fills the room. Sister Vereda stares into the small fire as if reading the red-gold flames reflected in her unseeing eyes.

“Twenty paces, then up a staircase. Small for a man, and wiry, like the fox he resembles. The dust of Amboise clings to his boots, and a red ruby given to him by the French regent winks in his ear. Martel is his name. That is who Mortain has marked.” The flames sputter out, and Sister Vereda’s eyes return to their milky white.

Not knowing what else to do, I curtsy. “Yes, Sister. Mortain’s will be done.”

Next, she lifts a small box from the shelf under the brazier. Her eyes may be blind, but her fingers are nimble and quick, and she opens the small leather case and pulls from it a heavy bottle. It is of deepest black, its polished surface catching small sparks of light from the embers so that it looks as if she holds a piece of night sky filled with stars.

“Even though you are not a full initiate, the reverend mother says that you are to receive the Tears of Mortain. Kneel,” she orders as she pulls the stopper from the bottle.

Keeping my eyes on the sharp, tapered point of the stopper, I kneel at her feet.

“By the grace of Mortain, I grant you Sight so you may see His will and act on it. Do you promise to obey the saint and act only when He bids it?”

“I do.”

She dips the point of the stopper into the contents of the vial, then gropes gently for my face. “Open your eyes wide, child.”

Even though I am sore afraid of that sharp wand, I do as she commands. She moves it unerringly toward my eyes, one single heavy drop hanging from the tapered end, and I pray her hand is steady.

There is a touch of warmth, then my vision blurs and all the colors and light in the small room run together. My eyes grow warmer and warmer until I fear they will burst into flames. For a moment, I am afraid she has blinded me, but then the sensation passes and the heat and the blurring cease, and I can see again. It seems to me that everything is somewhat brighter now, all the edges sharper, as if the same milkiness that clouds Sister Vereda’s gaze has been ripped away from my own.

But it is not only my sight that is different. My skin, too, has changed, and I feel the air as an almost solid thing against my arms and face. I am aware of Sister Vereda in a way I was not before; I can *feel* her, feel the spark of life that shines so brightly within her.

“These Tears of Mortain are a gift to those of us who serve Him,” she explains as she returns the vial to its box. “They allow us to experience life and death as He does. Now go,” Sister Vereda says. “And may Mortain keep you in His dark embrace and guide your hand with His own.”

Chapter Eight

CHANCELLOR CRUNARD HAS CLAIMED THIS chateau is nothing but a hunting lodge, but to my eyes, accustomed as they are to a poorly thatched cottage and the austere world of the convent, it looks like a palace. The only thing the nobles appear to be hunting is one another, whether for spirited gossip or furtive liaisons behind the tapestries.

The chancellor pats my arm. "Relax, my dear," he says. "Or else they will wonder why my new paramour is scowling so." His wry smile causes me to blush. Prettily, I hope.

"Your pardon, milord." It had seemed a most far-fetched notion when the abbess first explained it. Surely no one would believe that I was with Chancellor Crunard in *that* way. But the truth is, there are many such pairings throughout the hall, older lords and nobles sporting young maids on their arms just as they sport jaunty feathers in their caps or jeweled daggers at their hips.

Our host, Baron Lombart, approaches, and Crunard introduces us. Lombart is fat and old and reminds me of the boar who used to hide in the woods near my home. I murmur some polite nicety and wonder if my new garrote would be able to slice through the thickness of his neck.

I suspect Crunard has guessed the drift of my thoughts, for he nods in the direction of the crowd. "Entertain yourself for a bit, my dear. The baron and I have business to discuss."

It is my cue, and joy at being released surges through me. I am only too happy to let the tides and currents of the mingling nobles carry me to the edge of the room so I can slip away to my assignment.

As I move toward the door, curious glances brush against my skin. I feel one particular gaze linger too long, so I stop and pretend to make conversation with two gentlemen nearby. One of them stops talking and turns his protruding eyes to me. I give him a withering glance and continue on my way.

When I reach the doorway, no one is watching, so I slip from the room. The hallway is dark compared to the brightness of the great hall, and cool. I am glad to be away from the smell of too many bodies and warring perfumes. I count off twenty paces and am not surprised to find a wide, sweeping stairway, just as Sister Vereda predicted.

When I reach the first door at the top of the stairs, I draw into myself, as I have been taught, letting everything around me grow still, and then I cast my

senses into the room beyond. The Tears of Mortain have done their job well, for I am certain there is no spark of life burning behind that door.

The next chamber is as cold and empty as the first, but when I stand in front of the third, I feel the faint trickle of life, warm and pulsing.

Anticipation bubbles through me, and it is all I can do to keep from charging in, daggers drawn. Instead, I put a hand to my heart to calm it and quickly run through Sister Beatriz's instructions. This will be the hard part, acting the coquette.

With one last deep breath, I force a smile of breathless anticipation onto my face and open the heavy wooden door. "Jean-Paul?" I whisper into the room, then stumble slightly, as if I've had too much wine. "Is that you?"

Standing at the window, Martel whirls around to face me. He is just as Sister Vereda said he would be, not much taller than I, his hair the reddish brown of a fox. I stumble toward him, and barely have time to register his scowl of alarm before he steps away from the window and grabs my shoulders. "What are you doing here?" He gives me a rough shake and I let my body go slack, as if I can barely manage to stand on my own.

"I am looking for Jean-Paul. And you, sir"—I tap him lightly on the chest—"are not him." I squish my lips into a pout and pray I do not look like a hooked fish. I am close enough to see the ruby he wears in left ear.

Looking down at my bodice, the fool relaxes. Are men truly such idiots that they cannot resist two orbs of flesh? Martel glances at the door behind us and licks his lips. "Perhaps, after I conduct my business, I can come to demoiselle's aid," he suggests. His eyes stray again to my bodice, and the dagger at my ankle calls to my clenched hands. *Not yet*, I tell myself. *Not yet*.

"That is a very kind offer." I let my eyes wander up and down his body, as if assessing his charms. In truth, I am searching for the *marque*. His forehead is clear, as are his lips. Uncertainty raises its head. I sigh as if smitten. "But Jean-Paul," I say, then sigh again. I tilt my head, considering. "Well, as you say, he is not here. Mayhap monsieur will do." *As if I am a mare in heat*, I think in disgust, *and any stallion will suffice*.

Martel steps closer. I swallow the distaste that rises up in my throat and wind my arms around his neck. There! Just where his shirt meets his jaw line, a dark shadow marks his skin. He sees the spark of interest flare in my eyes, and his own heat with desire. I allow my body to press even closer against his. He licks his lips again. "As soon as I am done . . . Perhaps you can wait in the next chamber?"

"My pleasure, milord," I say. He nuzzles my ear to seal our agreement. While pretending to play with the hair at the nape of his neck, I slip the bracelet from

my wrist. Just as his nuzzling starts to move dangerously low, I yank the hidden wire from the bracelet. Before he can guess what is happening, I loop it around his neck, spin out of his embrace, step around to his back, and pull tight, a move I have practiced with Annith a hundred times.

His hands scrabble at his neck, tearing at the silver wire. The sounds he makes are ugly and desperate and fill me with uncertainty. Then I remember that this man is betraying my country, my duchess, and I pull tighter, praying to Mortain for strength.

He grants it. After a short but spirited struggle, Martel sags against me. Before he is completely gone, I lean in and put my lips to his ear. “We punish those who betray our country.” My words are as soft and tender as a lover’s caress, and Martel shudders as death claims him.

Just as I relax my grip, a thick warmth rises up from his body and rubs against me, like a cat rubbing its owner’s leg. Images fill my mind: a fleet of ships, a sealed letter, a heavy gold signet ring, my own breasts. The warmth swirls briefly within me, then dissipates with a sudden whoosh, leaving me chilled and shaken.

What in Mortain’s name was that?

His soul.

The words come unbidden. Almost as if someone else—the god, perhaps—has spoken them.

Why has no one at the convent warned me of this? Is this one of the glories of Mortain that Sister Vereda spoke of? Or something else? For I cannot decide if I have just been violated in some way or granted a sacred trust.

But I have no time for reflections. I shove my questions aside and brace myself against the man’s body, trying to balance his weight as I unwrap the garrote from his neck. I wipe it clean on his doublet, then retract the wire into the bracelet. With both hands free, I prop the body up against the window and peer down to the courtyard, praying that the cart Chancellor Crunard promised is there.

It is.

I grasp the traitor by his collar and begin the difficult task of shoving his body through the window.

For a small man, he is surprisingly heavy. I struggle with his dead weight, trying to maneuver it onto the casement. After a final heave that leaves me breathing hard, the lifeless body tumbles from the window. There is a moment of silence, then a thud as the body hits the waiting cart. I peer out in time to see the driver lift the reins and urge the horses forward.

I do not know where he will take the body or what he will do to keep it concealed, but that is not my task.

Flushed and shaky after my brush with Martel's soul, I long to sit down in one of the chairs and compose myself. Or fall to my knees and pray for understanding. But I must get back to Crunard so we may take our leave.

I push away from the wall and move toward the door, then hear a footstep in the corridor outside. Too late! Someone is coming. Baron Lombart, perhaps? Hoping to meet with Martel?

I try to think. Should I seduce him or kill him? Of course I would prefer to kill him, but I cannot—not unless he tries to kill me or I see the marque.

The latch on the door lifts and I step back a few paces, gripping my arms and hunching my shoulders, already slipping into the role I must play. Once again, anticipation burbles through me. Or perhaps it is panic.

When the door opens I cry out, "Jean-Paul? What took you so long? I'd almost given up on—oh. You are not Jean-Paul," I say accusingly.

"No," he says, then closes the door softly behind him. "I am not, but perhaps I can help you," he offers.

And indeed, he is not Jean-Paul, nor Baron Lombart. This man is much taller than the baron, and where Lombart had gone to fat, this man is all lithe muscle. His rich brown cloak is clasped in place with the silver oak leaf of Saint Camulos, the patron saint of battle and soldiers. Under that he wears an unadorned black doublet that is elegant in its simplicity. He steps farther into the room, and I begin to feel trapped. Afraid of what his sharp gray eyes will see in my face, I fold my arms so that my breasts rise up enticingly. "As you are not Jean-Paul, I do not think you can help me." Even as I speak, my eyes search his face, his neck, praying for the marque that will allow me to dispatch him. But there is none. Or none that I can see.

"But I am here and he is not." The man's eyes, as dark and shifting as storm clouds, roam over my body, but there is no heat there. His keen gaze dismisses me and moves to the window.

I take a step closer to distract him. "Ah, but I do not wish to play Jean-Paul false, my lord, even though your charms are many." In truth, he is not charming so much as dangerous, and I would have said anything to turn his attention from that window.

Almost as if reading my thoughts, he crosses to it and peers outside. I hold my breath. *Sweet Mortain, please let the cart be gone from the courtyard!*

The man's regard flicks back to me, cutting straight to the bone. "You wound me, demoiselle. I am sure I could make you forget all about Jean-Paul."

Still playing the coquette, I tilt my head to the side, but something is wrong. He is saying the right words, but his eyes do not match his flirtatious tone. A deep note of warning sounds inside me. “B-but I do not want to forget about him,” I say as if insulted.

He takes three giant strides toward me, his entire demeanor changing as he grabs my shoulders. “Enough with the games. Who are you? What are you doing here?”

I let my body go slack, as if I’m weak and frightened. “I might ask the same of you. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“Gavriel Duval. And if you are looking for a tryst, I can accommodate you.” He pulls me closer, so that I feel the heat rising off his body, warm and smelling faintly of some spice. “But I do not think that is what you are looking for.”

He knows! I can see it in the depths of his eyes. Somehow he knows what I am and why I am here.

I panic and begin to babble. “I am sorry, milord, but I am waiting for Jean-Paul. I will leave you to your moment of quiet and be on my way.” With a nimble twist of my body, I slip from his iron grip. It is artlessly done, but I am free and fleeing for the door.

Once in the hall, I run all the way to the stairs. I take them two at a time, then pause a moment to compose myself. I look over my shoulder, but there is no sign of Gavriel Duval. I straighten my skirts and square my shoulders, then enter the great hall. Upon seeing me, Crunard extricates himself from his conversation and makes his way through the crowd to my side. He arches an eyebrow. “Is everything as it should be?”

“It will be once we are away from here,” I say.

As he escorts me to the door, I feel a pair of eyes boring into the back of my head. I know if I turn and look, they will be the color of storm clouds.

Chapter Nine

AT THE CONVENT, THE REVEREND mother looks at me sharply as she leans forward. “You are certain he said Duval?”

“Yes, Reverend Mother. That was the name he gave. Although perhaps it was false? He also wore the silver oak leaf of Saint Camulos,” I add, in case that will help in any way.

The abbess glances at Crunard and he nods reluctantly. “Duval does serve Saint Camulos, as do most knights and soldiers.”

“Even so,” she says. “It would be easy enough to get hold of such a pin to round out the deception.”

Crunard shifts in his chair. “But if it *was* Duval . . .” he says.

“There could be other reasons for his being there,” the abbess points out.

“There could,” Crunard agrees grudgingly. “But it is also possible we have caught a very big fish indeed.”

The abbess turns her piercing blue gaze back to me. “How did he react to finding you in the room?”

“He assumed I was there for a liaison of some sort and was flirtatious at first. Then he grew angry.” I want to look away, afraid she will be able to tell just how poorly I played my role with him, but trying to avoid her will only make her pay closer attention.

“Tell me everything he said. Everything.”

And so I repeat the conversation for her, word by word. When I am done, she looks at Crunard, who shrugs. “It could mean nothing; it could mean everything. I no longer claim to know all the duchess’s enemies. They hide too well among her allies.”

“But Duval . . .” the abbess says, shaking her head. She leans back in her chair and closes her eyes. I cannot tell if she is thinking or praying. Mayhap both. While her eyes are closed, I take a deep breath and long for my own bed. Tonight’s duties have been exhilarating, but draining too. That Duval saw through my deception has left me shaken. I had thought there was little more for me to learn, but tonight has proven me wrong. I vow to pay more attention to Sister Beatriz’s lessons in the womanly arts. Perhaps Annith and I can even practice on each other.

“So,” the reverend mother says, coming out of her reverie. “This is what we shall do. Baron Lombart’s guests will be staying the week. Chancellor Crunard

was on his way back to court, but he has had a change of heart, haven't you, Chancellor?"

He nods, then spreads his hands. "I fear my horse has gone lame."

The abbess smiles. "So of course he will return to Lombart's with his young guest. And you"—her eyes pin me to my chair—"will return with him and find a way to engage Duval again. Preferably alone. With luck, you can convince him to play a game of seduction with you, a liaison or some such—"

"But Holy Mother—"

Her face grows cold and distant. "Did you or did you not vow to use every skill you possess in the service of Mortain?"

"Of course, but—"

"There is no but. Your feminine artistry is as much a part of your arsenal as your dagger or beloved poison. Duval must be watched. You yourself have found evidence of that. The closer you get to him, the more you will learn. Perhaps you will even be able to coax truths from him under the guise of pillow talk."

I am certain I could no more coax secrets out of the dark, angry Duval than I could coax the abbess to dance a gavotte in the streets of Nantes, but I keep that to myself. I have already performed poorly tonight and I am afraid if I argue she will think I am no longer fit to serve the convent. Then a thought occurs to me. "Why not just eliminate him now and avoid the risk altogether?"

"Did you see the marquer of Mortain on him?"

I hesitate, then answer truthfully. "No. But Martel's was nearly hidden under his collar. Perhaps Duval's hides as well."

She smiles, and too late I see I have played right into her hands. "All the more reason to get close to him, no?"

I cannot begin to fathom why Mortain insists on concealing these marques of His so that I must play hide-and-seek.

"Ismae," she says, serious once more. "Duval is one of the duchess's most trusted advisors. It is critical we know where he stands."

"He has her ear and trust in a way few others do," explains Crunard.

"And if he is betraying us, he will feel Mortain's punishment soon enough." The abbess's face is grim. "Perhaps even at your hand—"

She is interrupted by scuffling at the door. The abbess only has time to frown before the door bursts open. My breath hitches sharply in my throat as Gavriel Duval himself strides in.

Annith is right on his heels. "I am sorry, Reverend Mother! I told him you'd left instructions not to be disturbed, but he wouldn't listen." She sends the intruder a scathing look.

“Yes, I can see that,” the abbess says. She sends a quick questioning glance my way. When I nod, indicating he is who I saw at Lombart’s, she turns back to the man glowering in her doorway. “Well, Duval, come in. Don’t hover at the door.”

Duval comes farther into the room and I nearly flinch at his heated gaze. In truth, the man is angry enough to breathe fire. “Abbess. Chancellor Crunard.” He gives a perfunctory nod to both. His anger eats up all the empty space in the room. “We have a few things we must discuss.”

The abbess raises an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yes. The incompetence of your novices, for one.” He places undue emphasis on the word *novice*, I think.

“Twice now, she”—he jabs his finger in my direction—“has interfered with my work. The convent cannot keep sending out agents who destroy valuable sources of information.”

“Twice?” I challenge him, for I have seen him only once before.

“The tavern.” At my blank look, he hunches his shoulders and leers. “Hurry back down to Hervé when you are done, eh?”

The oaf! *He* was the oaf at the tavern. My fists clench at the memory.

The reverend mother speaks, her cold voice drawing his attention back to her. “The convent has always acted alone in carrying out Mortain’s will. Are you suggesting we need your permission?” Her tone implies he should not be suggesting any such thing.

He folds his arms across his chest. “I propose only that some thought be applied to your actions. Twice now you have gotten to men before I did. And while you and your saint are interested in meting out retribution, I am interested in information that can guide our country out of this wretched hole we are in.”

“You wanted them for questioning.” The reverend mother’s flat tone does not reveal whether she feels remorse for having disrupted his plans.

Duval nods. “I am sure, given the right incentive, they could have led us to the puppet master pulling their strings.”

Crunard sits forward in his chair, suddenly alert. “Surely they come from the French regent?”

“Perhaps,” Duval says cautiously. “But she is working with someone at court and I would like to know who.”

Crunard spreads his hands in invitation. “Will you share your suspicions with us?”

“Not at this time.” Duval speaks quietly, but his refusal is shocking just the same.

Crunard recovers first. “Surely you’re not suggesting we are not trustworthy?”

“I suggest no such thing, but it would be unwise for me to voice any suspicions I have without sufficient evidence. Unfortunately”—he sends me another scathing glance—“someone keeps destroying my evidence.”

Mouth pursed in thought, the abbess folds her arms in her sleeves. “How do you propose we rectify this? Are we to consult with you every time the saint bids us act?”

Duval runs his hand through his hair and turns to the window. “Not necessarily. But we must find a better way to coordinate our efforts. Because of your novice’s actions, the duchess has lost valuable information.”

I feel as if I’ve been slapped. “*Might* have lost,” I correct under my breath.

He looks at me in surprise. “Excuse me?”

I willingly bow to my god and my abbess, but I’ll be damned if I will bow to this man. I raise my head and meet his gaze. “I said *might* have lost. It is not certain that these men had any vital information.”

He strides toward me then, coming so close that I must tilt my head back to meet his glower. He places his hands on the arms of my chair, imprisoning me. “But we will never know, will we?” His voice is soft and mocking and he is so near I feel his words move across my skin.

“Duval!” The reverend mother’s sharp voice breaks through our tense silence. “Quit intimidating my novice.”

He flushes and pushes away from my chair.

“I was not intimidated,” I mutter under my breath.

He glances angrily at me but says nothing. A small tic begins at the base of his jaw. He appeals to Chancellor Crunard. “Tell them. Tell them how delicate the balance. How each bit of information has the power to sway that balance.”

“He has no need to tell me,” the abbess says sharply.

Crunard spreads his hands. “Then you know it is true. The circling vultures grow bold. The regent of France has forbidden that Anne be crowned duchess. It is our enemies’ wish to make her France’s ward so that they may claim Brittany for their own. They also claim the right to determine who she will marry.”

Duval begins pacing. “Spies are everywhere. We can scarce keep track of them all. The French have set up a permanent entourage within our court, which has made some of the border nations uneasy.”

Crunard adds, “Not to mention that their presence makes it impossible to see our duchess crowned without their knowledge. But until we place that crown upon her head before her people and the Church, we are vulnerable.”

I cannot help but feel sympathy for our poor duchess. “Surely there is some way out of this mess?”

I have addressed my question to the abbess, but it is Duval who answers. “I will forge one with my bare hands, if need be,” he says. “I vow that I will see her crowned duchess, and I will see her safely wed. But I need information against our enemies if I am to accomplish this.”

The room falls so silent that I fear they will hear the pounding of my heart. Duval’s vow has moved me, and that he has made it on sacred ground proves he is either very brave or very foolish.

At last the abbess speaks. “I will concede your greater experience in the matter of gathering information,” she says.

At her words, Duval relaxes somewhat. The fool. The look she has given him is one that all of us at the convent have learned to fear, and I, for one, do not care for the gleam in her eye one bit.

“Your concern for our country is admirable, and it is true that few are as committed as you.” Her compliments lull him further into an illusion of safety. “And,” she continues, “I know you are as anxious to help us as we are to help you.”

Duval’s face creases into a frown as he tries to recall expressing such a thing. My heart swells with pride at how neatly the reverend mother is boxing him in. She glances at Chancellor Crunard, who gives a slight nod.

“We will be happy to work with you. And in order that we may do so more smoothly, we will place Ismae in your household for the next few weeks.”

The shock of her words forces all the air from my lungs, which is the only thing that keeps me from shouting *No!*

Duval sends me a horrified look—as if this has somehow been my doing! He opens his mouth to protest, but the abbess talks over him.

“We need someone at court. I don’t like being so far away when there is such turmoil surrounding our duchess. Posing as your mistress, Ismae will have access to all the people and information the convent requires. More important, she will be in a position to act when needed. And”—she gives him a beatific smile—“coordinating our respective duties will then be possible.”

I cannot help but admire the neatly set trap she has built around him. I would admire it even more if I had not been the bait. “But Reverend Mother—” I start, but she silences me with a look.

Duval, however, does not owe her the same blind obedience. “You are mad,” he says simply, and the reverend mother’s face hardens. “I shall do no such thing. I do not have time to play nursemaid to one of your novitiates.”

“Then any chance we have of coordinating our efforts is lost,” she says, her entire demeanor cold and distant.

“You are blackmailing me,” Duval says, aggrieved.

“No, only agreeing to the cooperation you yourself have requested.” And there it is. He is well and truly trapped, and he knows it.

When he huffs out a sigh of resignation, I know she has won. “I will not claim her as mistress. We shall say she is my cousin.” That barb finds its home. Am I so very repugnant?

The abbess looks incredulous. “And who will believe you? Your family and its ties are too well known for that to work.”

“Besides,” Sir Crunard adds, “no one would place an unwed maid in your care without female family members to chaperone. It is much more believable that you have simply taken a mistress.”

I clear my throat, and the abbess raises an eyebrow, giving me permission to speak. “Would it not work for me to be installed in his kitchens? Or as a maid?”

She waves her hand, brushing away my suggestions. “You would not have access to court then, which is the whole point of this exercise.”

“Except,” Duval points out, “I am not known to favor mistresses. Not to mention that if I did, it would certainly not be one who was greener than a winter apple.”

I set my teeth at his words. I am not *that* unpolished.

Reverend Mother leans back in her chair and *tsks*. “You exaggerate, milord. Ismae has been well trained in all things, including how to act as a man’s mistress.”

Clearly now will not be a good time to confess to playing truant during most of Sister Beatriz’s lessons.

“But more important,” Duval continues, “with the way things are at court, I cannot assure her protection.”

“I do not need protection,” I say, offended at such a suggestion.

“No, she does not,” the abbess agrees. “She merely needs an opportunity to act.”

“You would leave such life-and-death decisions to a novice?”

“Of course not,” Reverend Mother snaps. “We leave such life-and-death decisions in the hands of Mortain, where they belong.” She turns to me. “You’ll leave with Duval within the hour. Go pack a small bag to take with you. We’ll have the rest of your things sent to his residence in Guérande. You may go.”

Dizzy at the speed with which my world has been turned upside down, I stall, trying to think of one last argument I can make. I have joined the convent to withdraw from the world of men, not to be thrust upon the mercy of one.

The abbess leans across her desk. “Have you forgotten your vow for complete and unyielding obedience in all things?” she asks in a low voice. “You are but a novice. You still have much proving to do before you can take your final vows.”

I swallow my remaining protests and go to my room to pack.

Chapter Ten

BEFORE I FINISH PACKING, THERE is a knock at my door. When the reverend mother walks in, I am stunned into silence. She has never visited my quarters before.

She closes the door behind her, eyes alight with a cold, blue fire. “You see how conveniently this aligns with our plans, don’t you?”

It is true. Duval has given her an opening to carry out the very subterfuge she’d been planning minutes before he burst into her office. “It is what you wanted, Reverend Mother.”

“It is what Mortain wants, child,” she says sharply. “Or else it would not be so easily arranged. Settle your mind to this, Ismae. Even if Duval is guilty of nothing more than temper and poor manners, this arrangement will serve us well, for there are many at court who bear watching. I would know with whom Duval spends time, who his allies are, what correspondence he sends. And receives. Keep an eye out for anything from the French regent. Be truthful with him whenever possible. It will be the quickest way to lull him into trust. I am not overly fond of coincidences and would like to better understand why he was in that room. He has complete access to the duchess, and her complete confidence as well. I want to be certain he is serving her interests.”

“Is that whose interests we serve, Reverend Mother? Does serving the duchess serve Mortain? I am not being impudent,” I rush to add. “I truly do not understand.”

Her face softens. “But of course it is the same, child. Every day thousands of Breton voices beg our gods to keep them safe from the French and to keep our duchess strong. You can be certain France does not pray to our gods. Nor will the French honor the old saints as we do should they succeed in conquering our land. France is too closely aligned with the current pope, who would see all forms of worship but his own purged from the world. Of course Mortain does not wish that.”

She lifts her hand from the folds of her gown and I now see that she carries something wrapped in soft, worn leather. “You have made only two kills, not three, but you are close to completing your training. This assignment is your final test. Once you pass it, you will only have to say your vows to be fully committed to this convent.”

Dismayed that she would think otherwise, I meet her gaze, willing her to see the truth of my words. “I am fully committed already, Most Holy Mother.”

“I know. Which is why I am giving you one of Mortain’s own daggers.”

I blink in surprise. I have never heard of such a dagger before.

“Full initiates carry them, and since you will be acting as such, I would see you properly armed with a misericorde.” She unwraps the leather and reveals an ancient dagger with a handle made of antler and chased with silver. The blade is a handbreadth long and worn with age. “This knife possesses an old, ancient magic, one of Mortain’s greatest gifts,” she says, holding it out to me. When I take it in my hand, it is warm.

“On a living man,” she continues, “the misericorde needs only to pierce the skin in order to release the soul from the body. Because the dagger was fashioned by Mortain Himself, only a cut or scratch will send a person’s soul to Him, quick and sure. It is meant as a weapon of grace—a way to invoke death and release the soul from painful days spent lingering and pondering one’s sins and wrongdoings.”

Awed by the power of this gift, I slip it through the slit in my gown and attach it to my waist; the weight of it is reassuring against my leg. This talk of souls has also reminded me of Martel. “Reverend Mother, as Martel’s soul left his body, I felt it rush through me. Is that . . . normal?”

The abbess stares at me a long moment, then frowns slightly. “But of course. It was your first encounter with a soul, yes?” When I nod, she continues. “The encounter was no doubt powerful and unexpected, as it is no small thing to experience a soul in all its richness.” She reaches out and puts her hand to my cheek as a mother would her babe’s. “You came to us a lump of clay, and we molded you into an instrument of Death. Duval is the bow through which we will launch you at our common enemies. Go now, and make us proud. Do not shame us with doubt or hesitation.”

And indeed, I am filled with remorse at her words. I am naught but a tool of the convent, to be wielded at need. Who am I to question those who have raised me up from the cellar floor?

I am a handmaiden of Death. I walk in His dark shadow and do His bidding. Serving Him is my only purpose in this life, and I have let my annoyance drive that duty from my mind. It will not happen again.

Instead of heading directly to the courtyard, I take a quick detour to tell Annith goodbye. Sybella did not have time to say farewell, and I would not have Annith suffer that twice.

She is in the rookery, helping the elderly Sister Claude. She startles at my approach, her eyes widening as she takes in my traveling cloak and satchel. She presses her lips firmly together and she turns away.

I pick my way across the bird droppings to where she is resealing a small parchment with beeswax. Guilt at having been chosen before her—yet again—fills me. I try to lighten the mood. “Sister Claude will catch you,” I tease.

Annith keeps her attention firmly on hiding the signs of her snooping. “And I will argue that this is what they have trained me for.”

“True enough.”

Silence stretches out between us as she finishes her task. When she speaks, it is as if she is pushing bitter pips off her tongue. “You are going out again.”

There is no answer I can give her but the truth. “I am to become a member of Viscount Duval’s household.”

Her head snaps up, her interest caught in spite of her disappointment. “The one who burst in on the reverend mother this morning?”

I nod. There are still no voices in the courtyard, so I quickly tell Annith of the night’s events and what transpired in the abbess’s office. When I finish, she tosses the resealed message down on the table with disgust. “It should be me,” she says with quiet fierceness.

“I know. I can only think that the abbess must have something truly special she is saving you for.”

“It is because I failed at the lesson with the corpse.”

It is the only one of the convent’s lessons at which Annith failed to excel—the time we were made to practice our skills on corpses. Sybella and I had our pasts to give us strength for the task, but Annith did not. “Faltered, not failed,” I say. “And you did it in the end. Sister Arnette said you passed. That cannot be it. Mayhap it is simply because you are younger?”

“I am only a year younger than you and Sybella. And Sybella was my age when they first sent her out.” She glares at me, not wanting my words of comfort. “Do they know how many classes you’ve skipped?”

“Sister Serafina needed my help in the workshop!”

“Even so,” she sniffs. “I am better at dancing and coquetry, not to mention I can beat you seven out of ten times in our practices.”

Her words pluck at my own worries. This assignment will not be a case of quickly slipping in and then out again undetected. It will be a prolonged deception before those who can easily sniff out an impostor. “I am sure she knows that,” I say, and hope that it is true.

Her haughty expression crumples. “If it is not the corpse, then it makes no sense,” she whispers, and I feel her despair as if it were my own.

“Have you asked the abbess?” I would never take such a risk, but Annith is far more at ease with the reverend mother than I am.

“And have her question my faith and dedication to Mortain?” she scoffs. “I think not.”

I hear a male voice in the courtyard, reminding me where my current duties lie. “I must go. Please don’t let us part in anger.”

She steps closer and throws her arms around me. “I am not mad at *you*.”

I hug her back and wonder how long it will be until I see her again. “Perhaps you will join me at court soon?” I suggest.

“I will pray for it nightly.”

I glance at the resealed parchment on the table before her. “No word from Sybella?”

“None.” Then her face brightens. “Perhaps you will learn of her at court.”

“If so, I will send word.” We hug one last time before I hurry from the rookery.

I clutch my small bundle of possessions and make my way toward the beach where Duval waits for me, his brown cloak whipping about his boots in the stiff breeze. He does not look any happier about this arrangement than I am, but from where I stand it is all his fault.

When he puts his hand on my elbow to help me into the boat, all the holy resolve I have wrapped myself in disappears and I jerk away, nearly tipping us both into the water.

“Don’t be an idiot,” he growls.

But I am in the boat and he is no longer touching me, so I consider myself the victor in our exchange.

I settle myself on one of the planks and stare out at the sun sparkling on the blue water. I amuse myself by wondering if Duval can swim and if I dare put it to the test.

“This is not my doing, demoiselle,” he says, “so you can save your prickly temper for the abbess.”

“It is most certainly your doing. If you had not seen fit to criticize the work of the convent, I would not be here now.” That is not the entire truth, for even before he burst into her office, the abbess was plotting to put me in Duval’s path again, but he does not need to know that.

He is silent for a while, the only sounds the lap of the water against the boat and the creak of the oars. As he rows, I cannot help but study him, this man in whose hands my fate now rests. His brooding eyes are the light gray of a winter sky. His chin is covered with whiskery stubble, which makes his firm, well-shaped mouth stand out all the more. Unbidden, the word *mistress* echoes

through my mind, and I shiver. A sense of foreboding washes over me. He is not Guillo, I remind myself. Indeed, he is as different from the pig farmer as can be.

Duval is the first to break the silence, and I count it another small victory. “Did Martel say anything before he died? Make a confession, perhaps?”

“A confession?” I allow a touch of scorn to seep into my voice. “We are handmaidens to Death, milord, not confessors.”

He shrugs in equal parts irritation and embarrassment. “I do not claim to know what your mysteries involve. Either way, did Martel have any last words as he looked into your face and saw his fate?”

Since Martel’s last words were of seduction, a red-hot poker will not drag them from me. “He said nothing of importance.”

“Are you certain? Perhaps it sounded like nothing to you but will have meaning for me. Tell me his exact words.”

Merde, but the man is persistent. Or is he concerned that the traitor named him? If so, I will not give him the satisfaction of saying yea or nay. “He talked only of meeting someone, that is all. How is it again that you came to be in that room at that exact time?” I ask sweetly.

His jaw twitches. “Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

I shrug my shoulders.

He stops rowing and leans forward, bringing his face close to mine. “I have served my country in more ways than you can imagine, and I serve it still. Do not ever doubt that.” His words are sharp and pointed and intended to slice my doubts to ribbons. And while they have the ring of truth to them, a traitor of his caliber would be very good at lying.

Still glaring at me, Duval begins to remove his cloak. For a moment, panic flutters in my breast and I wonder what he is doing. But he is only hot from his rowing, and he thrusts the garment at me. “Try not to let it get wet,” he says.

Without thinking, I take the thick, rich wool in my hand. A flash of silver catches my eye, and I run my finger along the oak leaf pinned to the cloak. The old noble families of Brittany have always dedicated at least one of their sons to the patron saint of soldiers and battle. I cast my mind back to the enormous tapestries that line Sister Eonette’s chamber walls, tapestries upon which the sisters of Mortain have recorded the family trees of all the Breton nobles throughout the centuries in bright silk thread. I do not recall seeing the name Duval embroidered there. Is it a family name? Or the name of his holding? For the first time, I wonder who exactly he is other than a favorite of the duchess who has earned the abbess’s and chancellor’s suspicions.

As he rows, his chest strains against the fine velvet of his doublet. The muscles in his arms bunch, then stretch, with every pull on the oar, and I cannot

help but think that even with all the training the convent has given me, he could easily best me in a hand-to-hand fight.

Not liking the direction of those thoughts, I cast my gaze out to sea, certain I have been consigned to a special version of hell.

Chapter Eleven

THE OLD SAILOR IS AT the beach waiting to help pull us ashore. Duval jumps off, then holds his hand out to me. I eye it warily.

He raises one sardonic eyebrow. "My cloak?"

Flustered, I shove it at him, then leap from the boat, ignoring the hem of my gown as it drags in the water. He slips the cloak around his shoulders, then begins walking to the stables. "I have only one horse, as I was not counting on company. Do you prefer to ride in front or back?"

Both of those choices are unacceptable to me. "The convent keeps a stable of horses here on the mainland for assignments," I inform him. "I will use one of those."

"Excellent. We will make better time that way."

I turn to the sailor. "Would you please saddle up Nocturne?" The abbess and I did not discuss this specifically, but surely she does not expect me to ride behind Duval the entire way to Guérande. And even if she does, she is not here to gainsay me.

The sailor nods and goes off to collect the horses. I can feel Duval studying me; it makes my skin itch. After a moment, he shakes his head, as if unable to believe the trap that has been sprung upon him. "They will think me a besotted fool."

I shrug and keep my attention fixed on the stables, willing the old sailor to return with our horses as quickly as possible. "If the boot fits, milord . . ."

He snorts. "I am many things, but besotted with you is not one of them."

Before I can make a further thorn of myself, the old sailor appears leading both our horses, and we busy ourselves making ready for our journey.

Under Duval's critically observant eye, I become all thumbs, and it takes me longer than it should to secure my satchel behind the saddle. When at last I am done, I lead Nocturne to the mounting block and, with the help of the old sailor, hoist myself into the saddle. Duval is already seated on his horse and waiting. "Ready?" He does not bother to mask his impatience.

"Yes." Before the word is halfway out of my mouth, Duval slaps his reins and his mount leaps forward.

Glowering at his back, I reach into the small pouch at my waist, take a pinch of salt, and toss it onto the ground, an offering to Saint Cissonius, the patron saint of crossroads and travelers. Only then do I urge Nocturne to follow.

Duval slows his horse long enough for me to draw alongside him. “Have you ever been to court before?” he asks. “Is there any chance you will be recognized by anyone?”

“No.”

“No? You do not even ask who is in residence at court. How can you be so certain no one there will know you? If you are recognized, it will throw our plans into disarray.”

Stung that he thinks me so witless, I toss my low birth across his path like a challenge. “No one will recognize me, milord, because I am naught but a turnip farmer’s daughter. You may rest assured that none of those in residence in Nantes will have ever seen me before.”

“Guérande,” he corrects. “Anne’s court moved to Guérande in order to escape the plague in Nantes.”

“Even so, I will not be recognized.”

He shoots me a glance out of the corner of his eye. “I thought you were supposed to be the daughter of Death?”

“I am,” I say through clenched teeth. “But I was raised the daughter of a farmer. There was dirt under my fingernails for the first fourteen years of my life. It has most likely seeped into my blood.”

He gives another snort—of derision or disbelief, I cannot tell. “It seems to me,” he says, “that being sired by one of the old saints puts your lineage into a class all its own, a class as untouchable by the nobility as the nobility is by turnip farmers. Now come, we must reach Quimper by nightfall.” Ensuring he has the last word, he puts his heels to his horse and breaks into a gallop.

It takes me a while to catch up.

We ride all day. In the newly cleared fields, sheaves of wheat hang from a cross, begging for Dea Matrona’s blessing on the harvest. Cattle graze nearby, feasting on the remaining stubble in the ground, one last fattening before slaughter. Indeed, the slaughter of animals for the winter has already begun and I can smell the copper tang of blood in the air.

A few stone cottages are scattered throughout the countryside, squat and stubborn against the encroaching wilderness. Most doors have a polished silver coin nailed to them, an attempt to discourage Mortain from casting His gaze on their households, since it is believed He will go to great lengths to avoid His own reflection. Those that are too poor to afford that small protection hang hazel twigs, in the hope that He will mistake them for the real bones He has come to collect.

The road is empty except for a handful of travelers heading to market in some nearby village. They carry bundles on their backs or push small carts. All of them step aside when they hear our horses coming.

There is little enough to distract my thoughts from circling back to Duval.

I am painfully aware of him riding in front of me, solid, commanding, angry. No matter where I steer my mind or my gaze, they always come back to him.

Mistress. The word whispers through me, taunting, beckoning, laughing. That I will have to pose as such is almost more than I can bear. And that I shall do so in front of half the Breton nobility is laughable. I pray that a messenger from the convent will come galloping up behind us to tell me it is a cruel jest and that Annith will go in my stead. But all I hear is the drip of the heavy mist as it falls upon the leaf mold on the forest floor, the creak of our saddles, and the faint jingle of harness.

Near midafternoon we reach a small wood. The thickness of the trees forces us to slow our horses to a walk so they may carefully pick their way through the branches and brambles. Under the canopy of leaves, it grows cool. I pull my cloak closer, but it does nothing to warm me.

It is not that kind of chill.

Death is nearby. I feel it in my bones, the way an old sailor's aching joints warn him of a brewing storm.

"What?" Duval's voice breaks through the shroud of quiet. He has noticed my distraction. His hand moves to his sword hilt. "Do you hear something?"

"No, but there is something dead nearby."

His eyebrows shoot up and he reins in his horse. "Dead? A man? A woman?"

I shrug. This has never happened to me before and my own ignorance frustrates me. "It could be a deer, for all I know."

"Where?"

"That way." I point off to the side of the road, through a faint opening in the trees.

Duval nods, then steers his horse over and motions for me to take the lead. Surprised that he gives a hunch of mine so much weight, I move ahead and let my sense of death lead me.

The trees are closer here, their soft, delicate branches waving overhead like rich green feathers. Just past an ancient standing stone, its surface mottled with lichen and moss and corroded by time, the sense of Death grows stronger. The freshly dug grave is well hidden by dead branches and a scattering of leaves, but I could find my way to it blindfolded. "Martel," I announce, certain of who is buried there.

I begin to dismount and immediately Duval is at my side, helping me. He reaches up and puts his hands on my waist. I bite back a gasp of surprise as the warmth from his hands seeps through his gloves and my gown to my skin, driving away some small portion of the chill Death has brought. He lifts me from the saddle and as soon as my feet touch the ground, I pull away from him. I am all business, as if he has not just touched me more intimately than I have ever been touched in my life, and I head toward the grave. "This must be where Crunard's men buried Martel."

Duval follows me and stares down at the freshly turned earth as if he would will Martel's secrets to ooze up from the ground. "On the battlefield," he tells me, "they say a man's soul lingers for three days. Is that true?"

"Yes." A plan is already taking shape in my mind, an idea that might remedy one of the mistakes of which I am accused.

"Would that you could speak with men's souls," he murmurs.

I glance up at him sharply. Has he pulled the very thought from my head?

He looks at me in surprise. "You *can* speak with souls?" he asks, as if the words are writ plain on my face.

While I do not like that he can read me in such a manner, I am eager to try this new skill and show him I am not as green or useless as he seems to think. "I can."

"Can you communicate with Martel's?"

And although I have been planning to do that very thing, his asking it of me makes me balk. "Are men subject to your probing even after death?"

He has the grace to look sheepish. "I mean no disrespect to the dead, nor would I ask you to break any of your vows. But if I am to find our duchess a way out of this mess, I must use every tool at my disposal."

Even souls. Even me.

"I will try, but he has been dead for more than a day, and I am accustomed to dealing with souls when they are fresh."

"Thank you." The look of gratitude changes his face, softening the harsh planes and making him appear younger than I had thought. He moves a respectful distance away, and I kneel and bow my head.

In truth, I have never done this, have no idea how to do it. I know only that I am compelled to try. I am eager to understand what it was I felt with Martel's soul yesterday. Was it merely the richness of the experience, as the abbess claimed? Or did his soul truly share his last thoughts and feelings with me? I want to fully comprehend all the gifts Mortain has bestowed upon me. Besides, if Duval is a traitor, as the abbess and Chancellor Crunard suspect, perhaps Martel's soul will reveal that to me.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I think of the thin veil that separates the living and the dead, of how tenuous it is, how very fragile. Once I have it pictured firmly in my mind, I search for an opening, a seam, any gap that might allow me to push aside that veil. There. A small corner turns up. I reach for it with my mind and gently peel back the barrier that exists between life and death.

Martel's unhappy soul is just on the other side. A towering wave of cold crashes over me. Hungry for life, the soul rushes to me. It rolls against my warmth, much as a pig trying to coat itself in mud. It is happy to see me, pleased even. And then suddenly, it is not.

It has recognized me. Knows that it was my hand that sundered it from its earthly body. It grows agitated, writhing against me, trying to escape my will. But I do not give way. This is not some innocent dead who deserves grace and mercy, but a traitor who surely earned whatever punishment Mortain saw fit to administer.

The thoughts and images the soul contains have begun to disintegrate. There is nothing but fragments and snatches, nothing I can grasp as a true memory. I bear down with my mind, willing the soul to gather itself, its memories. *For whom did you work?*

There is an angry swirl, an eddy of ice. I see the purple and yellow of the French crown, a fleur-de-lis plain on a servant's breast. Pleased with my success, I try again. *Who were you to contact?*

There is a brief flash of ships, and then the image is gone, broken into a thousand pieces as Martel's soul shifts. Now it tries to force its will on me, but the power it holds over life is nothing compared to the power I hold over death. I shove the icy coldness of Martel's lingering soul from me and bring down the barrier, so that it is once again solid between us.

When I open my eyes, I am shivering. I am so cold I cannot even feel the rays of sun, and then Duval is next to me, his hands on my elbows, pulling me to my feet. "Are you all right?" Concern is etched on his face, but I cannot stop my teeth from chattering long enough to assure him I am fine.

He lifts the woolen cloak from his own shoulders and places it around me. The heat from his body still clings to the rich fabric, and I close my eyes and let my body drink it in.

"Your face is so pale that, truly, you look as if you are dead too." He pulls the cloak tighter around me, grabs me by the hand—how warm his fingers are!—and drags me to a larger patch of sunlight. And still I shiver. Duval places his hands on my arms and rubs them up and down, trying to work some warmth back into them.

I am too stunned to even breathe, and my arms tingle as if they have long been asleep and are only now awakening. Appalled, I pull away. “I am warm now,” I say, my voice stiff. I avoid his eyes, afraid he will see the confusion in mine. That he is good at playing the gallant is only to be expected. His kindness to me means nothing. He is kind to his horse as well. In truth, his chivalry could be a plan to lure me into a false sense of trust and security.

“I would never have asked that of you if I had known—”

I cut him off. “I am fine.”

His eyes search my face to see if I am telling the truth. I try to shift his attention away from me. “He could tell me nothing,” I say.

“What?” Duval is clearly perplexed.

I nearly laugh at how thoroughly my discomfort has swept his purpose from his mind. “Martel told me very little.”

“A little is better than none,” Duval says, remembering. “Go on.”

I am still slow-witted from my encounter with the soul and try to decide just how much to tell him. I busy myself with removing his cloak from my shoulders. “Images. Fragments. Nothing that made much sense.” I pause; I want to clutch each bit of information to myself, gain any advantage I can over this man, but the reverend mother’s instructions still echo in my ears. “There was a fleet of ships—”

“Ships! Describe them to me.”

When I do, he swears and begins to pace in the small clearing. “The French fleet.”

It is exactly as the abbess and Crunard have feared. Martel was trying to find port for the French so they could launch their attacks.

“Are you well enough to ride yet?” he asks. “This news adds some urgency to our journey.”

In answer, I turn and head for my horse.

Chapter Twelve

WE MAKE QUIMPER JUST AFTER nightfall, the bonfires in the fields lighting the last of the way as the local plowmen celebrate Martinmas. Once we are inside the city, Duval leads us to a small inn where the innkeeper clucks and fusses over us as if Duval is an honored guest. At last, dishes of braised rabbit and mugs of spiced wine are placed in front of us, and then the innkeeper retires to the kitchens. We fall on our meal in silence. Indeed, Duval has not said much since my encounter with Martel's soul, but I can almost hear the wheels of his mind turning, much like a millstone, grinding down bits of information, until they can fit in some pattern only he can discern.

All this silence is fine with me, as I am as tired as I have ever been, and my backside is bruised from the day's grueling ride.

When we finish our meal, the innkeeper returns and leads us up the narrow stairs to our rooms. My chamber is next to Duval's, but after a quick search I find no connecting door, so I relax somewhat. Even so, it takes longer than it should for me to fall asleep. I can feel Duval on the other side of the thick wall, the flame of his soul bright and steady and so very different from the sisters with whom I've shared my nights with for the last three years.

We are on the road the next morning before daybreak. Once we clear the town, we ride hard and do not stop until noon. In truth, I think Duval would gladly ride straight through, but the horses need the rest.

As do I. However, I will let him think it is the horses he is coddling, not me.

While he tends to them, I stretch my legs and try to work out the stiff muscles in my back. Once our mounts are watered and settled, Duval rifles through his saddlebag and pulls out a small bundle. He tucks it under his arm and comes to stand next to me in the small patch of sunlight I have found.

It galls me that I am painfully aware of every movement he makes, from shrugging his cloak over his shoulder to pulling off his worn leather gloves. His hands fascinate me, and I remember the feel of them against my waist, along my arms. I force my gaze away.

Unaware of the turmoil inside me, Duval unwraps the bundle, which turns out to be a wedge of hard cheese. He breaks it in half, then holds a piece out to me. "Eat."

With a murmur of thanks, I take the cheese, hating that I must now rely upon him for food, just as I once relied upon my father and had thought to rely on Guillo. I am overcome by a childish desire to throw the cheese back at him and refuse to eat it. But I am no longer a child, and I have a responsibility to my convent, my saint, and my duchess. I take a bite of cheese and vow to arrange for my own provisions at the next inn.

The clearing is quiet except for the faint burbling of the brook the horses have drunk from. The silence feels thick and awkward to me, but any attempt to make small talk seems equally so. Wondering if he feels it too, I sneak a glance in his direction and am appalled to find him watching me. We both wrench our eyes away, and even though I am no longer looking at him, every part of me is aware of his proximity, of the faint heat coming off his body in the damp autumn air, of the scent of leather and whatever soap he washed with that morning. I hate that I am conscious of him in this way and I dredge through my heart, trying to find where I've hidden all the resentment and suspicion I hold him in. "What did you want with Runnion back at the tavern?" The question springs from my lips, artless and unsubtle.

His forehead wrinkles in thought, as if he is weighing some thorny dilemma. When at last he speaks, it is only to ask a question of his own. "What do you know of the man you killed there?"

I blink in surprise. "It is not my place to know anything of those I kill. I merely carry out Mortain's orders."

"And that sits well with you? Not knowing who or why?"

It does, but his question makes me feel lack-witted for not knowing more, for not *wanting* to know more. "I do not expect you to understand the duty and obedience required of those who serve Mortain," I say, my voice prim and pinched.

"How does the convent decide whom to kill?" he presses.

I study his face closely, but I cannot tell if he is questioning the convent or just me. "Surely that is the convent's business, milord, not yours."

"If I will be sponsoring you at court, I will not be kept in the dark, only to find myself cleaning up bodies and making explanations."

I raise my chin in annoyance, for in my mind that is exactly the role I have assigned to him. "The abbess will communicate with me through letters, and sometimes—sometimes the saint makes His wishes clear to me directly."

"How?" His question is sharp, urgent. He is hungry to understand this puzzle.

I shrug and try to regain control of this conversation. "What does this have to do with Runnion?"

He is silent for a long minute, so long I think he will not answer. When he does, I wish that he had not. “Doesn’t it worry you, that you understand nothing of how they make their decisions? What if they make a mistake?”

“A mistake?” My cheeks grow hot at the suggestion. “I do not see how they can, milord, since their hand is guided by the saint Himself. Indeed, to suggest such a thing reeks of blasphemy to me.”

“It is not the saint I doubt, demoiselle, only the humans who interpret His wishes. In my experience, humans are all too fallible.” He is silent again briefly, but his next words cause the cheese I have eaten to curdle in my stomach.

“Runnion was working for the duchess.”

“No! He was a traitor! I saw the marque on him myself.”

Duval jerks his head around to stare at me, eyes sharp with interest. “The mark of a traitor, demoiselle? What does that look like?”

Even as I reel from this revelation, I realize how neatly he has tricked me into divulging more than I intended. “That is not something I can share with you.”

“I seem to recall your abbess speaking to us both of cooperation.”

“In worldly matters, yes, but she said nothing of betraying the sanctity of our rituals.” I look pointedly at the silver leaf on his cloak. “Would you share with me the rites of Saint Camulos?”

He ignores that question, for he knows I am right. “Your abbess’s definition of *cooperation* differs greatly from mine,” he mutters. “Consider this. Runnion had betrayed the duke three years ago, during the Mad War, but he had come to regret that action. In truth, he wished to make amends for his betrayal. That was how he came to work for us, as a means of earning his way back into his country’s good graces.”

I feel as if I have been turned to stone by one of Saint Arduinna’s arrows. “You lie.”

“No, I do not.” He looks me square in the eye and what I see there looks disturbingly like truth. “Perhaps, demoiselle, your saint is more complex than your convent would have you believe. Now come, I think the horses have rested enough.”

Chapter Thirteen

DUVAL'S REVELATION ABOUT RUNNION PLAGUES me for the rest of the afternoon. If Runnion was truly innocent, why did the convent send me to kill him? Had they not known of his work for the duchess? Or do they know something Duval does not?

And if Runnion was working for the duchess, why had he borne the marque? Why had Mortain not removed that stain from the man's soul?

I fear the answer lies in my actions. By striking him down, did I rob him of his chance to earn forgiveness?

I shove that disturbing thought from my mind. Mortain is all-knowing. Surely He would have seen the man's intention and spared him if He thought Runnion worthy.

I am still wrestling with the Runnion matter when Duval steers us across a thick stone bridge. The town is small and crowded, but Duval seems to know where he is going and leads us through the cobbled streets until we reach an inn.

We dismount, and the ostler arrives to take our horses. Duval gives him instructions for their care, then offers me his arm. As I take it, I wonder what folly decreed that women cannot walk unassisted. Inside, the innkeeper rushes forward to greet us, and Duval tells him of our needs for the night. The innkeeper directs someone to take our things to our rooms, then leads us to the inn's main hall, where dinner is being served.

The hall is a large room, larger even than the refectory back at the convent. In spite of the room's size, a low ceiling and dark timber beams make it feel small and close. A fire burns in the hearth, and the place smells of smoke, new wine, and roasting meat.

We choose a corner table, as far away from the other diners as we can get. I hurry forward so I can take the seat that affords me the clearest view of the door. Duval's lips quirk in amusement.

A serving maid sets a flagon of wine and two cups on the table, then withdraws. I do not even let him quench his thirst before I launch my questions at him. "If Runnion was working for the duchess, what was he doing at the tavern?" I know the convent cannot make such a mistake. There is some other element in play here, and I am determined to ferret it out.

Duval lifts his goblet and takes a long drink before answering. "He was bringing me word on whether England would commit troops to aid our fight

against the French.”

I feel as if Annith has just landed a kick to my gut. I want to accuse him of lying again, but his eyes are steady, and there are none of the signs of deception that I have been taught to look for. Besides, his answer makes sense. The duchess had been betrothed to England’s crown prince before he disappeared from the tower. “If that is the case, then I cannot believe the abbess knew that he was helping you.”

Duval shrugs. “I would like to believe she had no knowledge of his true purpose. The alternative is most disturbing.”

“Your suspicions are ill founded,” I snap. I take my goblet and drain half of it, as if the wine can wash the foul taste of his mistrust from my mouth.

As I set the goblet down, Duval leans across the table. “Now, I have shown good faith and answered your questions, and I would have you answer one of mine. I want to know more of these marques and how they work.”

“I am sorry, but I cannot share such things with you.”

He leans back and his eyes grow as cold and stark as the winter sky. “That is unfortunate, demoiselle. For until I learn more of how the convent makes its decisions, I will have to regard it—and you—with suspicion.”

I give him a false, brittle smile. “It seems we are both bound by duty.”

The serving maid arrives at that moment, breaking our impasse. She sets down loaves of fresh crusty bread, a roast capon, two bowls of stew, braised turnips and onions, and a wedge of cheese. Famished by the day’s long ride, we dig into our supper.

Once the worst of my hunger pangs have been appeased, I risk another question. “And what of Martel? Do you claim he worked for you too?”

“Could it be you are asking me for more information, demoiselle? When you have refused to give me so much as a morsel in return?”

It sounds unfair when he puts it like that. I soften my voice so he will think I regret this, but of course, I do not. “I will share what I know with you, but I cannot reveal the secrets of our order.”

He looks away, a small muscle in his jaw tightening. He is silent for a long moment, then turns back to me. “Very well. I will tell you of Martel, but only in the interest of showing you why you must stay your hand until you have gathered all the facts.

“Martel did not work for us, no. But I believe he could have been persuaded to tell me who at court was working for the French regent.”

I take a sip of wine to cover my distress. “Feeling a twinge of conscience yet?” Duval asks.

“No,” I lie.

A shadow looms near the door and pulls my attention from Duval. The largest man I have ever seen steps into the room. Half a head taller than Duval, he is travel stained and road weary and looks like an ogre who has strayed out of a hearth tale. His face bears the roughened texture of pox scars; his nose—broken at least twice—is a lumpen knob. His hair is shaved close to his head, and his eyes are creased in a permanent squint.

The man's iron gaze sweeps across the room and lands on Duval. His eyes narrow, and he strides in our direction. Every muscle in my body tenses, and my hand creeps to the dagger at my waist. Duval catches the movement. His eyes widen in surprise, then he glances over his shoulder.

He is up on his feet in an instant, heading toward the stranger at full tilt. They crash into each other with the force of two tree trunks colliding. It takes a moment for me to realize their blows are those of joyful greeting and not attempts to pummel each other into the ground. I let out a slow breath and remove my hand from my knife.

As they finish pounding each other, I notice a small cluster of stable boys and apprentices hovering in the doorway, pointing at the stranger. Duval nods his head in their direction, and the giant man rolls his eyes good-naturedly before turning and greeting them. They smile and talk excitedly among themselves until the innkeeper shoos them back to their duties.

Duval then drags the stranger to our table. The man does not improve upon closer inspection. His light blue eyes are startling in his scarred face and put me in mind of a wolf. In truth, he may be the ugliest man I have ever seen.

"Ismae," Duval says. "This is Sir Benebic of Waroch, otherwise known as the Beast. Beast, this is Demoiselle Rienne."

My eyes widen in surprise, for even we at the convent have heard the tales of the Beast of Waroch, of his ferocity and valor in battle, his extreme disregard for his own life that causes some to think he is mad. "Greetings, my lord."

The Beast of Waroch reaches for my hand and lifts it in a gentle grip, then makes a courtly bow. His pretty manners surprise me, as they do not match his face. When he speaks, his voice is low and rumbles like far-off thunder. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, my lady."

"I am not noble born," I murmur, embarrassed.

"Every maid Beast meets is a lady as far as he is concerned," Duval explains.

Beast straightens and lets go of my hand. "Only those who do not run away from me in terror," he says with a grin. He intends it to be rakish, but it looks more like he is baring his teeth before an attack. I like that he does not apologize for his looks, that he throws them down like a gauntlet. It is an approach I admire, and I immediately warm to him.

Of course, the number of French he killed in the last war does not hurt his cause any either. During the Mad War, it was his bravery that inflamed the imaginations and hearts of the peasantry and moved them to take up whatever arms they could find—pitchforks, poleaxes, shovels, scythes—and drive the French out of our country. If it were not for Beast’s inspiration and the peasants’ aid, the French might be here still.

“Sit, sit.” Duval shoves Beast onto the bench and takes a seat beside him. “I did not expect you back so soon. Nor to find you here.”

The men’s eyes meet and an unspoken message passes between them. “We made good time,” Beast says, then signals the innkeeper for another cup. The innkeeper is only too glad to oblige this legend come to life in his inn.

“We? De Lornay is with you?” Duval asks.

“Aye. He lost the coin toss and is seeing to the horses.”

“Would this be de Lornay?” I ask, staring at the man who has just entered the room. He is tall also, although he is closer to Duval’s height than to Beast’s towering stature, and he too is clad in road-stained riding leathers, but that is where any similarity ends. He is perhaps the most beautiful man ever—fair of feature and graceful, he looks like an archangel who has fallen from heaven. By the time he reaches our table, he has a small army of serving wenches following in his wake, eager to do his bidding. Disgusted, I avert my gaze and take a swallow of wine.

Duval rises to greet him, and I feel Beast watching my face. “You do not care for de Lornay’s beauty, demoiselle?” Beast asks.

I wrinkle my nose. “I am not impressed with pretty men in general, my lord.”

He grins maniacally and raises his cup to mine. “I knew we would get along,” he says, then drains his cup. Warmed by his words, I do the same.

When Duval presents me to de Lornay, the other man makes no attempt to kiss my hand, nor does he call me lady. In fact, he all but ignores me. Beast leans in close again. “Pay no heed to this knight of Amourna’s manners.”

I glance sharply at de Lornay to see how he takes this slight, for to call a true knight naught but a lover of women seems a grave insult. But de Lornay merely shoots Beast an annoyed look and takes a seat. The innkeeper arrives and sets another jug of wine and more cups on the table, then shoos the cow-eyed serving maids away and leaves us to our dinner.

De Lornay reaches for the jug. “Did Runnion find you?”

Duval tosses a disgusted glance my way. “No. He met with an unfortunate accident before we could speak.”

De Lornay pauses in the middle of filling his cup. “Truly?”

Duval nods, and I stare at my dinner, doing my best to look incapable of causing an unfortunate accident. I remind myself that I have done nothing wrong, only allowed Mortain to guide my hand.

“What happened to him?” de Lornay asks.

Duval waves the question aside. “I am more interested in why you are here. I thought you had business in Brest once you returned.”

De Lornay and Beast exchange glances. “The baron was not there. He is on his way to Guérande for the convening of the Estates,” Beast explains. “As are we.”

“What?” Duval says. It is the first time I have seen him nonplussed.

Beast frowned. “You did not want us to attend? We thought you would need our support.”

“I am not aware that a meeting of the Estate has been called! The duchess hadn’t planned on calling all the barons together until she had a firm solution to this crisis to put before them. Are you certain?”

“Yes. The message arrived in Brest just as our boat landed. It bore the Privy Council seal.”

Duval takes a huge gulp of wine, as if fortifying himself. “Which means someone on the council has ignored the duchess’s wishes and called the meeting himself.” The table grows silent at this dire implication.

“Could she not have changed her mind?” I cannot help but ask.

Duval glances at me as if he had forgotten I was there. “No,” he says gently.

De Lornay turns to study me. “You picked a fine time to launch a romance,” he tells Duval.

“Demoiselle Rienne is my cousin, not a romantic liaison,” he says. “As such, I expect you to extend her every courtesy.” There is no mistaking the warning in his voice and I cannot help feeling a small glow of gratitude.

De Lornay’s striking dark eyebrows shoot up in disbelief. “Cousin?”

“Cousin,” Duval growls. “I am launching her at court.”

De Lornay whistles. “To what purpose? Other than to cause gossip and speculation among the entire court?”

Duval grins, a quick flash of white teeth. “Is that not enough of a reason? However,” Duval continues, “your news changes everything. We should retire so we can get on the road at first light.” He stands and looks down at me.

It takes me a moment to realize that supper is over and I am being dismissed. He holds out his arm, in case I have not caught his meaning.

I narrow my eyes at him. Does he truly think I do not know his plan? That I will sit quietly in my room while he talks of kingdoms and traitors with these

friends of his? Well and so, if he is that stupid, let him think I will do exactly as he wishes.

I smile sweetly at him. "Of course, milord." I rise to my feet and bid the others good night. As Duval escorts me from the room, I school my features into a mild, placid expression. At my door, he bids me a polite good night and leaves. I close the door and lean against it, listening. When I am certain he is gone, I open the door and peer out into the hallway. It is empty.

Quiet as a shadow, I slip out of my room and hurry to find the servants' stairway.

Chapter Fourteen

I DESCEND THE NARROW STAIRWAY and pass through a small, cramped antechamber, then come to a thick door. The kitchens, no doubt. It is late, and if the saint is with me, most of the workers will be done for the night. I push the door open, a ready excuse at the tip of my tongue. But there are only two boys inside, over in the scullery corner scrubbing pots nearly as tall as they are.

I wink at them, then hold my finger to my lips and offer them two copper coins. Their eyes brighten at this unexpected largesse. They snatch the coins from me with red, raw fingers and nod their acceptance of our bargain. Their loyalty thus purchased, I make my way to the door that will lead me to Duval's secrets.

It opens onto another short hallway between the kitchens and the dining hall. Perfect. I slip into the hallway, hide myself among the shadows, and inch along the wall toward the dining room.

Duval is just returning to his seat. Beast looks up and grimaces. "Catch that wench's eye and order more wine, will you? She is too awed by my pretty face to heed my call, and Lord Dandy here will not do it."

"Most likely because she'll try to follow him back to his bedchamber," Duval mutters.

Ignoring Duval's jab, de Lornay leans across the table. "Are you really going to flaunt this girl before the entire court? Your bloodlines are far too well known for such a deception."

Duval snorts. "I am hoping they will hear *cousin* and think *mistress*."

"They would if it were anyone but you," de Lornay scoffs. "You may as well be a monk with as few women as you take to your bed."

Beast tilts his head to the side. "What is truly going on? Politics is your mistress, not some rustic from the country, no matter how charming she may be."

I blush in the darkness, glad there is no one to see.

"And therein lies the rub," Duval says. "No one will believe us, as I tried hard to explain to the abbess of St. Mortain."

My limbs go rigid with shock as he exposes my true identity to the others. He must hold them in even greater regard than I thought. Or my safety in less.

Beast gapes at him. "That girl is from the convent of St. Mortain?"

Duval grimaces into his goblet. "One of Death's handmaidens, my friend."

Beast whistles. "Has she been set on you?"

"She says no, as does her abbess. But the girl is about as trusting as the French regent, so I have my doubts."

Mayhap he is not as foolish as I think.

Duval refills his goblet and recounts the story of how he was ensnared in the reverend mother's trap. When he is done, Beast throws back his great, ugly head and laughs, frightening the serving maid even more.

Duval stares morosely into the dregs of his cup. "It is not funny."

"Oh, but it is," de Lornay says. "The master of more plots than a whore has lovers has been neatly caught in someone else's."

Duval waits patiently for his friends' mirth to pass. In truth, he is handling it much better than I would. I would have clouted them both by now.

"If you've quite finished . . ." he says.

"Sorry," Beast murmurs, wiping his eyes with his massive fist. "What will you do?"

"Lie as convincingly as I can and pray she doesn't kill someone important."

This glum reply sets off Beast's laughter anew until Duval has to reach out and kick him to get him to shut up. "You're scaring the other patrons," he mutters. "Now, tell me what news you bring from England, since I was not able to hear it from Runnion."

"Runnion truly did not reach you? What happened to him?" de Lornay asks.

Duval jerks his head up toward the ceiling and my room.

Beast's eyes widen. "*She* happened to Runnion? But I thought the convent served Brittany?"

"It does, or so I believe. But there has been a breakdown in our communications, which is why they've saddled me with this green stripling of a novice."

De Lornay leans forward, his face aflush with curiosity. "Have you bedded her yet?"

Beast's face takes on a rapt look. "They say to lie with a handmaiden of Death is the sweetest end imaginable."

"They do?" Duval looks momentarily surprised. Which is nothing to how I feel at this announcement. No one at the convent has thought to mention this to me.

De Lornay shakes his head. "That is but a rumor," he says with great authority.

The other two turn to look at him.

He shrugs. "I didn't realize she was from the convent until the next morning, when the corrupt commander was found dead."

Although it is small of me, I cannot help but wonder who he has lain with. Sybella? Or one of the older initiates?

“Enough.” Duval holds up his hand. “I would have your news from the English king.”

Beast’s face grows somber. “He would not speak to us himself,” he says.

“Or so his chancellor claimed,” de Lornay adds. “We could never be sure which it was.”

“Either way, official channels were closed to us.”

“What about unofficial channels?”

“Ah, that is where we learned much, and most of it contradictory.” There is a long moment of silence, then Beast speaks. “The English king is considering an offer from the French regent. She will pay him an annual pension if he will not stand in the way of France invading Brittany.”

Duval strikes the table with his fist, making us all jump. “Even after all the aid we gave him in his struggle for the crown?”

Beast nods. “Even after.”

“There is some good news,” de Lornay offers.

“It would have to be very good to counter that,” Duval says.

“Well, for one, the French regent is reluctant to pay the fifty thousand crowns the king is asking for. But more important, the English king let it be known that he would put aside the negotiations and lend us aid if we would give him the four Breton cities the French still hold.”

Duval lifts his goblet and studies it. “Everyone has a price, it seems.” He falls silent a moment, then shakes his head. “I fear the age of kingdoms and duchies is coming to an end. France is eating its way through Europe like a beggar at a banquet.” He leans back and fixes his companions with a considering gaze. “The French regent is doing her best to outfox our every attempt to join with our allies. The question is, is she simply being cautious and anticipating our moves? Or does she have specific knowledge of our plans?”

Beast and de Lornay exchange a look. “I thought we were the only ones who knew our plans, outside of the Privy Council.”

“Exactly,” Duval says, “which is what makes it such a burning question. If someone is feeding our secrets to the French, it is one of Anne’s closest advisors. And now we must wonder if that traitor is the same one who called this estate meeting or if there is a second traitor we must deal with.”

They all digest this somber question in silence, then Duval lifts his goblet and drains it, grimacing at the dregs he’d forgotten in the bottom. “To bed, I think. We’ve an early start.”

They stand up and clatter out of the room, and I turn and begin making my way back to my own chamber. I had hoped to learn something that incriminated Duval. Instead, I have learned just the opposite. Even when I am not present, his story is the same.

Why, then, would he not discuss this in front of me? Unless he truly does not trust the convent? I bite back a sigh of frustration. Things would be much easier if I could just prove him traitor and be done with it. But no matter how I turn each word and gesture upside down, looking for hidden meaning and betrayal, I can find none.

We are up early and on the road before dawn. Duval has sent Beast and de Lornay on ahead. I know that he chafes at our slower pace, but there is naught I can do about it.

Recent rains have made the countryside wet and muddy, which further hampers our progress. As dusk falls, it becomes clear that in spite of Duval's best efforts, we will not make Guérande by nightfall. Resigned, he turns off the main road and heads toward La Roche Bernard.

La Roche Bernard sits on a rocky outcropping overlooking the Vilaine River. Its greatest feature is the new chateau the Geffoy family built after their last castle had been razed to the ground in the first war of succession.

At the chateau, we are escorted to a great hall filled with rich, colorful tapestries and a roaring fire. A rotund man with sandy hair and beard leans in close to an elegant woman as if he's hanging on every word she says. When the steward announces us, the woman pulls back and looks demurely into the fireplace, while the gentleman—the baron, I presume—rises to his feet and hurries to greet us.

“Duval! What a pleasant surprise this is,” Baron Geffoy says, but his face gives lie to his words. In truth, there is a harried look about him that has me wondering if Duval isn't precisely the last person he wishes to see right now. “We are graced with all sorts of visitors from court. Madame Hivern is staying with us for a few days.”

Duval's head snaps up, and his cold gray eyes zero in on the lovely woman by the fireplace.

The baron lowers his voice. “Being at court right now is too painful for her, as you well know.”

“So she keeps claiming,” Duval murmurs. There is an angry, bitter note in his voice that I have not heard before. I glance again to the fireplace. Madame Hivern sits with her head bowed, the very picture of pious contemplation—

indeed, it is the same pose I adopt at the convent when I fear I have been caught whispering to Annith or Sybella.

“Baron, I would like you to meet my cousin Demoiselle Rienne.”

Geffoy smiles knowingly at the word *cousin*. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” he says. An unsavory gleam appears in his eye. “Please make yourself comfortable in my home, my dear,” he says. “Will you be joining us for dinner, Duval? Or are you too exhausted from your journey?”

Duval’s eyes are still pinned on Madame Hivern when he answers. “We would join you and hear the news at court.” Surely the woman can feel him looking at her. Why does she not glance up?

Almost as if hearing my thoughts, she lifts her head just then. Although her charming expression never changes, her hostility toward Duval is palpable.

“Excellent! I will have someone show you to your rooms so you may refresh yourselves.” The baron leans in close to Duval. “I will be sure you and your *cousin* have adjoining rooms, *mais oui?*”

His vile wink has my hand itching for my dagger. Perhaps sensing this, Duval grabs my elbow and escorts me to the stairs.

My chamber is large and well appointed. I cast a longing glance at the immense canopied bed that I cannot enjoy for hours yet. I sigh with regret, then turn to make myself ready for the evening. As I disrobe, my mind returns to the baron’s unease at seeing Duval, Hivern’s hostility, and Duval’s tightly controlled reaction. Mayhap I will learn something of importance tonight.

At least the mystery of what lies between Duval and Hivern will provide some small measure of entertainment during dinner. I cannot help but wonder how much of Duval’s wish to dine in the great room has to do with her. Even from far away, I could tell she is very beautiful; her skin pale, her hair the color of spun gold and dressed in an artful style. The elegant Hivern has made me exquisitely aware of every lesson on court manners and womanly charms I have missed.

I catch my reflection in the small oval of polished silver hanging on the wall. We could not be more different. She has the feel of a delicately wrought treasure. I, on the other hand, am dark and serious; a faint frown draws my brows together. In my mind, I can almost hear the mocking laughter when the baron and his wife learn of my fakery and deception. I will not let that happen. I relax my scowl, which improves my looks somewhat but not nearly enough.

I dip the linen cloth into the warm water—scented faintly with rose petals, a true luxury—and take the opportunity to wash my face and arms and anywhere else I can reach.

I travel with only one gown grand enough for this evening, so with reluctance I put it on. I have not grown any more fond of it since I wore it last. And while I

have no fancy headdress such as Madame Hivern wears, I do have my hairnet with the pearls. I smile at this reminder of the dark skills I possess that Hivern does not.

As I poke the last stubborn tendril of hair into place, there is a knock at my door. I open it to find Duval, ready to escort me to dinner. He takes in my greatly altered appearance, much as I take in his. He has changed from his riding leathers to an elegant black doublet with fresh white linen at his neck. I wonder briefly if black is a signature color for him. He eyes me thoroughly, and I grow a bit flustered under the warmth of his gaze. "I am not certain I would let my cousin appear in public in such a gown," he says at last.

"Your cousin has no other choice available to her, milord."

A look of resignation settles over his face. "And so our lots are cast." He holds out his arm. "Come, let us join the others."

After a moment's hesitation, I gingerly place my hand on his sleeve. Annoyed by these courtesies I must endure, I look for a way to torment him. "Madame Hivern did not look especially pleased to see you," I point out. "Nor the baron, come to that."

He snorts, and the earthy noise catches me off-guard. "Madame Hivern and I do not see eye to eye on many things. The baron's discomfort is somewhat newer." Then he looks down at me, a faint air of amusement touching his eyes. "You do know who she is, do you not?"

I curse my own ignorance. It is even worse than being assigned to Duval's care. "No," I say shortly. "I do not."

Duval gives a short bark of a laugh. "That, dear assassin, is the late duke's mistress."

I gasp in surprise. "The French whore?"

He glances at me sharply. "Why do you call her that?"

I shrug as I try to peer ahead into the room, full of lewd curiosity now that I know who she is. "That is what the sisters at the convent called her," I tell him.

There is a long, heavy moment of silence. When I look back at him, his whole demeanor has shifted and the amusement is gone from his face. "Yes," he says. "And just so you are clear, I am the French whore's son."

I feel as if a giant cavern has just opened up at my feet as Duval's words clang through my head like a great bell. He is one of the duke's bastards. Half brother to the duchess.

Chapter Fifteen

DUVAL TUGS MY ARM AND pulls me into the great hall. It is ablaze with a roaring fire and candles burning brightly in heavy silver holders, but I hardly register any of this as my mind scrambles back to Sister Eonette's tapestries. The French whore is listed there, along with her five children by the late duke, but they are listed by first name only, and the name Gavriel is common enough.

Did the abbess know that I was going into this blind? Was this part of her test? Or was there merely a mistaken assumption that I would know the duke's bastard by the name Duval?

As if from a great distance, I hear Baron Geffoy say, "Here they are now." With effort, I try to concentrate on the introductions. "Viscount Duval, Demoiselle Rienne, this is my ladywife, Katerine." She is a drab peahen of a woman with sharp, intelligent eyes, and I warm to her immediately.

"Her brother, Anthoine de Loris, and my steward, Guy de Picart. And of course, Duval, you already know the charming Madame Hivern."

The clash of Duval's and Hivern's gazes as they meet is as loud as the opening parry of any duel, but what makes my breath catch is the brief glimpse of pain I see in Duval's face before he shuts it. It is so fleeting, I cannot help but wonder if I have imagined it.

When Hivern puts her hand out for Duval to kiss, he dons his formal court manners like a suit of armor and bows over it. "As always, your presence leaves me speechless, madame."

"Would that were so," she mutters. Baron Geffoy shifts in discomfort while his wife's brows rise slightly in surprise.

Duval's eyes narrow. "I am glad to see you have taken my advice and removed yourself from court."

Hivern's smile is as sharp as a knife. "Oh, but I have not. I am only taking a little break to visit with my dear friends and draw comfort from their company." She lifts a delicate linen handkerchief and dabs at her eye.

"My pardon." Duval's voice is drier than bone. "I did not mean to remind you of your loss."

She waves her hand in the air and I cannot tell if she misses the irony in his tone or simply chooses to ignore it. "It is always with me. I am just so grateful to Baron and Lady Geffoy for offering their hospitality, far from the painful

reminders of my dear Francis.” Her voice catches slightly, as if she is about to cry, and I am struck by the sense that they are acting out parts in a masque.

As if to distract from Madame Hivern’s sorrow, Lady Geffoy directs us to take our seats at the table, and I use the moment to try to collect my wits. With Duval’s revelation, so many small details fall into place. The abbess’s and Crunard’s incredulity that Duval would try to pass me off as his cousin; Beast and de Lornay’s reactions as well. In truth, remembering causes me to blush and squirm at how stupid they must have thought us. No wonder Beast thought me noble born, for although Duval is a bastard, he is a royal one.

Humiliation courses through my veins. I reach for my wine goblet and take a healthy swig, wishing I could drown my ignorance. As my thoughts begin to settle, I become aware of the tinkle of crystal, the smell of braised meat and strong wine. The table is laden with all manner of food and delicacies, but they are as tasteless to me as the dust kicked up by our horses.

Lady Katerine artfully steers the conversation to hunting and recent jousts, people and events I am not familiar with. I let it recede into the background until it is naught but the buzz of gnats hovering over a stagnant pond.

I try to remember everything the convent told us about the French whore, for that is how they referred to her always and why I did not recognize her by the name Hivern. She was the mistress of the old French king when she was but fourteen. When he died, she became mistress to our duke. Over their many years together, she bore him five children: three sons and two daughters.

Duval’s arm rests next to mine on the table, his long elegant fingers playing with the stem of his glass. When his fingers tighten suddenly, I force my thoughts to the conversation going on around me.

“That is the fourth tournament this year that my dear François has won,” Madame Hivern is saying to the baron. “He has few equals in the jousting lists.”

Baron Geffoy casts an admiring glance at Duval. “Except perhaps for his older brother. If I remember correctly, he was never beaten—”

“Those days are long gone,” Duval says, abruptly dismissing the baron’s attempt at flattery. As Duval lifts his goblet and drains it, and there is a brief moment of awkward silence. Lady Katerine tries to brush over it.

“We have had uncommonly good hunting this year,” she says, but once again Madame Hivern turns the conversation and begins prattling of François and his prowess at hunting and how he speared a wild boar single handedly in last week’s hunt.

Is that what lies between them? Does she favor François so much that it has driven Duval to hate her? It happens thus in families sometimes, especially the noble ones, where favor translates into titles and holdings. I glance over at

Duval, but he looks pointedly at his plate, cutting his venison with angry, precise movements.

I turn my attention across the table to Madame Hivern. Her gown is the color of emeralds and is cut even lower than mine, leaving her entire shoulders exposed as well as revealing the profuse swell of her womanly charms.

“Gavriel, dear,” she drawls. “Who is this maid of yours again and why is she staring at me as if I am a five-legged calf?”

I blush furiously, for I had thought them all so involved in their conversations and plots that they wouldn’t notice my scrutiny.

Duval tosses me a glance, as if to show he is bearing my presence with little grace. “Forgive her, madame. She was raised in the country and is no doubt struck dumb by your beauty and elegance.”

“As are we all,” Baron Geffoy adds, completely missing the deep irony in Duval’s voice. Lady Katerine, however, does not.

“Is she what caused you to stray so far from your young duchess’s side?” Hivern smirks.

Duval lifts his goblet and takes a sip of wine. “I did not *stray* anywhere. I had business to attend to on behalf of the duchess.”

Madame Hivern looks sharply at me. “Where did you say you were from?”

“She didn’t,” says Duval, and while I do not like that he is speaking for me, I cannot even pretend to understand what is going on between them.

“Have you news of the French?” Baron Geffoy asks. He is no longer jovial but tense and bristly, and for the first time since meeting him, I think I would not want to face him in pitched battle. “There have been rumors of their troops amassing in the north.”

Duval gives a firm shake of his head. “No. There have been no troop sightings or even signs of scouting parties. Your information is mistaken. The duchess has the matter well in hand.”

Madame Hivern leans forward, eyes glittering. “Does she, Gavriel? Does she truly? For it does not appear that way from where I sit.”

Across the table their eyes meet. “That is because you choose not to see it, madame.” His words are tight and hard, like stones from a catapult. “As always, you see precisely what you want to see and no more.” He casts his unflinching regard toward the head of the table, where Baron Geffoy pays careful attention to the slices of pheasant on his plate. Duval stares at him for a long moment before returning his attention to Hivern. “Beware, madame,” he says softly. “Politics can be far more dangerous than you know.” It takes me a full beat to recognize that this is no general advice but a very specific warning. But of what?

She, too, appears puzzled by his words, but before she can speak, Duval turns to me. I barely keep from recoiling at the simmering fury in his gaze. “Since we leave at first light, it would be wise to retire early.” He rises and holds his arm out to me and I quickly get to my feet, thank Lady Katerine for her hospitality, and let Duval lead me away.

Duval escorts me from the room, his lightly banked fury propelling us at a rapid pace, and I am nearly breathless when we arrive at my chamber. I start to ask a question, but he cuts me off with a curt good night, opens my door, and fair shoves me inside, then shuts it with unmistakable finality.

I am alone, and grateful for it, but angry too. It is not *my* fault he and Hivern have nearly come to blows.

I cannot guess what lies between them, what sort of falling-out they have had. It seems far too heated a feud to be based on Duval’s resenting his mother’s affection for his brother. And how does Geffoy play into all this? For he sat there looking as guilty as Annith did when she was caught snooping through Sister Beatriz’s love poems.

Or was that it? Is the baron contemplating a liaison with Madame Hivern, and is Duval trying to discourage it? De Lornay claimed Duval had the morals of a monk, so perhaps that is at the heart of his and his mother’s animosity: he believes she is taking another lover far too soon after his father’s death.

My tired fingers are graceless and clumsy as I fight with the laces on my bodice. At last they come lose and I remove it, shivering as the cold air brushes my skin. I step out of my skirt and, clad only in my shift, hurry over to the enormous bed and climb under the thick covers, welcoming their warmth.

I can hear Duval pacing in the next room, restless and agitated, his anger rolling in under the door like some foul miasma off a fetid marsh. I push it from my mind. Who his mother takes as a lover cannot be of interest to Mortain.

Sometime later, I am awakened by angry voices. At first, I think they are in the room with me, then realize they come from Duval’s chamber. The door is thick, so I catch only snatches.

“. . . you will ruin everything for us . . .”

“Have you so little respect for my father that you would . . .”

“. . . has nothing to do with . . .”

It is Madame Hivern. She and Duval are arguing.

That brings me fully awake and just as I throw off the covers so I may go listen at the door, I hear another door slam with a thud. After a brief moment, there is a sharp, brittle crash from Duval’s room, a shatter of crystal that brings me to my feet. I have only ever heard that sound once before, in the abbess’s

office, and before my head knows what my feet are doing, I am flying to the door, my hands fumbling at the bolt.

Duval sprawls in a chair by the fire, his head thrown back and his eyes closed. An open decanter sits at his elbow, and the rich fruity scent of wine mixes with the lingering traces of Madame Hivern's rose perfume. Firelight glints off the shards of broken crystal on the floor, and I stop, afraid I'll slice my feet to ribbons. "My lord?" I whisper, dread beating in my breast.

Duval's head snaps up, his eyes filled with bleak despair. He quickly looks away, but too late. I have seen his expression, and sympathy for something I do not even understand pierces my heart. "I heard a crash . . ."

He raises one sardonic eyebrow at me, his face now a brittle mask. "And thought to save me from attacking crystal while clad only in your shift?"

I flinch at his mocking tone. Truly, why had I rushed in? Even if he had been poisoned, what could I do? *His soul*, I think, relieved that a reason has come to me. *If he were to die, I must learn all I can from his soul before it departs.*

He glances at the empty decanter at his elbow. "Unless you are checking to see if your poison worked? Am I one of your targets, then?" The weariness in his voice suggests he would not mind so very much.

And while I did not like Hivern before, now, for some inexplicable reason, I hate her. "Are you drunk?" I try to put as much scorn into my words as he did.

"No. Yes. Perhaps a little. Definitely not enough." The bleakness is back and he turns to stare into the flames.

I am torn between wanting to leave him to wallow in his despair and wanting to rush to his side and chase that look from his eyes. That I long to do this appalls me, sets panic fluttering against my ribs.

"I suggest you return to your room," Duval says, his gaze still fixed woodenly on the fire. "Unless you have come to practice your lessons of seduction on me?" His mouth twists in bitter amusement. "That could well entertain me till sunrise."

I jerk my head back as if I have been slapped. "No, milord. I had thought only to pray for your soul if Madame Hivern had seen fit to poison you. Nothing more." And with that, I turn and flee the room, then bolt the door against the disturbing glimpse of both his soul and mine. Whatever games are being played here, he is a master at them, and I will do well to remember that.

Things are strained between us the next morning. I won't meet Duval's eyes nor he mine as we take our leave and gallop from the yard. The sun rises, and the early-morning mist swirls up off the ground in gentle eddies, like steam from a simmering pot. Our awkward silence follows us on the road to Guérande.

Nocturne doesn't like that I hold myself so rigidly, and she whinnies. I force myself to relax my shoulders.

For his part, Duval acts as if I don't exist. At least as far as La Baule. Then he turns in his saddle, his face stiff with discomfort. "I am sorry I insulted you last night. I was angry with Madame Hivern, and you presented an easy target. Please accept my apologies." Then he turns forward again, leaving me to gape at his back.

No one has ever apologized to me before. Certainly not my family, or the nuns. It is disturbing, this apology, as if my feelings matter when I know that they do not. It is what Mortain and the convent want that is important. Even so, I cannot help but whisper, "I accept," mostly to myself. Or so I think—until I see Duval nod once, then put his heels to his horse.

Chapter Sixteen

EVEN THOUGH I GREW UP only three leagues away, I have never been to Guérande. My father went, many times, and he used each of those to taunt me with what he had seen. I had thought he exaggerated in order to rub my nose in what I had missed. Now I see that he did not.

The town is entirely enclosed within thick stone walls that stretch as far as my eye can see. Eight watchtowers loom at regular intervals. I understand now why the duchess has chosen this city for her headquarters. Surely those walls are impenetrable.

Provided the enemy comes from without.

As we draw closer to the city, I see a crowd near the gate tower. Legions of servants and carts piled high with household goods block the road. Knights and noble lords mill about on horseback, their horses prancing impatiently at the delay. Duval mutters an oath. "I will not reach the palace till midnight at this rate."

"Are they refugees?" I ask, remembering the desperate families and townspeople who had been displaced by the Mad War.

Duval looks at me askance. "No. They are here for the Estates Assembly. Come, we will try the north gate."

Before he can wheel his mount around, a trumpet sounds from behind. A standard-bearer approaches, his gold and blue banner snapping briskly in the crisp autumn air. A long entourage snakes behind him on the road, the outriders and trumpeters heralding its arrival. People and horses do their best to make way, but it is a narrow road and there is nowhere to go.

The knights do not slow down. They gallop full tilt into the crowd, forcing people to leap from the bridge or risk being trampled. I recognize the banner at once; it is that of Count d'Albret, one of the wealthiest Breton nobles and one of the duchess's suitors. A most insistent one, according to Sister Eonette.

The count is surrounded by men-at-arms, so my only impression of him is one of great girth and a lathered horse with far too many spur marks upon its flanks. It is enough for me to take an immediate dislike to the man. Even so, I am surprised by the intensity of Duval's reaction—his eyes grow dark and flinty, while his lip curls in disgust. I cannot help but note that there are now two people we both heartily dislike—Madame Hivern and Count d'Albret—and I am

reminded of Sister Eonette's maxim that our enemy's enemy often makes a good ally.

Duval tears his gaze away from the count and looks to the road. "I think we can get through now," he says, then puts his heels to his horse. It leaps forward. Caught off-guard, I do my best to follow, but I am not as quick. Nocturne balks, then bolts out in front of an approaching horse. My hands are so full trying to manage Nocturne that I barely spare a glance for the other rider. As she struggles to regain control, she utters a foul oath at her mount.

The familiar voice is like a pail of icy water down my back. I whip my head around, but she has already passed. All I can see is her slender shoulders and the defiant tilt of her head. Until she turns around to send me a scathing glance, annoyance writ plain on her face.

Sybella.

My heart begins to race even as the rest of the riders converge on the road between us and she is lost to my eyes. Jubilation surges through me. She is alive! And in Guérande! That is more than I knew before. It is enough to lighten my heart as I hurry to catch up to Duval.

Once we are inside the city, our horses clop down the cobbled streets. Stone and timber houses jut jauntily into the street, like gossiping housewives. Shops line the narrow lanes, their shutters drawn up to display bolts of wool and silk, perfumed oils, and all manner of goods. We pass candle makers' stalls and food stalls. I look longingly at the latter. Our breakfast was hours ago.

"Try not to gawk," Duval says, amused.

"I am not gawking," I say, piqued that he has caught me.

"You most certainly are. Have you never been to a town before?"

"Not one this size," I admit reluctantly.

Duval shakes his head. "At least you will have no trouble playing the country rustic."

It is clear that Duval wants to gallop through the town, straight to court. He holds himself in check, however, as we are boxed in by townspeople and pedestrians clogging the streets and hurrying about. Trying to avoid these, we turn down a side street. Duval mutters an oath as we come upon an overturned cart blocking the road. Bags of grain and flour spill out onto the cobbled street, and the driver studies the broken axle in dismay.

"This way," Duval orders, turning into a narrow alley.

We have gone but a few paces when Duval gives a garbled shout. He reaches for his sword as three men drop seemingly from the sky into his path. Another one lands directly behind him, on the horse itself. The beast stumbles, but he is battle trained and quickly recovers. The stallion prances and snorts, nearly

trampling one of the assailants. Duval shoves his elbow deep into the belly of the attacker behind him, dislodging him from the horse. “Turn back!” Duval shouts.

But I am not some simpering maid to flee at the threat of a fight. There is a ringing of steel as Duval draws his sword, then he is swinging at a second man who is trying to pull him from his saddle. Even as the wet, soft *thunk* tells me the blade has connected with flesh and bone, I am reaching for the long knife at my ankle.

But too late.

Two—no, three—more men emerge from the shadows. Nocturne prances and rears. One of them grabs my bridle, then has to dance backwards to avoid Nocturne’s flailing hooves. I free my knife and regain my balance. I kick my right foot out of the stirrup, swing my leg over the saddle, and send both feet into the face of my attacker. He reels back, giving me just enough room to get my long knife between us.

But my movements have unbalanced me again and I am pitched from the saddle. I use the momentum and throw myself forward, landing neatly on my feet. I lunge to meet the bandit.

He does not see my knife in time.

His eyes widen as it sinks into his belly. I brace myself, but there is no whisper of soul. Not a killing blow, then. There is a sucking sound as I pull the blade out, but before I can strike again, another man is upon us.

I duck low to avoid his short sword and spin out from under his swing. There is a whinny from Nocturne as the blade misses me and cuts along her flank.

A hot wave of fury crashes through me and I straighten for my next strike but my hand explodes in pain as one of the men’s kicks finds its target. My knife clatters to the cobbles.

The two men draw together, silent but deadly, as their companion writhes on the ground, his hand clamped to his middle to keep his guts from spilling onto the street.

I reach through the slit in my skirt, hand closing around the smooth, worn handle. When I pull the misericorde free, the bandit on my left laughs at the puniness of my weapon.

I smile.

One nick, the abbess said. Just one scratch. And while I am loath to use a weapon of grace on two men such as these, I am certain Mortain will forgive me, as we are allowed to kill in self-defense.

I settle into my fighting stance.

The man spits out a mouthful of blood, then rushes forward with his short sword thrust out. *Merde*, but he is stupid. Does he truly think I will just stand

here and wait to be skewered?

I duck under the outthrust blade and roll onto the ground, swiping at the man's ankle as I pass. When I come up on my knees, there is a puzzled look upon his face. He stops moving and slowly sinks to the ground, like a puppet whose strings have been cut. There is a flutter of his passing soul, but it disappears quickly.

His companion's eyes widen at this uncanny trick. If he is smart, he will run, but he is not. He panics and lunges forward. I leap back and get the misericorde between us. It connects with his bony knuckles, just a scratch, but he stiffens, and then looks from his cut to my face.

"You cannot win against Mortain's own," I whisper. Then he, too, settles to the ground, as if giving a deep curtsy. Another fluttering of soul, then nothing. I frown at my lack of connection with their souls and wonder if that is another gift of grace with the misericorde, that the victims' dying thoughts remain private.

The sound of steel scraping on stone pulls my attention back to Duval. Three of his assailants are down; the fourth is backed against the wall. As I approach, the remaining bandit glances my way. It is the merest slip, but Duval uses the distraction to force his way inside the man's guard and strike him on the head with the butt of his sword. The man's eyes roll up in his sockets and he slides to the ground.

"I will save *you* for questioning," Duval says, then turns his attention to me. "Are you hurt?"

I glance down and see that one of the blades has sliced through the fabric of my gown. A faint line of red wells up on the meaty part of my arm. "Just a scratch. And you?" I ask, because it seems polite.

"Fine," he says curtly. His gaze moves beyond me to the three men I've dispatched. "Sweet Jesu!" He hurries over to where they lie and kneels to feel for their pulses. "All of them dead," he announces.

"I know." I try to keep the pride from my voice. A sense of triumph races through me and I am nearly giddy with it. I have bested three men, and though the test was harder than any at the convent, I passed with flying colors. Even better, I fought as well as Duval. I wonder how to compose my message informing the abbess of this without sounding as if I am bragging.

"What happened to your horse?"

My spirits crash back to earth at Duval's question. I whirl around, shocked to see that Nocturne is lying on the ground, her sleek black side drenched in sweat and heaving like a bellows. "She was only scratched," I tell him as I rush over to kneel beside her. The acrid tang of bitterroot fills my nose and there are flecks of bloody foam upon her lips.

“Poison.” Even as I say the word, I can feel the fevered heat coming off of her. “No mere bandits, then. They wanted us dead.” I run my hand down Nocturne’s silky flank, trying to comfort her. “Do you have so very many enemies?” I ask Duval.

“It would appear that I do,” he says. “The better question is, Should I be flattered that they set seven upon me? Or does that mean someone knew I would be traveling with a skilled fighter?”

The full implication of what he has said hits me. “Are you suggesting the abbess sent them? Or Chancellor Crunard?” I am barely able to keep the disbelief out of my voice.

He shrugs. “It seems whoever sent them knew that both of us could fight.”

I am tempted to ask if he also suspects Beast or de Lornay, but then I would have to reveal that I overheard their conversation, and I am not willing to do that. Not yet.

Is it possible that Duval had sent them on ahead to arrange such a thing? Would he have staged an attack in order to rid himself of me?

“We must put her out of her misery,” Duval says gently.

His words remind me of what I must do, and while I long to ease Nocturne’s suffering, I am saddened beyond reason that I must bid her farewell.

“Would you like me to do it?” Duval’s voice is nothing but kind. There is no hint of condescension in it, but I act as if there is. Getting angry is the only way I can bear this. “I am trained in death,” I remind him. “I need no help.”

“None of us are trained to kill those who have served us well and faithfully,” he says. “It is a special agony all its own, and I would spare you if I could.” There is a note of sorrow in his voice and I know—*know*—that he has had to do this very thing. His sympathy makes the pain of losing Nocturne worse, as if my feelings for her are not some childish affection I should have put aside long ago. “I am not weak.” To prove my words, I reach down and grasp my knife handle.

“I never said that you were.” His voice is still gentle, as if he sees how much this is hurting.

Which only makes me resolved to prove that it is not. “If you will cease your endless prattle, I will do it.” I feel rather than see him step back, and I am suddenly able to breathe now that he is no longer near. I turn my full attention to Nocturne, wanting to find some way to let her know how much I will miss her.

I place my cheek along her neck, breathe in her familiar horsy scent. “Thank you,” I murmur in her ear. “For carrying me so faithfully, and for being my friend.” I whisper this last part so softly that I am afraid she will not hear. But her ear twitches, and I know that my words have reached her. She gives a faint whinny, as if to let me know she understands. “I hear there are many carrots

where you are going,” I tell her. Then, before I can falter, I grasp the misericorde and put it to her throat.

Nocturne’s spirit leaves her body in a red-hot gush. A faint breeze rustles by, bearing the scent of sweet green grass and the sense of galloping into the wind. I lay my head down on her neck and pray I will not weep.

Then Duval grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. If I didn’t know he had nerves of iron, I would have said there was a faint glimmer of panic in his face.

“What are you doing?” I wrench my arm out of his grip.

He stares intently at the cut on my arm. “If one blade was poisoned, why not all of them?” As I look at him blankly, he gives me a little shake. “*You* might have been poisoned too.”

Now that he has mentioned it, there is a faint burning sensation in my arm. I glance down at the cut. “I am fine,” I assure him.

“You cannot know that. Perhaps even now it is working its way to your vital organs.” He takes my arm again and keeps a firm hold on it as he leads me to his horse.

He does not know I am immune to poison, and I am reluctant to share this. If he himself was behind our attack, better not to hand such secrets to him. When we reach his horse, he stops long enough to feel my brow. “No fever yet,” he mutters.

“I am fine, I told you.”

He ignores my protestations and puts his hands around my waist. I barely have time to gasp before I am perched on the horse’s back, the imprint of his hands still burning against my skin. He springs up into the saddle, then takes the reins in hand. “Grab hold of me or else you’ll tumble off,” he instructs over his shoulder.

Gingerly, I place my hands along his sides.

“Hold on,” he repeats, then puts his heels to his horse. We fly forward, and I barely have time to grab the thick folds of his cloak to keep myself from spilling off.

He gallops back the way we’ve come. The overturned cart is gone now and there is no sign of anyone nearby. He takes a side street, then another, and soon we come to a wider street with finer houses.

Duval pulls up in front of one of them. His horse has barely come to a full stop before a groomsman rushes out to take the reins. Duval dismounts only long enough to introduce me to his steward, then remands me into the keeping of his housekeeper, Louyse, a round, pleasant-faced woman who welcomes me cheerfully, if curiously.

When he starts to give her orders to send for a doctor, I stop him. “Milord. If I had been poisoned, I would be dead by now.”

He scowls at me and begins to argue, but I cut him off. “Look how quickly it felled my horse. Surely someone my size would be dead already.”

His face clears somewhat at my words. “Perhaps. But why would only one of their blades be poisoned?”

“I do not know. I only know that I am well, and that is enough.”

He nods curtly. “Very well. Louyse will see that you have anything you may need.” He surprises me by taking my hand. It is for the servants, I tell myself. To convince them of our masquerade. “Promise me you will send for a doctor if you start to feel ill.”

I want to laugh at his concern. No, I want to wrap it around me like a blanket and use it to soothe my most recent loss. Instead I say, “I promise,” knowing it will cost me nothing.

Then he leaps onto his horse, calls four of his men to ride with him, and leaves. As they clatter out of the courtyard, I realize I do not know if they head for the palace or back to the scene of our attack. My desire to know is so strong, I take one step forward as if to run after them, but then I notice Louyse’s puzzled look.

I give her a wan smile, and she smiles back broadly. “Come, demoiselle. You are no doubt weary from your journey.”

I marvel at how well trained she is, for I am certain she heard Duval say *poisoned*, and yet she neither sends me curious glances nor asks me any intrusive questions.

Instead, she leads me inside. A great hall looms to my left, and the sun sparkling through the oriel window casts a glow on the tapestries covering the wall. It occurs to me that I should at least try to search Duval’s home now that he is gone, but in truth, I cannot muster the desire. I am tired down to my bones, and my movements feel as if I am wading through water.

Perhaps there was poison on the blade after all. If so, this feeling will pass quickly, much quicker than some malaise of the heart, which is what I fear it is. Nocturne’s death shouldn’t gnaw at me so, but it does, and I hate how weak I am.

Louyse continues up a wide center staircase to a bedchamber. It, too, has glass windows, and thick velvet drapes keep out the chill. There is a fire burning in the hearth, and a large tub sits nearby. A serving maid is just emptying a bucket of steaming water into it.

My spirits lift somewhat at the thought of a bath. I have not had a bath since the convent and am in sore need of one.

There is a light knock on the door and a footman appears bearing my satchel. Louyse motions for him to put it on the bed, then shoos both him and the maid from the room. She takes a step in my direction. “May I help you with your gown?”

“No!” The small spurt of panic I feel at exposing the scars on my back gives more force to the word than I intend. “Thank you,” I add, more graciously. “But I am convent raised and more comfortable disrobing in private.” My heart is beating quickly. I have not given a single thought to the assistance of a maid.

Her eyebrows raise only slightly, yet another sign of her excellent training. “Very well. I shall leave you to your bath then.” And with that, she leaves.

When she has quit the room, I ease myself onto the bed. All sense of triumph has fled and I feel nothing but the keen loss of Nocturne and the awareness of how very far from home I am.

Chapter Seventeen

I COME AWAKE WITH THE fine hairs at the nape of my neck lifting in warning, every muscle in my body tensing with anticipation. As my mind fumbles with the unfamiliar surroundings, my hand reaches for the stiletto under my pillow.

A voice heavy with weariness rumbles through the silence. “You can leave that pretty little prince sticker of yours where it is.”

Duval. I am tucked up in his house in Guérande. My hand relaxes its grip on the handle. “You don’t *stick* with it,” I correct automatically, much as Sister Arnette does. “You shove and twist.”

A low, warm chuckle fills the chamber, and my skin ripples slightly. Annoyed, I want to rub my forearm to ease the sensation, but I am not ready to let go of my knife just yet.

Duval sits in a chair with his back to the lone window. Has he come to take advantage of me? Here, where the only ones who will hear my protests are those loyal to him?

For I *will* protest, I assure myself.

“I said put your dagger down.” This time there is a hint of steel in his voice rather than laughter.

“You must be mad to think I’ll just sit here in the dark, defenseless—”

“What exactly do you feel you must defend against? I have not made any move toward you.”

And there he has me, for I cannot say what I must guard against, only that I feel threatened in some way.

“You have exactly five seconds to put your dagger away before you find it at your lovely throat.” He thinks to browbeat me into obeying him, but his words have the opposite effect. I am filled with a desire to test my skills against his. We have both dispatched three men today. How would we fare against each other? The thought has something dark and unsettling unfurling inside me. I shove my stiletto back under the pillow, afraid I will use it without cause.

Lying down feels too vulnerable, so I sit up. Duval’s broad shoulders are silhouetted by the faint moonlight coming in through the window and I want desperately to see his face so I can discern what he is about, but it is cast in shadow. Besides, he isn’t even looking at me. His head is leaning back against the chair, and the faint slump to his shoulders hints of his fatigue.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

He turns his gaze to me, and although his eyes are still hidden in the shadows, I feel them as surely as any touch. My skin ripples again, and this time I do rub my arms.

“What is my fair assassin so afraid of? I wonder.”

“I’m not afraid.”

Duval tilts his head to the side. “No?” He studies me a long moment, then rises out of his chair. I hold my breath as he crosses to my bed. “Are you afraid I will draw closer, perhaps?” His voice is pitched low, little more than a purr. My breath catches in my throat, trapped by something I long to call fear but that doesn’t feel like fear at all. Every inch of my skin is thrillingly, painfully aware of the soft linens and bedcovers between us. They are thicker than any gown I have ever worn, and yet I feel unbearably exposed.

“Perhaps you worry I might touch you,” he muses. I watch, mesmerized, as his hand reaches toward me, hovers over the foot of the bed. Under the covers, my skin twitches in anticipation.

When his hand comes down and grasps my ankle, it takes every bit of willpower I possess to keep from jerking away. His grip is firm, and it is as if the heat from his hand burns through all the layers between us. My ankle throbs, and the sensation creeps up my leg and spreads throughout my entire body, until every inch of my skin is alight with—what? Fear? Anticipation?

We stare at each other, the moment stretching out, swallowing up all the moments that came before it. “However will you play the game of seduction if you flinch so?” His voice is soft velvet along my skin. “You will be hard-pressed to gain my secrets if you cannot bear my touch.” Then he swears and pulls his hand away from me. “What is your convent thinking, sending such an innocent out in the world to play the strumpet?”

My heart thuds painfully in my chest as Duval returns to his chair. He knows. He knows the abbess has sent me to spy on him. Has probably always known. It was only I who thought we were fooling anybody.

Duval settles back and studies me, as if I am some complicated knot he must untangle. I try not to fidget.

“So why *are* you here?” I cling stubbornly to that question.

“Your abbess was correct. It does not matter what we call you—people are drawing their own conclusions. When I arrived at court this evening, two nobles congratulated me on my new mistress. It is stupid to fight this.”

“Perhaps my wits are addled from sleep, but I still do not understand why you’re here.”

Duval sighs. “So my attendants will note I visited your bedchamber tonight and draw their base conclusions.”

“Surely we don’t need to continue the charade under your own roof?” I say, glad to have something concrete to argue over.

“Surely you are not willing to risk your life or our duchess’s future on everyone in my household being completely loyal?”

“I cannot believe you do not trust your own household,” I say, but it is a lie. I am not surprised.

Duval leans forward and places his elbows on his knees. “The French have bought any number of Breton nobles, Ismae. It is only a matter of who and how much. If I were the French spymaster, I would certainly make an effort to place a spy or two in the house of every one of Anne’s trusted advisors.”

“Then surely they would all bear the marques of Mortain for their treachery.”

“And yet, they do not. As I have said, I suspect your saint is more complex than your convent would have you believe.”

Anger, prickly and welcome, flares inside me. “How can you know they do not bear the marques? They are not visible to you.”

He smiles then, a genuine smile. “That is why I am presenting you at court tomorrow. It will prove most amusing, I’m sure. However, I recommend that you consult with the duchess before you begin assassinating her courtiers with abandon. Now, go back to sleep,” he says. “I will sit here for another hour, then return to my own chamber.”

It is clear he will not budge until he is good and ready. I settle back down under the covers, too aware of his presence, of the lack of space between us. Of only the thin linen of my nightshift covering me. I clear my throat. “Did you learn anything of our attackers?” I ask.

“Sleep now, Ismae. We will talk more in the morning.” His voice is low, naught but a faint rumble in the night air.

I am certain I will never fall back to sleep, and yet I do. And when I awake in the morning, he is gone. It is as if he was never there at all.

When Louyse comes to help me dress, I am unable to meet her eye. Does she know that Duval spent a good portion of the night in my room? If so, she gives no indication. She is either remarkably discreet or truly unaware.

With a pleasant “Good morning, demoiselle” she sets a ewer of water on the stand and lays a fresh chemise on my bed. As she moves to the garderobe to collect my gown, I slip quickly out of bed, eager to get into my chemise while she is not looking. When she returns with my gown, she blinks in surprise but says nothing. The woman is well trained.

I step into my skirt and she moves behind me to fasten it. “The viscount is in his study,” she says, lacing up the back of my gown. “He asked that you join him

when you are ready.”

“Very well.” I hope she does not hear the reluctance in my voice.

The door opens again and I flinch slightly at this intrusion, but it is only the serving girl Agnez bringing me a tray so that I may break my fast. Once I am fully dressed and brushed, and after I assure them—twice—that I can manage my breakfast unattended, they finally take their leave. I close my eyes and allow myself to savor the solitude, even just for a moment. But the knowledge that Duval is waiting robs me of whatever peace it might bring. I tear a corner from the loaf of bread on the breakfast tray and nibble at it, hoping it will calm the roiling nerves in my gut.

Feeling restless and awkward, I pace as I nibble, unable to stand still. It is as if sometime during the night I have outgrown my own skin. Duval’s presence still lingers, like the faintest trace of perfume, and my ankle still bears the memory of that touch. I find myself wishing for a great throbbing bruise instead. That I would know how to deal with better than this.

Agitated, I go to the window and throw open the shutters, welcoming the chill morning into the room. Closing my eyes, I breathe in, pulling the sharp cold air deep into my lungs. I will it to clear my addled wits and am pleased when it does. But even with my wits restored, I cannot discern Duval’s strategy.

He could easily have made me his mistress in truth last night. With the spell he cast over me, I am not even sure I would have fought very hard. And yet he did not. Is he that honorable? Or is it but one more way to keep me unbalanced, to keep me wondering what his next move will be?

With a grimace of disgust, I toss the remaining bread out into the courtyard below and turn from the casement. It is a strategy, I tell myself. And an excellent one at that. But I will not let myself be lulled into a false sense of accord between us. I cross the room to the bed, then withdraw my blades and sheaths from where I have hidden them under the mattress. Only when I have strapped them firmly in place do I go to find Duval.

He is in his study behind a large desk. Gone is the travel-stained man I journeyed across the country with. In his place is a finely dressed courtier in a doublet of dark blue. He has shaved the whiskery stubble that lent such a dark and dangerous air to his face. A pot of ink and half a dozen quills are on one side of him, stacks of parchment on the other, and his fingers wield a quill with quick, bold strokes.

When he looks up, I am sorely vexed to be caught staring, so I step inside the room, holding my head high and fighting the shyness that plucks at me. “Good morning.” My voice is cool and remote.

“I will be with you in a moment,” he says, returning his attention to the letter in front of him.

Torn between annoyance and relief, I saunter to the two trestle tables that have been set up to hold the overflow of papers and maps from his desk. A map of Brittany is spread out, and small, colored pebbles are scattered across it. I squint my eyes and see a shape and pattern to the pebbles. The dark ones mark the towns and villages that France took easily during the Mad War. Is he trying to determine where the French will attack if they do not get their way? A shadow passes over my heart. *Sweet Mortain, not another war.*

Duval finishes his letter and sets it aside before looking up at me. “How did you sleep last night?” There is a gleam of amusement in his eyes—eyes that are very nearly blue from the reflected color of his doublet—that I do not care for.

“Poorly, I am afraid, milord. My sleep was much disturbed.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” he says, even though he knows full well he is the cause. Before I can point that out to him, he holds up his hand. “Peace,” he says. “We have much to discuss this morning before I leave and very little time.”

It costs me to let him have the last word, but I nod in agreement nevertheless.

Duval tosses his quill on the desk and leans back in his chair. “I was correct. Someone has called the meeting of the Estates without the duchess’s knowledge or consent, and she is most aggrieved. All the barons of the realm are now gathered here in Guérande like eager vultures. Even worse, the French envoy will no doubt witness the entire spectacle and report back to the French regent.”

“Perhaps he will bear a marque,” I say with hope. “Then I can kill him before he carries tales back to the French.”

Duval grimaces. “By all means, if you see a marque on the French ambassador, kill him with my blessing along with Mortain’s. However, if you think that will stop the leak of information from our court to France, you are more naive than you appear.”

I bristle at his words, wanting to argue that I am not naive, but it has become clear that the convent has woefully underprepared me for this assignment.

Or perhaps it is the convent that is underprepared. It is a most unsettling thought, and I push it away. “Did you learn anything further from the footpad who attacked us?”

A grimace of embarrassment crosses his face. “No.” He rises to his feet and stalks to the window. “I’m afraid I clouted him a bit too soundly. He has yet to wake up.”

“Did you search through his belongings? Was there nothing that hinted at who they were or why they were there?”

“No, they had no standard or signed note of instruction stuffed neatly in their purses.” His mocking tone prods me to my feet as well.

“Of course not. But had they been paid? What coin did they carry? Were their cloaks of Flemish wool, or their boots of Italian leather? We can learn much from these details.”

Duval’s brows lift in respectful surprise. “They carried French coin, but that tells us little, as half the coinage in the realm is French. Their cloaks were of cheap make, but their boots were of the finest leather, so they made some attempt at concealing their origins.”

I try not to look smug, but before I can enjoy my small victory, he changes the subject.

“I have a number of meetings today. As you can imagine, the duchess has much to sort out with these newest developments, and I would be there to offer her guidance.”

“Will they not question my presence, my lord?”

He looks at me in amusement. “They would indeed, demoiselle, which is why you will not be there.”

“But what am I to do? Shall I question the footpad when he awakes? Or perhaps I should attempt to learn who it was that called for the meeting of the Estates in the first pla—”

He raises his hand to stop my flow of words. “None of those. In fact, you will have a meeting too, of sorts.” I do not like the smile playing about his mouth. “A seamstress, one of the duchess’s, will be here shortly to fashion a gown for you to wear tonight when I present you at court.”

“A . . . gown,” I splutter. He cannot be serious. He cannot think I will sit and be poked and prodded with pins and silk while he is off attending to matters of state. “That is not in our agreement, my lord.”

“A good subterfuge requires preparation and attention to detail. Surely the convent taught you that much? If you are appear tonight as my mistress—”

“I thought we had settled on cousin,” I say stiffly.

He leans against the wall near the window and folds his arms across his chest. “You must realize the futility of that now. My bloodlines on both sides are too well known for me to pull a cousin out of my lineage like a conjurer’s trick.”

My cheeks flame red at this reminder of my earlier blunder. He purses his lips and taps his finger against them, studying me. “In fact, that is what you can do once your gown has been properly fitted. You can study the noble families of Brittany so that when you meet them face to face tonight, you will not make similar mistakes.”

I raise my chin. “I have already studied them, my lord, but unless they carry their shields or colors or display their coats of arms, I have no way of recognizing them.”

“True enough, but you will forgive me if I am somewhat leery of what you learned at the convent. I would like to be certain you possess the basic facts of the situation.”

A hot bubble of anger rises up inside me, but I force it back down. At first, I think it is his arrogance that has made me angry, but then I realize I am angry because he has planted tiny, wicked seeds of doubt within me.

He strolls to a chessboard near the window. There is a game in progress, I see—but no, there are far too many pieces for that. There are, in fact, twice as many pieces as in a regular game.

“Do you play?” he asks.

“No.” This is a lie. I do play, just not very well.

“I am surprised,” he says. “I would think the convent would find chess a useful tool for their novices.”

“They do.” Honesty compels me to admit it. “But it is not one of my strengths.”

A corner of Duval’s mouth lifts in amusement. “Too impatient, perhaps?”

I force myself to unclench my jaw. “So I was told,” I mutter.

Ignoring my discomfiture, he reaches down and lays a finger on top of the white queen. She is flanked by a small cluster of white pieces. Surrounding her are dozens of dark pieces. “The French,” Duval says, “press hard against us. They look for any excuse to step in and swallow us whole. They not only wait but actively plot and plan. If they can create discord within our ranks, they will cheerfully do so and use that as a justification to help themselves to our country. I know they are paying off some of our barons, but I do not yet know which ones. I am working on gathering that information.”

“That is precisely what the convent explained to us, my lord.” With the exception of the barons being bribed by the French regent, but I will bite off my tongue before admitting that to him.

“There are two things we must do,” he continues, as if I have not spoken. “Secure a strong marriage alliance for the duchess, and see her crowned. Both are made more difficult by the French envoy’s presence here at court. What do you know of Anne’s suitors?” he asks.

“That she was dangled like bait in front of all the princes in Christendom and promised to nearly half of those,” I say.

Duval’s lips twist in a sour smile. “Precisely so. However, the one who is most determined to ensure that promise is kept is Count d’Albret. His suit has

some support among the Privy Council, as well as among the barons. He has a number of large holdings and thousands of men-at-arms that he can call upon to fight against the French. It does not hurt his cause any that his half sister, the duchess's governess of many years, sits on the Privy Council. She is much in favor of his suit. The duchess herself, however, is greatly opposed to the match, as am I."

"Why?" I ask, genuinely curious.

He looks at me, incredulous. "You have seen the man."

"Not truly. He was surrounded by his outriders yesterday. I only caught a glimpse of his bulk and his poor lathered horse."

"Yes, well, he treats his wives much as he does his horses, but he goes through wives much faster."

His words strike a chord of memory. "Six," I say, remembering Sister Eonette's teachings. "He has had six wives so far. Indeed, he has gained much of his wealth and many of his holdings through those marriages."

Duval plucks a black knight from the board and scowls at it viciously. "You will forgive me if I dislike those odds."

I gape at him. "What are you suggesting?"

His jaw twitches. "Only that marriage and childbirth are hard on women, especially d'Albret women. Besides, I harbor suspicions of his role in our final and losing battle with the French."

"But I thought d'Albret rode to our rescue with four thousand troops?"

"Yes, but he was supposed to charge the center with those troops during the battle, and instead they hung back. I cannot decide if it was due to the normal chaos of battle or some ulterior purpose."

I am quiet a long moment as I ponder the many reasons d'Albret would be a most unsuitable match. "But surely he is not the only one of Anne's suitors who wants to claim her hand? She has been promised to so very many."

Duval drops the chess piece back on the board, then holds up his hand. "The Spanish prince is too ill right now to think of pursuing his betrothal agreement, although his royal parents have offered fifteen hundred troops to aid us. The English prince went missing from his tower over five years ago and is unable to follow through with those betrothal plans. Two of the other contenders are already married, although they are seeking annulments from the pope even as we speak. That leaves the Holy Roman emperor. He is by all accounts a good leader and a decent man, as well as a powerful ruler over both Germany and the Holy Roman Empire. But he is mired in wars of his own and cannot send us any aid. Further, if we betroth Anne to the Holy Roman emperor, France will call it an act of war, and we will need troops to defend the alliance."

“Thus the plea to England for support.”

“Exactly so. And we still do not know which side the English king will favor.”

I stare at the board, painfully aware just how desperate the duchess’s situation is. “She is well and truly under siege then,” I murmur.

“That is a most excellent assessment of the situation, I’m afraid.” Duval’s gaze lingers on me for a long moment before he reaches toward the board once more. He lifts up a discarded white pawn and sets it in front of the white queen.

“Who is that, my lord?”

When he looks up, his eyes are so dark they seem almost black. “You,” he says, our eyes holding for a long moment. “I can count you among those loyal to the duchess, can’t I?”

“Of course, my lord,” I murmur, struggling against the unexpected warmth his words bring me. *But, I remind myself, I am not the issue. Better for me to ask if I can count him among those loyal to the duchess.* Instead, I look back down at the board and wonder what piece Duval has assigned to himself.

Chapter Eighteen

I STAND AMONG A GAGGLE of women who are clucking and honking like a flock of geese. They are tugging and pulling and patting and smoothing until I fear I will scream. Instead, I stare out the window at the lengthening shadows and wonder how they would react if they knew what I planned to hide under this fine skirt and these elaborate sleeves.

Louyse gives a final tug, then steps back. “You look a wonder, demoiselle.” There is a warm glow in her old cheeks.

Young Agnez clasps her hands together as if in prayer. “It is the finest thing I’ve ever seen.”

I want to dismiss their foolish prattle, but as I finger the heavy silken brocade, I cannot help but agree. I do not know where these seamstresses have found this gown or whose it was supposed to be, but it is mine now, and I must remind myself that assassins should take no pleasure in their finery and frippery.

But surely even a knight can admire his armor?

“Go get the mirror from the master’s chambers,” Louyse tells the others.

“That is not necessary,” I tell her. “I trust what you have done.”

“*Pish.*” Louyse flaps her hand. “You should see how lovely you look.”

I realize then how much she misses having a lady of the manor. I also realize that she does indeed know that Duval has spent the night in my room and is much pleased by it. The housekeeper appears to have a taste for romance, and I do not have the heart to take that from her, so I keep silent.

Agnez and the other two women return to the room, lugging the heavy mirror between them. When they lean it against the wall, Louyse takes my hand and gently pulls me toward it. “There.” The triumph in her voice is unmistakable.

“Well? What do you think?” Young Agnez is practically bouncing on her toes in her excitement.

Slowly I lift my eyes to the image in the mirror and for one heart-stopping moment I do not recognize that person. It is most certainly not me, for my complexion has never been that fine nor my cheeks tinged with such a becoming shade of pink. The dusk-colored gown has done something to my eyes, and they shine back deep and luminous. I am filled with a ridiculous desire to lift my skirts and twirl to see how the fabric moves. Instead, I scowl at my image and turn away abruptly. “It will do,” I say, and I harden my heart against the

women's falling faces. "Now leave me, please. I would like a few moments alone before I go."

"But your hair," Louyse says, her old face uncertain now.

I soften my voice. "Thank you, but I can dress it myself. You forget that I am convent raised and all this vanity sits poorly on me."

"Ah." Her old face clears with understanding, and she reaches out and pats my hand. Then she shoos the others from my room as she leaves, and I am blessedly alone. At least for a moment. I allow myself another quick look in the mirror, and—with no one to see—I do give a twirl, savoring the thick drape of the heavy skirt and the way the fabric ripples like water.

Feeling foolish, I turn my back on my mirror and hurry to the bed and snatch up the net of gold and pearls. I hastily twist my hair into a knot, then secure the net around it.

Next, I go to the mattress and reach for my weapons. The moment my fingers touch my ankle sheath, certainty flows in my veins once more. I strap it in place, then take up the wrist sheath. There is barely enough room for it under the tight sleeve, but after a long struggle, I am able to make everything work. I slip the lethal golden bracelet onto my wrist, then put my hand to my waist. At the comforting touch of the misericorde, I smile, and a sense of purpose settles over me. Surely Mortain will make His wishes known to me tonight, and I will be able to deal with our country's traitors in a manner suited to their crimes.

I am still smiling at that thought as I go to meet Duval. He is waiting for me at the foot of the staircase, and when I appear at the top of the steps, he forgets what he is saying to his steward and stares as if he has never seen me before. Even though this may well be an act, it pleases me more than it should. It cannot *all* be an act, for Duval is master at having the last word and would never knowingly grant me such an advantage. "That will do for now," he finally tells the steward.

"Good evening, milord," I say as I descend the stairs, trying to tamp down the bubble of pleasure.

When he takes my arm, he looks at me with suspicion. "What is wrong?" he asks.

"May I not smile without arousing your misgivings?"

"No," he says with a wry twist to his mouth.

"You need not look so distrustful; I am but practicing my role for tonight's masquerade. If we—if *I*—cannot convince the court of my role, then I will have no access to the duchess's enemies and will fail in the task the convent set for me. I have no intention of failing." The unwelcome truth is, until Chancellor Crunard returns, Duval is my only ally at court. Furthermore, the Breton nobility

does not take kindly to the lowborn prancing among them. The last commoner to reach so high had been hung from the gibbet when his aspirations proved greater than his birth.

“What shadow just crossed your face?” Duval asks, and I curse his eyes that always see too much.

“I was thinking of your father’s late chamberlain.”

Duval grows somber. He tucks my arm closer against his. “That will not happen to you.” His words sound almost like a vow, which discomfits me greatly.

To distract us both, I cozy up to him and flash my most brilliant smile, one I have copied from Sybella. “That is settled then. Shall we go?”

He blinks. “If you are not careful, I will begin to think you are enamored of me.”

At his words, something flutters happily in my breast, pleasure, perhaps, but I am at last finding my footing in this game we play. “It is what we want the court to think, my lord.”

The grandeur of the Breton court can scarce be described. The rustle of fine silk and brocades, the whisper of plush velvet and softest leather. The air is heavy with perfume, from the shy scent of violets and bold bouquet of roses to the subtler scents of vetiver and sandalwood. The very air drips with richness and opulence that puts every place I’ve ever been to to shame.

I cannot imagine a gathering where I would be less at home; a turnip mislaid in a rose garden. I feel Duval’s eyes upon me and risk a quick glance at him.

“What?” I ask, reaching up to discreetly adjust an escaping tendril of hair.

He bats my hand away. “Leave it. It looks charming thus.”

My cheeks grow warm at this unexpected compliment. Then he leans down. “Just how many of those pearls are poisoned?”

The warmth of his breath tickles my ear in an unsettling manner, but his words embolden me, reminding me of my purpose. I turn back to the gathered nobles with a lighter heart. Surely now that I am here, Mortain will reveal His wishes to me.

It is like watching a large group of birds of prey, all hooded eyes and hungry gazes, all waiting to pounce. What tasty morsel they hunger after, I know not. Gossip? Intrigue?

The nobles cluster in small groups, much like the chickens at the convent when they find a nest of slugs. All of the ladies are as poised and graceful as Madame Hivern, and while there are varying degrees of beauty, the style is the same: bold and well practiced, artfully achieved, demanding to be noticed.

“First things first, I think,” Duval murmurs. “I must introduce you to the privy councilors so you do not kill one of them in error.”

“If Mortain wills it, my lord, it will not be in error.”

“Even so, I suggest you consult with the duchess before dispatching any of them.” He leads me to two older men standing a bit removed from the others.

It is easy enough to guess who they are. The man on the right is built like a bear and stands as if he has been riding a horse for a fortnight. Surely he must be Captain Dunois. There is something about his quiet, unassuming strength that makes me inclined to trust him at once, a sentiment that I remind myself has no place in this game we play.

The other man is taller, with iron-gray hair and a surfeit of square yellowed teeth that put me in mind of a braying ass. He must be Marshal Rieux, and it is clear from the way he stands and surveys the room that he is much in love with his own opinion.

Captain Dunois greets Duval warmly, but Marshal Rieux is vexed and takes no pains to hide it. “You picked a fine time to disappear,” he snaps.

Duval meets the older man’s eyes steadily. “Indeed, I would never have left if I’d known someone would call an Estate meeting over my sister’s wishes.”

Marshal Rieux doesn’t flinch. “The barons have every right to be addressed and apprised of the situation, and sooner rather than later.”

I glance at Duval. Does that mean that the marshal called the meeting? If so, he would surely bear a *marque*, but he does not. Or at least, not one that I can see. Duval takes a step toward Marshal Rieux. “So it was you who called the meeting?”

Marshal Rieux’s manner grows cold and distant. “You forget yourself, Duval,” he snaps. “You are naught but a bastard, tolerated only for your sister’s sake. You do not have a formal place on the council, or a voice. You are in no position to demand answers from me.” Without giving Duval a chance to respond, he turns on his heel and stalks away.

Captain Dunois watches him a long moment before turning back to Duval. “Were you intending to have that effect on him?”

Duval gives an irritated shake of his head. “No, he is just more prickly than a damned hedgehog. Was it Rieux that called the meeting, do you think? Is that why he grew so angry?”

“No, I think he grew angry because he did *not* call the meeting and does not like being reminded that someone disregarded not only Anne’s authority but also his own.”

“Since Chancellor Crunard has been away from court nearly as long as I have, that leaves Madame Dinan. But to what purpose? Does she mean to put her half

brother's marriage proposal before the barons? Surely she knows Anne will refuse him. What does she gain by forcing the issue in such a manner?"

Captain Dunois shrugs. "Perhaps it is intended as a show of support and strength to deter our French guests?"

"French plague is more like it," Duval mutters. "Perhaps now is as good a time as any for us to greet the French parasite."

Dunois bows. "You will forgive me if I do not linger to watch the resulting tempest," he says, then takes his leave.

With a sigh, Duval begins leading me across the room. "If the French ambassador bears a marque, do feel free to kill him at once. It would save us all a great deal of trouble."

Only too pleased at the chance to open myself to Mortain's will, I let Duval steer me to the far corner of the hall where the French envoy sits like a fat brown spider, patient and cunning, tending his carefully woven web. He is a hatchet-faced man surrounded by smirking, fawning courtiers. He makes no move to acknowledge us as Duval and I approach, but I feel him study us all the same.

When we reach the envoy, Duval looks contemptuously at those gathered round him. "Still here, Gisors?" That Duval does not even feign politeness surprises me. I thought honeyed words a requirement here at court.

The French noble spreads his hands. "But of course. I am here to oversee the wardship of young Anne."

"Anne is no one's ward," Duval counters. "You are here to guard France's interests and care nothing for our duchess." While Duval's words are sharp, he delivers them almost cheerfully, as if he enjoys tearing down the carefully constructed web Gisors has built.

"Tsk-tsk. So little trust, Duval."

Duval narrows his eyes. "Says the wolf as he sniffs at the door."

As Duval keeps Gisors distracted with conversation, I study the French envoy intently, looking for any hint of a marque, but I see nothing, not the faintest smudge or shadow anywhere.

When Gisors finally turns his hooded gaze on me, I am struck by how very green his eyes are. Those eyes travel languidly down my body and back up again, but he says nothing to acknowledge my presence. Under my hand, the muscles in Duval's arm stiffen, and he glances at me. When I give a little shake of my head, his mouth flattens in disappointment.

Completely unaware of our silent exchange, Gisors says, "I hear Anne has received correspondence from the Holy Roman emperor. What did he have to say?"

“I believe that is between the Holy Roman emperor and the duchess.” Duval’s mild voice is at odds with the tension in his arm.

“Since he is petitioning for a betrothal that the French Crown forbids, it is most certainly our business as well.”

“Brittany is a sovereign nation, and our duchess free to choose whom she pleases.”

I peer up at Duval from under my lashes. This is not quite true and I wonder if Gisors will call the bluff. He does.

“And I would remind you of the Treaty of Verger,” the envoy says. “Furthermore, young Anne has not yet been crowned duchess.”

“A mere formality,” Duval replies, “since that treaty you’re so fond of quoting agrees that she keeps the duchy and will rule over it as duchess.”

“Only if she marries whom the French Crown says she should marry.”

“We have yet to see a serious offer put forth by you or your regent,” Duval points out.

“We have given you two.”

“A foppish minor baron and a doddering sycophant older than her father.” Duval flaps his hand at the far wall, where for the first time I notice an old, gray-bearded courtier dozing in a chair. “Neither is remotely suitable.”

Gisors gives an indifferent shrug. “Then we are at an impasse.”

“Again,” Duval says, then gives a curt bow and escorts me away. As we pass beyond Gisors’s hearing, I glance once more at the dozing figure against the wall. It takes me a moment to realize that his spirit is growing dim, like a candle flame shrinking and sputtering before going out. “It is just as well the duchess is not inclined to accept France’s candidate for a husband. That one over there will be dead within a fortnight,” I tell Duval.

He stops to stare at the aging courtier. “He is marked by Mortain?”

“No, he is merely dying of old age or some slow disease.”

“You can tell this from looking at him?”

I nod, pleased that he is impressed with my gifts. Before Duval can say anything further, a large hand clamps down on his shoulder.

“That is quite a subtle touch you have there, Duval, to have angered two men in so short a time. First Marshal Rieux and now the French envoy.”

We turn to find a brute of a man just behind us. He is tall and fat, and a bristly black beard covers his face. Amid all that blackness, his lips stand out like wet pink slugs. His hooded eyes study me with the hungry intensity of a hawk. Something cold and chilling slithers in their depths, and then it is gone, so swift and fleeting I do not know if it was truly there or was simply my own dark fears awakening.

Duval's greeting is less than warm. "Count d'Albret," he says. "What brings you to Guérande?"

This is the man the late duke promised his twelve-year-old daughter to? I can scarce wrap my mind around it.

D'Albret casts Duval a sly look. "Always the wit, aren't you, Duval."

"One hopes so," Duval mutters, his voice dry as bone. "Allow me to present my cousin Ismae Rienne."

I look demurely down at the floor and sink into a curtsy.

"Ah, yes. I, too, have a cousin," he says. "I am quite fond of her." D'Albret reaches out, takes my hand, and brings it to his slack, fleshy mouth. Revulsion, sharp and hot, spikes through me and it is all I can do not to reach for my knife. As his wet lips press against my hand, I shudder. Duval places a bracing hand at my back, and I am grateful for something to focus on besides d'Albret's touch. "*Enchanté, demoiselle,*" the count murmurs.

"The honor is all mine, my lord," I reply. As soon as his grip on my hand has loosened, I snatch it back and bury it in the folds of my gown where, unable to help myself, I wipe it on my skirt.

Count d'Albret smiles at me as if we are the closest of friends, as if we share some secret that Duval is not privy to. "Do not let Duval bore you with all his talk of politics and intrigue, demoiselle," he says. "There are much finer pleasures to be had at court." The leer on his face leaves little doubt as to which pleasures he is thinking of.

"My cousin is young and from the country, d'Albret. Surely you can do your hunting in more verdant pastures."

"Nonsense, Duval. I just wanted to make her feel welcome at court. After all, it can be overwhelming, and she will quickly learn how serious and dull you are." D'Albret turns to me. "When he leaves you in a corner somewhere so that he may discuss politics like an old man, I will find you, my dear." And even though this promise will surely give me nightmares, he smiles as if he has just offered me the moon.

Duval stares steadily at the older man, his dislike rolling off him like fog from the sea. It is a wonder the count does not see it.

D'Albret winks at me. "Come find me when you grow bored." And with that, he saunters off.

Once he is well out of hearing, I give voice to my outrage. "I cannot *believe* your father promised that man your sister's hand in marriage. He is so old," I say. "*And vile!*"

The look Duval sends me fair trumpets the words *I told you so*.

“Does he care anything for the duchess herself or is it merely the duchy he is after?”

Duval’s mouth quirks in disgust. “The duchy is his first and foremost goal, but I am sure being married to a young maid of Anne’s beauty and charm will be no hardship for him.” Something dark and dangerous shadows Duval’s face, but before I can question him further, he speaks again. “Now, come with me. I have one more person I would have you meet.”

Chapter Nineteen

THE HEAT OF DUVAL'S HAND passes through the silk of my sleeve all the way down to my marrow. I am sorely tempted to throw it off, but I need his solid warmth to chase away the clammy chill d'Albret has left behind.

Duval leads me up a wide stone staircase, then down one corridor, then another. For the first time I get a feel for just how big the duchess's residence in Guérande is. After leading me through many twists and turns, he stops in front of a thick oaken door and knocks. When there is no answer, he lets himself in.

The room is a sumptuous receiving chamber with several ornately carved chairs, thick velvet tapestries covering the stone walls, and a fire burning in the fireplace. "Why have you brought me here?" Duval lets go of my arm and prowls around the room. He looks behind the tapestries at the window, then strides to the small door in the far corner and confirms that it is locked. "Because I would have you meet our duchess face to face and see who precisely it is that you are serving."

The main door opens just then and the duchess herself comes into the room. She is very young, but she holds herself with pride and not a little arrogance. Her forehead is high and noble; her cheeks still bear the slight fullness of her youth. Her brown eyes are keen with intelligence. It would be a mistake to underestimate her, yet because of her youth, I am certain many do.

She is followed by an older noblewoman whom I can only assume is her governess, Madame Dinan. She was strikingly beautiful once, and her bones still hold the truth of that beauty even with her hair gone white. It is hard to believe she shares any blood with Count d'Albret.

Duval bows low and I sink into a deep curtsy. "Your Grace; Madame Dinan," he says.

"You may rise." The young duchess's voice is as clear and true as a bell. She turns to the other woman. "And you may leave us."

Madame Dinan glances at Duval. "Your Grace, I think I should stay. It is not fitting that you are alone, with no chaperone."

"You would keep me from speaking with my own brother?" the duchess asks sharply.

"I would keep you from nothing, Your Grace, only suggest you should have a chaperone, as is fitting."

The duchess glances at Duval, who gives the tiniest shake of his head. "We

have a chaperone,” she says, indicating me. “You may leave.”

The command in her tone is unmistakable, and Madame Dinan rears her head back slightly, nostrils flaring. “Very well, Your Grace. I will wait outside.” Her unhappiness with this arrangement is palpable, but whether it is because she resents being left out or because she is truly worried to leave the duchess with her own brother, I cannot tell.

The room is quiet until she leaves, then the duchess crosses over to the fireplace and holds her hands out to the flames. “Was that necessary, Gavriel?” she says. “It is hard for her to take orders from me.”

“I understand, Your Grace.” Even though he is her brother, Duval remains formal with her, and I wonder if it is for my benefit. “But I wanted you to meet Demoiselle Rienne and learn from her own mouth who and what she is. It is knowledge best kept to ourselves for a while.”

The duchess tilts her head, curiosity shining in her eyes. “You do not trust Madame Dinan?”

“Someone called this Estate meeting, Your Grace, and d’Albret is her half brother.”

The duchess wrinkles her nose. “Do not remind me! She presses his suit at every turn until I fear I shall scream.”

“We will find you a better marriage, I promise,” Duval says.

She dimples prettily at this, making her look impossibly young, and her affection for Duval is plain on her face. In that moment, I am fiercely glad she has a brother to protect her from this marriage they have planned for her. It is unthinkable that she has been promised to d’Albret. Surely it cannot be Mortain’s desire to see the duchess wed to such a foul man.

Duval grabs my hand and pulls me forward. “Ismae Rienne is sent from the abbess at the convent of St. Mortain.”

The duchess’s eyebrows shoot up. “Mortain? The patron saint of death?”

“The very one, Your Grace. It is but another thing your advisors would keep from you.” Duval quickly explains the convent and its purpose.

When he is done with his explanation, she turns to me. “You are truly trained in death?”

It feels too bold to meet her gaze, so I look down at the floor. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Sit, sit.” She waves her hand and chooses a chair for herself. After an uncertain glance at Duval, who nods, I sit also.

“How do you kill a man, demoiselle?”

I am certain her advisors would be shocked if they could see the hungry curiosity in her eyes. “With a knife. Or poison. Or by strangling. There are many

ways. Hundreds of them. It depends on the circumstances and Mortain's wishes."

She leans forward slightly in her chair, her brow furrowed. "How do you decide who to kill?"

"Yes," Duval drawls from where he stands by the fireplace. "How *do* you decide who to kill?"

And there he has me, for while the rites of Mortain are closely held, if Chancellor Crunard can know of them, so can the duchess. Just as I must know what weapons I have in my arsenal in order to do Mortain's work, so must the duchess know what tools are available to her in her struggle to maintain her country's independence. "Your Grace, I would tell you of our mysteries, but our knowledge is sacred and revealed only to a chosen few." I glance at Duval, indicating that he is not one of the chosen few.

When she sees where I am looking, her expression grows unyielding. "I trust my lord brother with my life," she says. "I have no secrets from him and want him to know of these rites as well. Now tell us."

I fair grind my teeth in frustration. Is that why he arranged this meeting, knowing she would demand answers and that I would have to give them? "We are mere instruments of Mortain, Your Grace. His handmaidens, if you will. We do not decide who to kill or why or when. It is all determined by the god."

"You mean saint, do you not?" she asks.

I have forgotten the conventions of the Church that must be followed outside the convent. "But of course, Your Grace. Forgive me. The saint."

She nods graciously. "How, then, does the saint inform you of His wishes?"

"One of our nuns, Sister Vereda, has a vision. The saint communicates through her, then she and the abbess direct our hands."

"How does Chancellor Crunard fit in?" Duval asks.

"He acts as liaison to the outside world and keeps the abbess up to date on the politics at court."

"And you have only the sisters' word that there has been a vision?"

I turn on Duval. "Their word is above reproach. They serve Mortain."

"He raises an interesting question," the duchess points out. "How can you be so certain their visions are correct? How do you know they serve Saint Mortain and not their own interests? And what if they make a mistake?"

"They don't." I direct my answer to the duchess and do my best to pretend Duval is not in the room. "If they did not speak truly, then we would not see the *marque* of death on our victims and we would stay our hands."

The duchess is intrigued by this idea. "*Marque*? What does that look like?"

“It looks as if the saint has dipped His finger into the darkness of a man’s soul and anointed him with it. Sometimes the marque will show how a man is to die.”

“And that is how you will know how to strike here in Guérande, away from your seeress?”

I shake my head. “It is our plan for the abbess to communicate the visions to me by crow. But should I happen to see such a marque without an order from her, I am allowed to strike.”

“*Mon Dieu!*” The duchess sits back in her chair and looks at Duval. “Do all the Privy Council know of this convent?”

Duval shakes his head. “I believe only Crunard works with the abbess. Marshal Rieux has some vague knowledge of it, and Dunois has probably heard rumors among his men, but as he is French, he was not made privy to Breton secrets by our late father. Madame Dinan has no knowledge—or should not—which is why I requested she be kept from this meeting.”

The duchess tilts her head and studies me. “Who else knows Ismae’s true identity?”

“Only Chancellor Crunard.”

“Then I agree we should keep it that way.” I stand as she rises to her feet. She holds her hand out to me. “I am glad you are here, Ismae. It is a comfort to know that you and the patron saint of death are helping Duval guard my flanks.”

I kiss her ducal ring, awed that the daughter of a turnip farmer is being raised to her feet by her sovereign. “It is my greatest honor to serve, Your Grace.”

She smiles again, transforming her young face. “I welcome you to my court. Your skills will come in most handily with my fractious barons,” she says in jest.

At least, I believe it is in jest.

Chapter Twenty

I LIE IN BED, MY head still buzzing from the babbling voices that filled the court this evening. In truth, I have learned much and nothing at all. Duval is still an enigma, and if he is a traitor, as the chancellor and abbess suspect, I have no idea whom he might work for.

His hatred of both d'Albret and the French envoy is palpable, but of course he could easily fake that. But what of the fierce protectiveness he feels for his sister? I remember the grim set to his mouth, the fury in his eyes, and the anger that fair sparked off him, and I must admit that even he could not feign that. Which turns all my other arguments to dust.

Perhaps Duval is exactly who he says he is, a devoted brother intent on seeing his sister crowned duchess and safely wed to a man who can stand with her against the French. Of a certainty that is what the duchess believes.

Hoping a night's rest will bring clarity, I close my eyes and urge my thoughts toward sleep. Instead, Count d'Albret's thick, fleshy lips rise up in my mind, and my eyes snap open. Guillo. That is who d'Albret reminds me of, why he disturbs me so.

I fear the dreams will come tonight. Whether they will be the old ones of Guillo or some new nightmare built around d'Albret, I cannot guess.

There is a whisper of sound near the door, and my heart stutters in my chest even as my mind whispers, *Duval*. But my hand creeps toward my stiletto, just in case.

"I thought we had gotten past that." Duval's deep voice stirs the darkness of the room.

I lift my head from the pillow to see where he is. "Perhaps you have, but I have not."

"Do not be tiresome."

I follow the sound of his voice. There. In the faint glow cast by the dying embers, I can see him make his way to the chair in front of the window. I relax somewhat. As unwelcome as he is—and he *is* unwelcome, I assure myself—he will chase away the even more unwelcome dreams. "What are you doing here?"

"Performing my nightly duties to my young mistress."

His words cause something to flutter inside me. I have no idea what it is, but it frightens me almost as much as my dreams. "I am too tired to spar tonight, my lord."

“As am I. Go to sleep. I will sit here but an hour or two, then leave.”

I yawn. “So very long as that?”

When he answers, there is a wry note in his voice. “I do have my reputation to protect.”

I have no idea what he is talking about. I yawn again, then pinch myself, not wanting to fall asleep. “Why did your father promise your sister to Count d’Albret? With her kingdom as dowry, surely she could have made a better match than that? To someone who wasn’t so repulsive.”

There is a long moment of silence before Duval answers. “It was a desperate bid to save that very kingdom. Our lord father was short on troops with which to fight the French. D’Albret agreed to supply those troops, but at a price.”

“The duchess’s hand in marriage.”

“Yes. My sister’s hand in marriage.”

The utter betrayal of this leaves me speechless, for while the price paid was considerably higher, the arrangement was not so very different from my father’s bargain with Guillo.

“Perhaps my father thought he would live long enough to assure the marriage never came to pass,” Duval says. “I would like to believe that.” There is a faint note of anguish in his voice, and I know that he feels the betrayal as sharply as I do.

“I’m sure you are right, my lord,” I say, surprised that I feel the need to comfort him.

“I have sworn that no matter how much d’Albret bellows or what he threatens, he will have to step over my dead body to marry her.”

I cannot help but admire Duval greatly in that moment and find myself wishing that his father had cared half so much about Anne. Even so, I am not altogether comfortable with this small bit of harmony. Luckily, it does not last long.

“Now, enough questions, Ismae, or else I will have to think of some way to silence you.”

At his threat, my mind immediately goes to his disconcerting game of the previous night. From the faint note of humor in his voice, I suspect he is thinking of it also. Not wishing to test that theory, I settle down under my covers and close my eyes. I am certain I will not sleep with him in the room, but the sooner I fool him into believing I am asleep, the sooner he will leave.

I am locked in Guillo’s root cellar; my face presses against the floor, and the sharp smell of dirt is in my nose. Something heavy pushes down on me, forcing me farther into the dirt. Straining my neck, I look up. Guillo is before me, fumbling at the front of his braies, leering. The weight on top of me grows

heavier, and my arms are wrenched up behind my back, nearly to the point of breaking. I twist around, trying to peer through my hair, and find the flat black eyes of Count d'Albret. His long, careless fingers fumble at my skirts while Guillo beckons to me from the shadows. I struggle and buck against him, trying to throw him from my back, but he grips my arms tighter and forces me back down. "No!" I shout. My hand scrabbles in the dirt until it closes around the handle of a dagger hidden there. I grip it tightly, then roll out of d'Albret's grasp and thrust the knife in his throat.

He swears a black oath and I feel the warmth of his blood trickle down my arm. Now free of his grip, I blink and shove the hair out of my eyes.

Only to find Duval sitting on my bed, staring at me. He holds his hand to his collar, blood seeping between his fingers, the dagger still in my hand.

"God's Teeth," he says. "I was only trying to wake you. You were crying out in your sleep."

"I was not," I say, then look from his neck to my knife.

"When I tried to wake you, you stabbed me." He sounds sore put out, and I cannot blame him.

"*Merde.*" I am fully awake now and filled with remorse. I toss my knife onto the bed and scramble out from under the covers. While Duval tries to keep the blood from dripping on the bed, I hurry to the washbasin and dip one of the linen towels into the cold water. "Let me see how bad it is," I say, returning to the bed.

"Not serious, I think." He lifts his chin to give me better access. "But you have ruined one of my favorite shirts."

I gently mop the blood on his neck and collarbone. "Then perhaps you shouldn't sneak up on people when they are sleeping."

"You were whimpering and crying. You'd rather I left you to the tender mercies of your dream?"

Heat creeps into my face at the memory of my nightmare. "No," I admit. "Perhaps not." I've wiped away most of the blood and can see a two-inch scratch along his collarbone. "I must resume practicing," I mutter. "I missed."

Duval barks out a laugh. "Only because I have very good reflexes and you were asleep." He grows quiet for a moment, and I become aware of the intimacy of our positions. We sit on the bed, our knees touching. My hand rests at the base of his throat and I can feel the steady beat of his heart under my wrist. His dark eyes study me.

Trying to ease my sudden discomfort, I take the towel from his neck and begin folding it. My wrist still throbs where it has lain over his heart.

"Do you care to share your dream?" His voice is low and warm and like as not could coax secrets from a stone.

“It was nothing. I have already forgotten it.”

“*Liar.*” His voice is so soft I am not sure I heard it. Even so, I keep my gaze on the linen towel as I search it for a clean, unbloodied spot.

There is a long moment of awkward silence, then Duval speaks. “I can tend to it from here, I think.” His fingers brush against mine as he takes the towel from my hands. He stands up, leaving me alone on the bed, the warmth of his solid body no longer between me and my nightmares.

Feeling miserable, although not sure why, I wrap my arms around myself. “I am sorry, my lord. I did not wish to harm you.” The truth of my words surprises me, for it seems as if I have done naught but long to be rid of him.

His smile flashes, quick and surprising in the darkness. “When one consorts with assassins, one must expect to dance along the edge of a knife once or twice. I bid you good night.”

He leaves the room, and I lie back down on the bed, unable to tell if I am overly warm or chilled to the bone.

The next morning, Louyse bustles in with a cheerful smile and a pitcher of hot water. I have not slept since Duval left and am awake when she arrives. “Good morning, demoiselle.”

“Good morning, Louyse.” I stretch, then climb out of bed. Since there is no towel this morning, I cup my hands into the basin and splash the warm water on my face. “No word of my trunks yet?” I ask as I hurriedly dry my face and hands on my night shift.

“No, demoiselle,” she says as she straightens the covers on the bed.

“In that case, I will wear the dark gray gown today.”

When Louyse doesn’t answer, I turn and find her staring at a smear of blood on the sheets. Sweet Mortain! What must she think?

Not wanting to acknowledge the blood, I hurry over to the garderobe. She bustles to my side and casts me a look, her face full of concern. “Is demoiselle sure she feels well enough to be up and about today? Would you like me to bring you more hot water? Or I could arrange for a bath, if demoiselle likes?”

“No,” I say shortly. “I am fine.”

The older woman reaches out and pats my arm. “Do not worry.” She lowers her voice. “It will not always hurt so.”

With dawning horror, I realize what conclusions she has drawn from the blood on the sheets. My cheeks flame bright red.

My reputation as Duval’s mistress has just been firmly established.

Chapter Twenty-One

DUVAL IS BREAKING HIS FAST in the winter parlor. At my entrance, a servant pulls out a chair. I sit stiffly, filled with shame that Duval has seen me having a nightmare as if I were nothing but a child. Nor can I forget the feel of his skin beneath my fingers as I tended his wound. Even worse, I am afraid all of this will show on my face.

“How did you sleep?” he asks politely.

I risk glancing at him, expecting to see a glint of amusement or a smirk. Instead, there is a hint of concern. It is this kindness of his that unsettles me most. I can dodge a blow or block a knife. I am impervious to poison and know a dozen ways to escape a chokehold or garrote wire. But kindness? I do not know how to defend against that.

“Like a babe,” I answer. The lie falls easily from my lips as I glance pointedly at his throat.

He fingers the small ruff on the high collar he is wearing this morning. “Mayhap I will set a new fashion at court.”

His words prick my conscience. I raise my chin slightly and refuse to utter the apology that hovers on my tongue. It is his own fault for skulking about my room at night. “I have not yet received any message from the reverend mother. Have you word from Chancellor Crunard?”

His face sobers immediately. “No, why?”

I shrug and take a pear from the platter on the table. “I have been in Guérande three days. As urgently as the abbess wanted me here, I would think there should be someone who needed killing by now.”

Duval throws back his head and laughs. “You are a bloodthirsty thing, I’ll give you that.”

I stab a knife into my pear. The golden skin splits, and fragrant juice drips onto the plate. “Not bloodthirsty, merely eager to do Mortain’s work. It is why I am here, after all.”

“True enough.”

“What are our tasks for the day?”

He raises one of his eyebrows at me. “I have received word that a messenger has arrived at the palace and requests a meeting with me.”

My hand stills. “Who is it?”

“I do not know, as the messenger has cloaked himself in secrecy. He claims he

will speak only to me, which is why you will stay here and entertain yourself this morning.”

I clench my knife. “I can easily hide, my lord. That will not be a problem.”

“Yes, but I have promised the man a private meeting and I would keep my word.”

“But what of your promise to the abbess?” I begin cutting the pear with quick, clean strokes.

“I have not said that I will not inform you of what transpires, merely that I have promised him a private audience. Besides, there is still much you are keeping from—sweet Jesu!”

I look up, alarmed. “What?”

He nods at my plate. “You are supposed to eat it, not disembowel it.”

I look down and see that I have sliced my pear to ribbons. I carefully set the knife aside and reach for the bread.

“If it is activity you crave, one of my groomsmen can accompany you if you care to ride. Or you can occupy yourself with”—he waves his hand, searching for some activity he deems appropriate—“needlework.”

I stare at him coldly. “I do not care for needlework.” I pause. “Unless it involves the base of the skull.”

His mouth lifts in amusement and I hold my breath, wondering if he will laugh again. I ignore the small nick of disappointment when he does not. “Then occupy yourself reading some of the histories in my study. I assume the convent taught you how to entertain yourself for a morning. Put some of that excellent training to use.” And with that, he removes himself from the table, leaving me to seethe over my breakfast.

Stay, he bids me. As if I am some hound to follow or not, at his command. As if it is he, not I, who is in charge of my actions. I know in my bones that the abbess will want to be informed of any urgent secret meeting. Besides, does not his very desire to keep this meeting secret prove he is up to some deception? When it is over, I will have only his word as to what took place.

Renewed purpose flowing through me, I rise and hurry to find my cloak.

I travel on foot. Saddling a mount would waste precious time and risk drawing questions. I do not know how loyal Duval’s servants are or to what lengths they will go to enforce his wishes.

The morning air is crisp and clean; Guérande’s merchants are only just beginning to open their shutters. Industrious maids and housewives are already shopping for their day’s provisions. No one pays any attention to my passing. When I reach the palace, it is easy enough to gain admittance, as courtiers,

nobles, and petitioners come and go as they please. I also suspect the guard recognizes me from last night, although I cannot be certain. My biggest obstacle is finding where Duval's mysterious meeting is taking place.

I stand in the main hallway for a moment, trying to create a map of the palace in my head. As I orient myself, I remember that Duval has private rooms assigned to him. That is surely where he will hold his meeting.

I ask a posted sentry for directions, then hurry up the staircase he points to. The palace is larger than the village where I grew up and far more confusing. Countless chamber doors line the endless hallways and corridors. In the end, I give up and bribe one of the many pages underfoot to show me the way to Duval's chambers. I give him a coin—two when he promises silence—then study the door before me.

There is no antechamber. The door is in plain sight of anyone who walks by, which means I cannot simply stand with my ear to it. There is another door to the right of Duval's, so I approach it, casting my senses out, trying to see if anyone is in there.

It feels empty, so I slip inside and hurry to the joint wall between the two rooms. I press my ear against it, but the stone is thick, and the men are speaking in low, cautious voices. I turn back to explore the chamber. It is filled with fine furnishings and elegant tapestries, none of which will help me in the least. There is a window, however, that overlooks a small enclosed courtyard. I stick my head out, pleased to see Duval's room also has a window. It is easier to hear through glass than stone.

Once assured there is no one in the courtyard below, I remove my cloak so it will not trip me and step out onto the ledge. Carefully, I inch along the narrow casement until my hand grasps the wood that frames Duval's window. I pause, then flatten myself against the wall so I cannot be seen from inside. I am quickly rewarded for my efforts by Duval's voice, slightly muffled but audible through the thick glass. "If you cannot tell me who you are working for, then we have nothing more to discuss." His voice is as cold and hard as the stone at my back.

"You know well that there are few to trust in the duchess's court. If word of my liege lord's identity were to fall into the wrong hands, it would put many people in jeopardy."

"You cannot expect me to gallop off to a rendezvous with your mystery lord when it could so easily be a trap."

"You may choose the time and place of the meeting, one to your own advantage. But my liege has a plan, a proposal"—his voice sounds like he is smiling—"that he thinks you'll find most intriguing."

There is a long pause as Duval considers, weighing the risks. My ears are firmly fixed on the room beyond, but my eyes search the courtyard below. My fingers and toes have grown numb in the bitter chill of the morning, but I will not leave my post before I hear Duval's answer.

"Why me?" he finally asks. "Why has your liege sent you to me rather than to the chancellor or one of the duchess's guardians?"

"Because blood is thicker than any chain of office. My liege believes that you more than anyone care for the young duchess's well-being."

Interesting that the mysterious lord would think such a thing. Is it empty flattery? Or does the man have personal knowledge of Duval?

The room is quiet as both men weigh and measure each other, and I nearly dance with impatience—I'm desperate to hear Duval's answer and nearly as desperate to be gone from this place before I am discovered.

"Very well," Duval says at last. "I will speak to this liege of yours and hear what he has to offer. Tell me where you are staying and I will have word sent as to when and where we shall meet."

Satisfied that the main thrust of the meeting is over, I peel my fingers away from the window, flexing them to get the blood flowing again. Slowly, for fear of missing a step with my nearly numb feet, I begin inching back to the adjoining room. Stiff with cold, I half fall, half climb back into the chamber, then silently close the shutter. I grab my cloak and rub my arms, trying to get warm again, but only for a moment. I need to be well away from here before Duval concludes his meeting.

I hurry to the door, open it a crack, and peer out into the hallway, then nearly gasp in surprise when I spot Madame Hivern lurking outside Duval's door. Hopefully, the door presented as thick an obstacle to her as it did to me.

I know Duval wanted this meeting to remain secret, but it is my own suspicion of the woman that propels me into the hall. I arrange my face in a flustered look, then step out of the office. "Madame Hivern?" I say, making my voice young and just a bit tremulous.

Startled, she whirls around. "Demoiselle Rienne? What are you doing here?" Her lovely face is wary.

I glance about, confused. "I was looking for milord Duval's chambers. One of the footmen told me they were in this corridor, but I must have miscounted the doors."

Her face relaxes and a smile that is pure condescension appears on her face. "Come, my dear." She reaches out, tucks my arm in hers, and begins leading me down the hall, away from both doors. "Surely you know that the best way to lose

a man is to chase him down?” She pats my hand. “Let me share with you the secrets of our trade.”

It is all I can do to keep from correcting her disturbing assumption. Nor do I trust this sudden charity of hers. “Madame is too kind.” I am pleased that I keep any whiff of irony from my words. In truth, the last thing I want is advice from Duval’s mother on how to be a good mistress. However, perhaps I can turn it to my advantage and use the opportunity to learn more about Duval.

The memory of his stricken face the night they argued flits through my mind, and I feel sick at my own deception, as if I am probing a gaping wound. Nevertheless, it *is* why I am here, and I know just what the reverend mother would think of such misplaced scruples.

Ignoring the nobles and courtiers gathered in clusters in the grand salon, Madame Hivern settles us in a corner away from the others. When we are alone, she turns considering eyes on me. “So.” She sets her graceful hands in her lap. “Where are you from, my dear, and how did you meet Gavriel?”

I lower my eyes—a young country miss would be nervous, would she not?—and begin twisting my hands in my lap. “My family is of modest means, madame, and would not be known to you.”

She tilts her head daintily, but the smile on her face is brittle as glass. “Then how did you come to meet?”

Stick close to the truth to give weight to the lie is what the convent drilled into our heads. “In a tavern, near Brest.” I do not fully trust Duval, but I trust his mother even less and will not serve up his secrets on a platter before her.

Her face blanches and she rears back a little, as if she has just been struck. “Please tell me you were not the serving wench.”

“No,” I say, careful not to smile. “I was passing through on my family’s business.”

I watch as she mentally combs through the coastal area of Brest, trying to determine what business Duval was up to. After another moment, her lovely mask falls back into place. “You must forgive me,” she says, “but my son has kept so completely to himself until now, I scarcely know how to credit your presence.”

I make my eyes wide and innocent. “But madame, clearly the two of you are estranged, so perhaps he has simply not mentioned such relationships to you.”

Her mouth grows ugly and flat at this blatant reminder, but she bites back her retort as a servant places a tray of spiced wine in front of us. By the time the servant leaves, she has composed herself. I pick up a wine goblet, and she leans forward, changing the subject. “Not all men are the same, you know. With someone such as Gavriel, I would suggest appearing aloof, not chasing too

much. He might see that as suffocating rather than charming.” Her words are sharp, but her voice is sweet, like honey on the edge of a blade, and meant to be cutting. I comfort myself with the knowledge that if Duval ever feels smothered by me, it will be because I am holding a pillow over his face and commending his soul to Mortain.

She frowns and continues her prattling. “Why ever did you think it would be a good idea to chase him down? Is that what girls do in the village you come from?”

“I was not chasing him, madame, merely trying to deliver a message. It came after he left this morning and I thought to deliver it myself.”

Hivern holds up her hands in mock horror. “You are his paramour, not his servant. Do not follow him like a dog follows his master.”

My hand tightens on my wine goblet, and I am glad it is silver, not glass, for surely it would shatter under the force of my annoyance with this woman.

“Madame, I assure you—”

“Oh, call me Antoinette, won’t you? I think we shall be fast friends, you and I.”

“Do you think that is a good idea, given the breach between you and your son?”

A hint of cold fury flickers across her face, then is gone. “Perhaps you can help us to heal this rift.”

I set my goblet down on the table and give Madame Hivern my most innocent look. “Is that why *you* were looking for him? To call a truce?”

Annoyance crosses her face, and she casts about the room as if searching for a distraction. Apparently she finds one, for her expression softens and her eyes shine with the first true emotion she has shown. “My darling!” Hivern’s face is alight with pleasure. “Do come here, I have someone I would like you to meet.”

The man who approaches is tall and slender with dark eyes and fine features and is far too young to be her lover, and yet she has called him darling. He gives me a cautious, considering look, then bends to kiss Hivern’s cheek.

“Ismae, I would like you to meet my son François Avaugour. François, this is Ismae, Gavriel’s new friend.”

If he has heard tell of his brother’s “friend,” he gives no indication. He bends gallantly over my hand. “*Enchanté*, demoiselle. Any friend of my brother’s is a friend of mine.”

I murmur some nonsense back, and Madame Hivern pats the seat next to her. “Come join us, my love.”

“But of course.” François takes the chair close to Hivern so that he faces me. “How can I resist the two loveliest ladies at court?”

I long to roll my eyes at his words, but I peer up at him through my lashes instead.

“Gavriel’s friend is not used to such polished manners, François. She has been too long in the country. You should offer to guide her through her first visit to court when your brother is tending to his other duties.”

His liquid brown eyes meet mine. “I can think of nothing that would give me more pleasure, demoiselle.”

“You are too kind,” I murmur, pleased at how easily I have been pulled into the bosom of Duval’s family. They must hunger after his secrets as much as I hunger after theirs.

“My son was born and raised at court and can steer you safely through its treacherous waters.”

“But surely milord Duval will do that,” I protest.

“Duval can do what?” a deep, familiar voice asks.

“Gavriel!” Hivern’s voice is full of gaiety that is as false as her heart. “What a lovely surprise. We were just getting to know your friend a little better. She is such a charming thing.”

The warm, heavy weight of Duval’s hand settles on my shoulder and I am rendered speechless as he bends down and places a kiss atop my head.

“Dearest Ismae,” Duval says. “Whatever are you doing here? Not that it isn’t a delightful surprise.”

Merde. I have been so busy matching wits with Madame Hivern that I have not given any thought to an explanation for my presence here at court.

“She was kind enough to accept my invitation, Gavriel,” Madame Hivern says with a sly glance in my direction. “I thought it would be fun to become acquainted.”

Duval’s hand on my shoulder tightens painfully, then he removes it and gives a perfunctory bow. I do not know how he makes it look ironic, but he does. “My lady mother’s generosity knows no bounds.” Then he turns his gaze upon me. “Come, demoiselle. I am finished here.” He reaches down, grabs my elbow, and pulls me to my feet. Without another look in his family’s direction, we depart.

Behind the crackle and snap of anger that burns in his eyes, I catch a glimpse of something else. Something that looks remarkably like fear.

“Was that part of your convent’s instructions?” Duval’s voice is tight with anger. “To catch the eye of my brother and offer yourself to him as well as me?”

“No, my lord, it was not,” I say primly.

But likely only because it hadn’t occurred to the abbess.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DUVAL ESCORTS ME BACK TO his residence himself. He says it is so I do not get lost along the way, but he does not fool me. He wants to be certain I do not circle back to the palace. When he leaves to return to court, I consider following him a second time but then realize it would be foolish, as he will likely be expecting it. Besides, I do not wish to risk running into Madame Hivern again. The thinly veiled venom of her false concern still bubbles through me, as vicious as any poison. I wonder how Duval would feel if I killed his mother, for in truth, that is what I wish to do. He might well thank me.

When I reach my chamber, I find Louyse unpacking my trunks. She turns to me, her old cheeks pink. “Oh, miss! So many lovely things you have.”

Indeed, rows and rows of the most beautiful gowns are spread about the room. I am stunned at the riches the convent has provided. Velvets and brocades and the finest silks, all in dazzling colors: deep blue, emerald green, and rich claret.

There is a sound in the doorway and I look up to find Agnez coming into the room holding a large twig cage at arm’s length. In it sits a large, rather fiendish-looking crow.

“They sent this along with the trunks, demoiselle,” Louyse explains. “We tried to put it in the stables, but it unsettled all the horses, so the ostler insisted we bring it inside. Is it a . . . pet, my lady?”

“Of a sort. Put the cage over by the window,” I tell Agnez. As she sets it on the floor, the crow squawks and lunges for her finger. She squeaks and springs back, nearly tripping in her haste to be away from the bird.

“That’ll be all,” Louyse says to her sharply, although it isn’t really the girl’s fault.

With one last suspicious glance at the crow, Agnez quickly takes her leave. Louyse shakes her head. “Will you want help dressing?” At my blank look, she adds, “Before you go to court tonight?”

“Perhaps in an hour or so, thank you.”

She pauses at the door. “Oh, I nearly forgot. Two letters came with the trunks. They’re on the table over there. And the smallest of the trunks is still locked. They do not appear to have sent a key. Would you like me to send up one of the footmen to break it?”

“Let me see what the letters say before I decide.”

“Very well, milady.” She dips a curtsy, then departs, leaving me alone with a

very ill-tempered crow who is trying to shred his cage with his wicked-looking beak.

I hurry to the table and pick up the first letter. Even though I recognize the reverend mother's handwriting, I turn the note over and examine the seal. Annith has a wealth of tricks for opening correspondence, and she has taught me the signs to search for if I suspect tampering, but I see none of them on this seal. It is the same black wax the convent always uses, smelling faintly of licorice and cinnamon, and it is all in one piece, with no smaller, thinner layers to indicate it has been resealed. Satisfied, I tear open the seal, hoping for a new assignment. There are so very many here at court whose throats I would happily slit.

Dearest Daughter,

I hope this finds you well and adjusting to life at court, and I trust your training at the convent is serving you well.

Sister Vereda casts her bones into the flames daily, searching for guidance, but has Seen nothing yet. When she does, I shall send a message. However, if your heart and eyes are open to Him, He will no doubt guide your hand.

Remember that you are also our eyes and ears at court. Report to me all that you learn, no matter how small a thing it may seem.

In addition to gowns and finery, we have sent a small trunk of the tools and supplies your service to Mortain will require.

Vanth bears the key.

Yours in Mortain,

Abbess Etienne de Froissard

My hand crushes the note and in my frustration I cast it into the fire. These are not the instructions I was hoping for. Waiting, waiting. Always more waiting. Had they taught us to wait as well as they taught us to kill, I might be better at it. Sighing, I pick up the second letter. It is from Annith.

Dearest Sister,

I would be lying if I didn't allow how jealous I was at all your new finery. The entire abbey stitched and sewed, altering the gowns to Sister Beatriz's exacting measurements so they would fit you and do the convent proud. Although how they will reflect on the convent when your association with us is secret, I know

not, and Sister Beatriz only told me to stitch faster when I pointed that out.

I am near to bursting with curiosity to hear how court is, how many you've killed since you left, and all the other details. I think Reverend Mother suspects I am sore put out that you have been given this task and not me. She has assigned me to work closely with Sister Arnette so that I will not feel left out, but of course, it does no good.

Write me when you can so I can see with my own eyes how you fare, else I shall surely die of boredom. Still no word from Sybella.

*Your sister in Mortain,
Annith*

When I finish the letter I ache with homesickness, not for the convent but for Annith and her sharp, clever mind. I would dearly love to put all that I have learned before her and see what she makes of it. I briefly consider writing it all down, then realize Vanth could not possibly carry all the pages it would require.

Instead, I hurry to the cage and see that the crow has a small packet affixed to his left leg. Eyeing him warily, I reach into the cage, crooning in a soothing voice—only to wrench my hand back as he snaps at it with his sharp beak.

“Stop that,” I scold. “’Tis my key, not yours.” I try again, this time moving more quickly, and pluck the packet from his ankle. His vicious beak just misses my fingers and jabs futilely against the cage. “Traitor,” I chide.

I unwrap the packet, and a small gold key on a chain falls into the palm of my hand. Grasping it, I hurry over to the trunklet and fit the key into the lock. I lift the lid and bite back a laugh of pure pleasure. The trunk contains daggers of all sizes: a large anlace to wear against my back, a small easily hidden dirk, a long thin stiletto to slip into the top of my stocking, a needle-like stylet for the base of the skull, and a tangle of leather sheaths so that I may keep them all close at hand. There is a plain garrote as well as one hidden in a fancy bracelet. Sister Arnette has also included a small crossbow, no bigger than the palm of my hand. The quarrels are honed to a fine point.

The sharp metallic tang of my weapons is more welcome than the finest perfume.

But the trunk is deep and holds a second compartment. When I remove the top tray, there is the faint tinkle of glass vials. I pick up a small bottle, its contents the color of the cold winter sky. Mortain’s caress, a most pleasant, merciful poison that fills its victims with a sense of euphoria and well-being. I set that

bottle on the floor and reach back into the trunklet. There is the deep amber of heretic's lament, a quick-acting poison for those wishing to avoid the excruciating pain of being burned at the stake. A short, squat bottle of thick glass holds the rust-colored scourge, a poison designed with Mortain's harshest judgment in mind: it eats away at the victim's insides and is rumored to be as painful as martyr's embrace. I recognize the blood red of dark tears, which causes the lungs of the victim to fill with fluid until he drowns, and the muddy green of St. Brigantia's bane, so named because Brigantia is the goddess of wisdom and this poison does not kill its victims but instead eats all the knowledge from their brains, leaving them babbling simpletons with no memory of who they are.

In the very bottom of the trunk sit three carefully wrapped cream-colored candles, no doubt scented with night whisper. Beside those is a small box filled with white pearls, each one containing enough vengeance to fell a grown man. Last, there is a small earthenware jar of honey-colored paste nestled in the corner: St. Arduinna's snare, a poison that is used for rubbing on surfaces so it can be absorbed through the skin.

I am now as well stocked as the convent itself. Much relieved, I quickly repack the trunklet and lock it. I slip the thin gold chain around my neck and tuck the key into my bodice, out of sight.

If I hurry, I will be able to write the abbess a letter and dispatch Vanth before I must dress for the evening.

Dear Reverend Mother,

It is exactly as you and Chancellor Crunard said: There is much afoot here at court, and very little of it good. Someone has gone over the duchess's head and called a meeting of the Estates. The duchess has no choice but to face her barons under the watchful eye of the French ambassador. Anything they decide will be immediately reported back to the French regent.

Furthermore, the English king is refusing to send aid. The only bright spot is that Duval has been approached by a lord who keeps his identity hidden but claims to have a solution to offer our duchess. I will report more on this once the meeting has taken place.

One other incident of note. Duval and I were attacked upon our entry into the city. The men's blades were coated in poison, so it was no mere robbery. (And I am saddened to report that Nocturne fell victim to their treachery.)

I pause for a moment and run the feathers of the quill along my chin as I consider whether to tell the abbess of Duval's nightly visits so she will see that I am not shirking my duties. I fear if I do she will write back wanting more detail, so I say nothing.

I have met our duchess and can clearly see the hands of the saints upon her. Truly, they have chosen well, for she is wise and strong beyond her years. Honesty compels me to tell you that she appears to trust Duval completely and values his counsel above all others'.

I eagerly await your next orders and pray that Sister Vereda will see some way I may be of service to my god and my duchess.

*Sincerely,
Ismae*

The next letter is much easier to write. I know Annith will find a way to read the letter to the abbess, so I do not waste time repeating what I have already written there.

Dear Annith,

I wish someone had thought to tell me Duval was one of the duke's bastards! You might mention to Sister Eonette to include the bastards' names when she speaks of them. It would prevent future misunderstandings.

I saw Sybella! There was a mob of people trying to enter the city when we arrived, and she was among them. She did not speak to me, but I was much relieved to see her alive and well. Alas, I have seen no marques. Soon, hopefully!

*Your sister in Mortain,
Ismae*

The duchess is in attendance at court tonight, so Duval takes me to be formally introduced. She is surrounded by her ladies in waiting, the local prelates, and her advisors. I am surprised to see that d'Albret is with the duchess. No—not *with* her, but staying close, much like a wolf stalking a rabbit. She sits, rigid and tense, looking pointedly away from him, her face pale. She looks like a young

child trying to pretend a monster from a hearth tale has not just sprung to life beside her. It is Madame Dinan who chats gaily with d'Albret, ignoring her young charge's acute discomfort.

Duval's hand tightens on my arm and he quickens our pace, propelling me to the duchess and her entourage. I am heartened to see Chancellor Crunard has arrived, as we need every ally we can find. Even better, he stands behind the duchess, one hand on her shoulder, as if steadying her. My heart warms toward him.

To the duchess's credit, when Duval introduces us, she greets me as if we have never met, shows not so much as a flicker of recognition. She is well made for these games of deception. "My lord Duval tells me you are fond of hunting," the duchess says politely. "Will you indulge in the sport while you are here?" As she speaks, she glances over at d'Albret, then lets her hand drift to her neck and gracefully runs one finger along the base of her throat, as if adjusting the heavy jeweled cross that hangs there.

I nearly laugh out loud and am very careful not to look at d'Albret. "If the opportunity arises, Your Grace, I would happily partake in the hunt."

"Let us hope, then, that the opportunity presents itself," she says graciously.

As we murmur pleasantries, a man-at-arms approaches and bows before Captain Dunois, then speaks quietly in his ear. The captain nods, then moves to Duval and takes him aside. "Your prisoner is awake, my lord."

Duval turns to me with an eager gleam in his eye. "I must go and question him."

"Surely I should come with you."

"Surely you should not. How would I explain allowing either my young cousin or my mistress to be in the presence of such a criminal?" As he speaks, he searches among the gathered nobles. "No, you will stay here and play your part and keep your ears open." He releases my arm and to my utter horror calls out, "De Lornay!"

"No!" I whisper to Duval, but too late. The young lord disentangles himself from a group of admiring women and heads our way.

Duval glances down at me in surprise. "You cannot just stroll about unattended. People may turn a blind eye to a discreet liaison, but a lone woman wandering on her own is no lady and will quickly find herself with a reputation that keeps her from the duchess's presence."

His words feel like the bars of a cage clanging down around me, and I suddenly feel trapped in a prison of silk and velvet. He looks faintly amused. "Do not act as if you've been consigned to the executioner's block. Most women are quite fond of de Lornay's company."

“I am not most women, my lord,” I say, and I assume his snort is one of agreement.

De Lornay bows in front of us, and I am gratified when his eyes move past me, then sharpen.

Duval gives his friend a wry grin. “She cleans up nicely, does she not? I have something I must see to and I would leave her in your tender care.”

De Lornay’s dismayed look mirrors my own. “What, pray tell, am I to do with her?”

Duval waves his hand in the air. “I don’t know. Whatever it is you do with your lady friends—”

“Not *that*, surely,” de Lornay murmurs.

“Dance then.” Duval casts a worried look at me. “You do know how to dance, do you not?” he asks.

“Yes, but—”

“Good.” Before de Lornay or I can issue another protest, Duval abandons us and walks away.

De Lornay and I stare at each other with twin expressions of distress before we both quickly look elsewhere. Even as I plot an escape, the music starts up and the dancers move to the floor. With an ungracious sigh, de Lornay gives me a perfunctory bow. “Let us dance then.”

I dip a shallow curtsy but do not take his offered hand. “I appreciate this noble sacrifice you are making, but rest assured, it is not necessary. I have as little desire to dance with you as you do with me.”

He reaches out and snags my hand. “Nevertheless, Duval said dance, so dance we shall.”

I try to pull my hand away, but his grip turns to iron. I set my teeth and tug harder. “Do you always do what he tells you?”

“Always,” de Lornay says as he begins dragging me toward the dance floor. “I would ride into the fires of hell itself upon his command.”

Forgetting our tug of war, I glance at his face to see if he is serious. “Does he demand such things of you?”

De Lornay looks at me then with a fierce expression on his face. “If he did, I would do it gladly and welcome the chance.”

The music begins in earnest, and the other bodies around us fall into the steps of the dance. Even though my mind still mulls over de Lornay’s fearsome loyalty, I move easily into the opening reverence. As I go through the steps of the dance, I cannot help but wonder why de Lornay dislikes me so very much. Indeed, I have never found dancing so painful. He glares at me over the other

dancers' heads and I am surprised our mutual loathing does not set their hair on fire.

When the music finally ends, I nearly shout with joy. De Lornay takes my arm and escorts me from the dance floor. "You dance very prettily." *For a lowborn assassin.*

The actual words do not cross his lips, but I hear them all the same. I pay them little mind, for we have danced as Duval has commanded and surely now he will leave me to my own devices.

I curtsy with as much gratitude as I can muster. "Thank you for the courtesy you have shown me." I keep my head down so he does not see the resentment in my eyes, and I begin to move away.

Once again, his hand clamps down on mine. "Oh, we are not done, demoiselle."

I jerk my head up and snatch my hand away. "We most certainly are."

He shakes his head. "Listen. The musicians are readying their instruments for another dance—a basse dance, I think. I am quite fond of the basse dance. Are you?"

I stare at him. Does he intend to blindly follow Duval's orders until he returns? "No," I say flatly. "I am not." Then, before he can reach out and grab my hand again, I turn and leap away from him, putting as much distance between us as I can and hoping that he will not lunge after me and cause a scene.

I quickly worm deeper into the crowd and lose myself among the gathered nobles. As I move through the richly dressed and heavily perfumed bodies, I try to decide how best to make use of my hard-won freedom. I wish a *marque* of Mortain would appear on any one of these silly, vain nobles, but alas, it does not.

I spy François flirting with a venomous-looking lady dressed in peacock blue. His mother is in the far corner, laughing gaily and flirting with the half-dozen barons who surround her. Is that why Duval is so angry with her? Because she is not wasting any time finding a new paramour? If he was close with his father, then mayhap he considers it a betrayal of his memory that his mother is seeking a new bed to warm so soon after his death.

Madame Dinan, Count d'Albret, and Marshal Rieux have left the duchess and now stand together, buzzing among themselves like busy little bees. That could prove a most interesting conversation.

I shift directions and move toward them, determined to hear what they are plotting. I am nearly halfway there when a tall figure steps boldly in front of me and I must stop suddenly or plow right into him.

The French envoy Gisors looks down at me from his towering height. "Demoiselle Rienne," he says.

“Milord Gisors.” I give a small curtsy.

“It occurs to me that I did not greet you as warmly as you deserved yesterday. You must forgive me, as I had weighty matters on my mind.”

“But of course, my lord ambassador. I understand completely.” Indeed, I am a marvel of restraint and cunning.

“You are young and innocent of the ways of court, even such a small court as this one. I would be honored if you would allow me to act as your guide in some matters.”

“That is very kind of you, my lord, but that is what Lord Duval has promised to do.”

Gisors’s green eyes seek out Duval. “And yet he is not at your side. And you may not realize it, but a small flock of young cockerels are lining up behind you even as we speak. I would help you learn who it is wise to associate with when your Duval is otherwise occupied.”

I open my mouth to demur, but he steps closer—far too close—and places his hand across my mouth. The boldness of the gesture shocks me into silence. “Do not say no, demoiselle. I only ask that you think about it. I can make it worth your while. Living at court is very expensive, and no woman should be without her own resources. Especially since you cannot be sure just how long Duval’s protection will last.”

I push his hand away. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, once it becomes widely known that Duval’s mother is plotting to put her son on Anne’s throne, you will find yourself a pariah at court. I wager you will not be too proud to accept my friendship then.” And then he moves away, back to whatever rock he has crawled out from, and I am left breathing hard, shock simmering in my veins.

Duval and his family are plotting treason.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I CANNOT SLEEP. MY MIND worries and gnaws at this newest revelation about Duval like a rat on a bone. A week ago, I would have been thrilled with the discovery, eager for the proof needed that would compel my god to act against him. But tonight— tonight it does not feel like a victory at all. I tell myself it is because the duchess trusts him so much and has so few allies left, but that is a lie. I fear my lack of pleasure has more to do with Duval himself, and it pains me that my heart has been so easily swayed.

It is also possible—likely, even—that he is not involved in his mother’s schemes. Indeed, it would go a long way to explaining the rift between them. So too would acting as if they were estranged prevent suspicion from falling on him.

There is a faint click at the door and everything inside me stills. I have no idea if I will confront Duval with what I have learned. I am torn between wanting to leap out of bed and rail at him for his duplicity and wishing to hide in shame because I was so easily misled. Instead, I pull the covers up under my chin and close my eyes, hoping he will think me asleep. I will my heart to slow its beating and my breathing to become deeper. My elaborate efforts are foiled by a muffled curse exploding out of the darkness. “God’s Teeth! What is this you have used to barricade the path to the window?”

His good-humored discomfiture befuddles me. “What?” Disoriented, I sit up and push the hair out of my eyes. “’Tis Vanth’s cage. You can just move it out of the way.”

“I already have,” he grumbles. “With my shin.” He flops into his customary chair and glares at me. “Who by the grace of God is Vanth, and why must he be kept in a cage?”

The darkness in the room is not absolute. I hug my knees while trying to read his face, but it is too hidden in shadow. “He is the crow sent by the abbess so that she and I can communicate.”

“Ah, did she have any news for you? Any assignments that I should know about?” Is that a note of concern I detect in his voice?

“Why, my lord? Are you afraid she has learned of your mother’s plot to put her son on the throne?”

His head snaps up and I can feel the intensity of his gaze. His silence is proof enough of their guilt.

“When were you planning on telling me? Or did you truly believe I would not find out?”

“No, I knew that you would eventually, and when you did, I hoped that you would ask me about it.”

“Then I am asking you.”

He leans his head back against the chair, and when he next speaks, his voice sounds impossibly weary. “My mother got it into her head that what our country needs is a duke, not a duchess. She does not believe that Anne will be able to weather the current crises with both France and the barons. Instead of risking the duchy going to one of them, Madame believes it should go to one of the duke’s sons, bastard or no.”

There have been bastard dukes before, but not in a long while. “Why François and not you?”

“Can you not guess?”

“I can, but I want to hear it from you.”

“Because I refused.” His words are clipped.

“Which is why you and she are estranged.”

“Exactly so.” He sighs and runs his hand through his hair.

“Then why did you not tell me?”

“And seal their death warrant? Perhaps I am not as cold-blooded in my pursuit of justice as you and the convent. Until I understood your full orders and how you would act, I did not dare tell you.” There is a moment of silence, then he speaks again “So, are they marked for death by your god?”

“No,” I say. “Not that I can see.”

He lets out a long slow breath. “Then how did you learn of their plans?”

“The French envoy, Gisors. He not only tried to purchase my loyalty tonight but also warned me that once your family’s plans were known, I would be a pariah at court.”

Duval swears. “If nothing else, this should prove to you how badly I want Anne crowned duchess. Aside from the love I bear her, it is also the only way I can be certain my mother and François will put aside their ill-conceived schemes.”

“But I have only your word that that is so.”

There is an impatient whisper of velvet as he leans forward. “We must call a truce, you and I. If we are constantly at each other’s throats, it will serve only our enemies, not our duchess. I would ask that you set aside your abbess’s suspicions and listen to your own heart, for even though you pretend you don’t have one, I know that you do. I ask not for my sake, but for my sister’s.”

“D’Albret presses her to honor her father’s promises to him; the Holy Roman emperor wants her hand but does not have the troops to secure her realm once she agrees to that betrothal. The French are breathing down our necks, and there are very few options open to her that do not either plunge her country into war or consign her to a marriage too horrible to consider. If we do not work together, we further reduce those options.”

Of course he is right, but even so, it is a dangerous bargain we strike. I cannot help but think the abbess would never approve. I do not know how dearly she holds her belief in Duval’s guilt or whether she and Crunard will thank me if I prove them wrong. But I have searched high and low for any signs of treachery to give weight to their suspicions, and the only evidence I found has just been neatly explained. It also has the convincing ring of truth to it, especially as I have witnessed the open animosity between him and his mother.

It is a narrow line Duval asks me to walk, seeing to both the duchess’s needs and my convent’s. For although their goals are the same, I fear their methods are very different. If I am wrong, I risk losing the convent’s trust, which is surely the thing I value most in this world. Even so, there is no other choice. Not with the duchess in such dire straits, for if she fails to maintain her country’s independence, the convent will surely suffer. “Very well, milord.”

He smiles then, and even though it is well past midnight, it as if the sun has just come out. “Excellent,” he says. “This is what I need you to do.”

Early the next morning Duval and I ride out into the country. Louyse asks him to repeat himself twice when he requests a hamper to take with us. Clearly, this is out of character for him, and she slides her wise old eyes to me, a look of pleased speculation in them.

De Lornay and Beast are waiting for us outside, their horses fresh and pawing at the morning. Duval is lending me a dappled gray mare of his for the day, and I slip her a bit of apple I snuck from the table.

Our horses’ hooves ring out on the cold cobbles as we ride toward the north gate. The town is even more crowded than it was the day we arrived; every Breton noble—and many French ones—are tucked up inside its walls, waiting to see what drama will play out at the Estates meeting. The tension in the city is thick enough to slice with a knife and feed to the peasants.

As we ride through the streets, de Lornay tosses his head back and laughs, as if Duval has said something clever. Duval himself grins, and Beast turns his ugly face to me and smiles. I smile back. We are, for all the world, a happy little party out to enjoy the fine autumn day.

But of course, we are not.

Duval is well aware we may be riding into a trap, but the duchess's situation is desperate enough that we will take our chances. De Lornay and Beast are the muscle of the operation. I have been brought along as a decoy, for surely the serious, stalwart Duval would not leave town at a time such as this unless he was utterly besotted with his new mistress.

Once clear of the city, we head north through the woods that surround Guérande, and our gaiety falls from us somewhat. It is a crisp, chill morning and I am grateful for the fur-lined cloak Sister Beatriz has sent. My thoughts hop and flutter, just like the nearby birds searching out the last of the season's offerings before winter arrives. I tell myself that if the abbess learns of this outing, I will simply explain I am being her eyes and ears, just as I was instructed. She has no need to know I have agreed to work with Duval. Indeed, I do not know myself if I truly meant it or just agreed in order to placate him and be included in his plans. Either way, until it requires that I do something in direct conflict with the convent's orders, it seems harmless enough.

We ride for nearly an hour before Duval sends de Lornay to double back and check if we are being followed.

"Who do you think would follow us?" I ask.

Duval shrugs. "Anyone who saw us leave. The French envoy would dearly love to know what we're about, as would my mother. D'Albret. Anyone on the Privy Council who is jealous of the trust Anne places in me."

"So very many," I murmur.

He cocks an eyebrow but says nothing as the sound of galloping hooves reach us. De Lornay rides into view, nods his head, and holds up five fingers, then one. Six pursuers. Duval mutters an oath. "How far back?"

"Not far at all," de Lornay says.

"Could you tell who they are?"

De Lornay shakes his head. "They are men-at-arms, wearing no identifying tabards or colors."

Duval nods grimly, then waves us off the road and into the surrounding forest. His eyes search the area until he spies a small glade with a log and dappled sunlight. He steers his horse toward that, and the rest of us follow.

By the time I reach the glade, he has dismounted and is waiting to assist me. He lifts me from my saddle, then grabs the bag slung across his horse's neck. He points Beast and de Lornay to a flat boulder that sits closer to the road, then takes my hand and leads me to the log.

He lowers himself onto the grass and then leans back against the log and tries to pull me down beside him. "My lord!" I squeak as I nearly tumble into his lap.

He looks at me. "Would you rather I put my head in your lap?"

“Can we not just sit side by side?”

His eyes glitter as brightly as highly polished steel. “We are besotted lovers, remember? I, who never leave the duchess’s side except on *her* business, am out lolling around with my mistress. Or so we must make them believe.”

I glance away, ashamed. It is the plan we concocted last night, but it is harder than I expected to play this masquerade. I clear my throat. “If I must choose, I would rather sit and have your head in my lap.” I will feel less helpless that way.

He rolls his eyes but quickly switches positions. I have hardly settled my rump to the ground before he is stretching his long body out beside me, and then his head is in my lap.

It is heavy and solid and warm, and for a moment, it consumes all of my attention. Embarrassed, I glance over at de Lornay and Beast, but they are busy doing their part, sprawling and dicing, looking for all the world like bored attendants waiting on their lingering lord.

When Duval’s hand closes around mine, I jump like a startled rabbit, and his eyes crinkle in amusement. “How long must we stay this way?” I whisper.

“Until they are satisfied that we are naught but the besotted lovers we claim to be.”

It is my turn to roll my eyes.

“Do not scowl so.” His voice is amused, tender. “Pretend I am de Lornay, if it is easier.”

I snort in disgust.

“My brother, then, if you fancy him. I do not care, but God’s Teeth! Paste a smitten look on your face or our ruse will not work.”

I soften my eyes and force my mouth into a smile. “I do not care for your brother either,” I murmur, as if it is a declaration of love.

Something in Duval’s face shifts. “Good,” he whispers, and I must remind myself he is but playing the game. It should not surprise me that he is so very, very skilled at it.

Then our pursuers are upon us. Beast and de Lornay spring up and draw together, as if trying to protect us from prying eyes. It is no great struggle for me to look discomfited by the intrusion, especially when the mounted soldiers do their best to peer around the two men. Lewd curiosity has replaced their suspicion, and after slowing down to gawk, they quickly ride on.

As they canter away, some of the tension leaves my body and I allow myself to sag against the log at my back. When I open my eyes, I find Duval staring up at me. “We really must work on your skills of seduction,” he says.

Without thinking, I reach down and hit him in the arm. He laughs, and reluctantly, I smile. I *am* bad at this, but only with him. I was able to play the

flirt with Martel and even François. It is only with Duval that my skills leave me.

Duval reaches up and brushes away a strand of hair that has fallen across my cheek. I expect to see amusement or jest in his eyes, as if he is trying to teach me how to play this game. But there is no hint of amusement there—only his gray eyes, which are deep and serious.

I hear a quail call just then, the signal Beast was to give once the soldiers had ridden out of sight. As if some master is pulling on my strings, I leap to my feet, nearly sending Duval's head thudding to the ground. He looks at me as if I have lost my wits. Perhaps I have.

I brush the grass and twigs off my skirts as Duval rises. De Lornay and Beast join us. "Did you recognize them?" Duval asks.

Beast shakes his head. "But now that they have passed, will you tell us where we are meeting this mysterious fellow of yours?"

Duval glances down the road, as if assuring himself they are well beyond hearing. "At the church in St. Lyphard."

At his words, all the blood drains from my face. Not wanting the others to see, I turn and lead my horse to a stump so I may mount. But Duval—damn his eyes—misses nothing. When I am settled on my horse, he nudges his own mount closer to me. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"I am fine, my lord."

"Then why is your face the color of chalk?"

I manage a crooked smile. "It is just that I was born in St. Lyphard and have not been there in years. It was not a happy place for me."

"You mean you did not spring wholly formed from drops of sweat off Mortain's brow?"

I smile. "Not wholly formed, no."

No longer teasing, he looks at me in concern. "Will you be recognized, do you think?"

"No, it was many years ago, and I have changed much. Besides, they would never think to look for the turnip farmer's daughter in such finery or among such exalted company. People see what they want to see." Perhaps if I repeat it enough, it will be true.

His eyes hold mine a moment longer. They are filled with understanding and I want to slap such kindness from his face. Does he not realize it erodes my defenses just as surely as salt erodes his armor? I look away abruptly. "If you do not wish to be seen, I know a shortcut to the church," I say, eager to be out from under his shrewd gaze. When at last he nods, I put my heels to my mare's flanks and fly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

AS WE DRAW NEAR THE church, I catch a glint of sunlight on steel behind a wall of shrubbery. I slow my horse so that I fall back alongside Duval. Dipping my chin, I look up at him as if flirting. “There are armed men in the trees,” I tell him in a low voice.

A quail calls just then, and Duval flashes a quick grin. “They are mine,” he says. “I had them ride out at first light to watch the place in case any trap was laid.”

I say nothing, but I admit to myself that I am impressed.

The church in St. Lyphard is an old one, made of solid Breton stone and thick wooden timbers. Small alcoves are set into the walls, each housing one of the old saints. My eyes are drawn immediately to the carving of Mortain. This statue is old, older than any I have seen, and shows Mortain at His most skeletal, clutching an arrow with which to warn us all that life is fleeting and He could strike at any moment.

While Beast and de Lornay take up positions on opposite ends of the churchyard, Duval dismounts, then comes to assist me from my horse.

“Why this place?” I ask in an attempt to distract myself from the sensation of his hands at my waist.

He sets me on my feet. “Because the priest here still makes prayers and offerings to the old saints and I can be certain he is loyal to his country. Besides, men are less likely to plot treachery in a church.”

The arch over the front door is covered with more carvings, this time of cockleshells and sacred anchors of Saint Mer. Some pious soul has hung a sheaf of wheat for Dea Matrona. Duval pulls open the door, puts his hand on my back, and nudges me through.

The inside of the church is dark and damp and filled with the rich, smoky scent of incense. The shimmering, golden halos cast by the burning candles do nothing to lift the chill of the place. I can feel the weight of all the souls that have passed through here, feel the pull of the thousands upon thousands of prayers that have been said inside these walls. The pulpit is carved with scenes of the early lives of the saints, the copper gone green with age and dampness. Behind that, above the altar, is an exquisite, if newer, sculpture of the Resurrection.

I make my way to the niche of Saint Amourna and take the small loaf of

freshly baked bread from my pocket. It is the traditional offering all young maids make when asking for true love, the disguise Duval and I have devised for our trip to the church. In order for the offering to work, it must be fashioned by the maid's own hands. This one is not, but even so, the old saints are thick in this place and I do not like putting a false offering before a saint for a blessing I do not wish. To ease my conscience, I pray instead that the duchess will find happiness in whatever match she is forced to make.

When I am done, Duval motions me to a back doorway, one only the priest uses. I am to stand here and be certain no one approaches him from behind.

We wait in silence for what seems an eternity before I hear the scrape of a boot heel upon the stone step. Harsh light slices through the darkness as the door opens.

A lone figure enters the church. His hair is blond with a reddish cast to it, and his clean-shaven jaw is strong. While he is clearly of noble blood, he is neatly dressed in a breastplate and vambraces. Not just some court dandy then, but a man with soldierly experience. The two men greet each other cautiously, then the stranger gets right to the point—yet another thing to admire about him. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

Duval nods. “Your caution was well founded. We evaded a party of soldiers following us.”

The stranger smiles. “Ah, yes. My own men intercepted them just before we split off the road for the church. They are even now leading them on a merry chase toward Redon.”

Duval tilts his head, studying the man. “I know you,” he says at last.

The young man smiles. “You have a good memory. I am Fedric, Duke of Nemours.” He bows deeply.

Duke of Nemours! My mind scrambles back to Sister Eonette's lessons. Nemours is a small but rich holding that, like Brittany, pays only nominal homage to the French Crown. The old Duke of Nemours had fought alongside Duke Francis in the Mad War, and died there. The young lord before us was one of the many men betrothed to the duchess.

“I come to offer to reopen negotiations for the hand of your sister,” Nemours says.

“But I thought you were already married.”

Nemours's face grows somber. “I was. My wife and young son died of the plague that passed through Nemours at the end of the summer.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Duval says.

Nemours's grin is somewhat forced. “Which is why I come to you seeking a new bride. When word of your sister's circumstances reached me, I thought to

approach you.”

“What have you heard?” Duval asks warily.

Nemours barks out a humorless laugh. “That the French regent has bribed half your barons to join France’s cause and that the Holy Roman emperor is too mired in his own wars to come to her aid. And the duchess’s own barons are too busy fighting for her crown to fight on her behalf.”

“You have heard the right of it, I’m afraid.”

“So I offer a way out. I propose the same terms as the original betrothal agreement, so you will see that I am not trying to take advantage of your situation.”

Duval is suddenly cautious. “Why? What is in it for you that you are so chivalrous?”

“Is chivalry not its own reward?”

“Not in my experience, no.”

Nemours shrugs, then smiles. It very nearly reminds me of Beast’s maniacal grin. “In addition to the great fondness I bear your lady sister, is not beating the French at their own game enough? My father died at their hand.”

“How many troops can you lend to enforce the betrothal? For the French regent will move quickly once she learns of it.”

“Three thousand,” he says, “which I know is less than d’Albret’s considerable numbers, but at least I can guarantee they will be loyal to the duchess.”

“And that is worth much, I think.”

“There is more,” Nemours adds. “My cousin, the queen of Navarre, will send fifteen hundred pikemen to aid our cause.”

Duval’s brows shoot up in surprise. “Not that we would not welcome them, but why would she bestir herself on our account?”

A grim note creeps into Nemours’s voice. “Do not forget that she also is married to a d’Albret. She knows only too well what marrying into that family entails.”

A dark look of understanding passes between the two men. “Very well then,” Duval says. “I will put your proposal before the duchess.” And although he tries to hide it, the relief in his voice is plain.

It takes me a moment before I recognize the feeling burbling through me. It is not trepidation, or even apprehension, but joy. I am nearly giddy with relief that we may have found our duchess a solution to her tangle. And while it is not the task I was trained for, I savor it all the same. I tell myself that my happiness has nothing to do with coming that much closer to removing the suspicion that clouds Duval’s name.

On our return trip to Guérande, Duval does not use the shortcut I showed him but instead leads us through St. Lyphard itself. If this is a test, it is easy enough to pass. I know in my bones that no one will recognize me.

The town has not changed at all since I left nearly four years ago. We pass the blacksmith's forge and the small square where we held our meager celebrations, the weaver's home, the herbwitch's cottage and that of the tanner. In no time at all, we have reached the town's outskirts. A lone cottage sits there with smoke rising sluggishly from the chimney and a few threadbare linens hanging on the line.

In the fields beyond the house, a man works, his back bent as he struggles with the hard ground. Even though he is a turnip farmer, in the winter he sows a crop of rye. I am surprised at how old he looks, how grizzled his hair, how stooped his shoulders. It is as if only his hatred of me had kept him going. Now the monster of my childhood nightmares is nothing but a broken old man struggling to eke out a living, while I have been chosen by a god to do His bidding.

As if sensing my eyes upon him, the man looks up, surprised to see four nobles prancing through his fields. When he bows his head and tugs at his forelock, I know that my disguise is complete. Even my own father has not recognized me.

Duval brings his horse closer to mine. "Someone you know?" he murmurs. "He is no one," I say, and for the first time I realize it is true.

Chapter Twenty-Five

BEFORE THE WALLS OF THE city come into sight, we are met by an outrider looking for Duval. Captain Dunois has sent him to tell us that the footpad has not only awakened, but escaped. I glance sharply at Duval, briefly wondering if that could have been his purpose, to lure me from the city long enough for our assailant to escape. But since he is doing a fine job of looking poleaxed by the news, I dismiss that idea.

We ride to Guérande with all due haste and hurry to the dungeons beneath the palace.

“How?” Duval asks as he steps inside the small prison chamber that is now empty. It is made of four solid walls with no window and only the one door.

“How did he escape?”

The captain of the palace guard shrugs uncomfortably. “He was not bound or manacled, and the key hangs on the hook outside. Anyone could have opened the door.”

“But why, is the question.”

With reluctance, one of the guards steps aside so that I too may enter the chamber. The minute I am in the room, I know. Death has visited; the man did not walk out alive.

“My lord,” I murmur to Duval. “I would speak with you alone.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “Now?”

“Now.”

Understanding dawns and he pulls me away from the others.

“He did not escape,” I murmur. “He was killed first, then taken from here afterward.”

His dark eyebrows shoot up. “You can tell this merely from being in the room?”

I nod.

His eyes narrow in thought. “That at least makes more sense.” He turns back to the guards. “Find everyone who visited this room within the last two days, then bring a list of those names to me.” He sighs heavily. “Let us go speak to the duchess. At least we have one piece of good news to trade for this latest setback.”

We find the duchess in her solar, sitting with her ladies and Madame Dinan, embroidering an altar cloth for the new cathedral. A young girl lies on the couch beside her. Isabeau, her younger sister, is delicate and frail-looking and cannot be older than ten. Both of their faces light up when Duval steps into the room.

He bows and I drop a deep curtsy. “Your Grace; my lady Isabeau.”

“Hello, Gavriel.” Young Isabeau smiles at him. “What brings you out from behind your stuffy desk?”

“Since the sun is not shining today, I thought to catch sight of your face instead.”

I have to look twice to be certain this is the same Duval I walked in with for I have never heard such pretty words fall from his lips, not even when he was with the duchess. But young Isabeau throws back her head and laughs, amused by his flattery. Before long, her laughter gives way to coughing; great, racking coughs that shake her frail body. Instantly the duchess is at her side, rubbing her back and trying to soothe her.

Madame Dinan slaps her needlework down and hurries to Isabeau. She scowls at Duval. “Your teasing is unseemly, my lord Duval. It is too much excitement for the girl.”

“Nonsense, madame,” Anne snaps back. “Isabeau coughs like this with or without my brother’s words, and at least he brings a smile to her face.” She turns to her ladies in waiting, who hover nervously. “Leave us, please.” With rustling as faint as butterfly wings, the ladies set down their embroidery hoops and leave the room. But not Madame Dinan, who boldly stands her ground.

A look passes between Duval and the duchess, and then Anne turns to her governess. “Madame, sit with Isabeau, if you please, as I must speak with my brother.”

Dinan wishes to argue, it is there in her eyes, but Duval does not give her the opportunity. “Walk with me, Your Grace.” He holds his arm out and the duchess takes it. He leads her to the far window, and I stand there like a bump in the floor, unsure if I should follow or stay and distract Madame Dinan. Anne glances over her shoulder and gives a quick motion for me to follow. I lift my skirts and hurry after them, Madame Dinan’s scorching gaze fair burning a hole through the back of my gown as I go.

The three of us gather in front of the oriel window. It is a large room, and Duval speaks softly enough that his voice will not carry back to Dinan. “I bring interesting news, Your Grace.”

“That is good to hear, as there is a desperate shortage of that just now.”

Keeping his voice low, Duval tells her of our meeting with Nemours. When he is done, she clasps her hands together, hope lighting her young face. “Are my

prayers being answered in such a fashion?”

When Duval smiles at her, I realize that I have never seen him truly smile. Not like this, where it warms his entire face. “It would appear so, dear sister. But I would warn you not to speak of it to anyone. Gisors’s men followed us today, but we evaded them.” Duval glances over to where Madame Dinan is attending to Isabeau. “Nor do we want word to get back to d’Albret. Who knows what mischief he could make for our plan.”

The duchess quickly nods her understanding. “I will say nothing to anyone, but I cannot deny it will give me something to cling to during the meeting with the barons tomorrow. I cannot tell you how much I am dreading it.”

Duval’s face settles back into seriousness. “I think the simplest course is to plead your grief over our father’s death. It is too fresh right now for you to consider marriage to d’Albret or anyone else.”

The duchess’s mouth trembles ever so faintly. “It is not even a lie,” she says, and I am struck by how few choices she has for all that she is a duchess.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE GREAT HALL, WHICH ONCE seemed impossibly large, now seems impossibly small, stuffed as it is with this many bodies. Oh, they are noble enough bodies, but ripe with sweat and perfume and unbridled anticipation. I cannot tell if they are expecting disaster or farce. My sincerest hope is that my god will marque all the traitors today and my duty will be clear.

I worm my way to a spot by the far wall, and my shoulders press painfully into the carved paneling at my back. Even so, I am glad for the space and am all too happy to defend it with my elbows when others press too close.

As the main players assemble on the raised dais in the front of the room, I scan the crowd. The men have left their swords with guardsmen at the door so that none may be drawn during the meeting, but no one has been searched for knives or daggers. My hand drifts to my own hidden weapons at my wrists, and I wonder just how many other blades are nestled inside sleeves or hidden in folds of satin.

Once all of Anne's councilors have taken their place, the assembly rises and the duchess herself comes into the room. Her chin is high, her spine rigid with determination. Of their own accord, my eyes search out Duval, who sits at the far end of the dais. He is dressed in his customary black and is the very picture of somber reason. De Lornay and de Waroch stand near him at the front wall. They have kept their swords, most likely at his insistence.

D'Albret sits directly before the dais, sprawling in his chair, trimming his nails with a knife, either a subtle threat or a sign of just how uncouth he really is. I study him carefully, but no matter how much I will it, there is no visible marque upon him.

Chancellor Crunard calls the meeting to order, and the room grows quiet. Before the chancellor has finished the formal opening remarks, Count d'Albret puts away his knife and rises to his feet. There is the swish of skirts and creak of boot leather as the courtiers lean forward to hear better. The duchess eyes him shrewdly but gives him her full consideration, much as one gives a venomous serpent.

"My lords." He runs his gaze along the dais, then turns to the crowded room. "I am here to collect what was promised to me by your late Duke Francis. Namely, marriage to his daughter—my rightful payment for lending aid against the French last fall."

“A war we lost,” Chancellor Crunard is quick to point out, and I cannot help but think of his two sons who died in that war.

A rumble reverberates around the room, but whether it is one of outrage or approval, I cannot tell.

The duchess’s clear young voice carries over the crowd and they grow quiet once more. “My lord d’Albret. While your offer is worthy of our consideration, I am afraid I am too consumed by my family’s recent loss to turn my thoughts to marriage, and I beg your understanding a little while longer in this matter.”

“You do not have the luxury of time, my lady. Your very country is at stake.”

“You do not need to remind *me* of that, sir,” the duchess snaps.

“But perhaps I need to remind you of your duty. Dukes and duchesses do not have the luxury of long mourning periods. The needs of their kingdoms come first, even before their grief.”

Of course, he is right, and the duchess knows it as well. “I have always put my country first.” There is true anger in the duchess’s voice now.

D’Albret’s tone softens in an attempt to coax. “With this marriage I offer, you will be able to turn your attention to more womanly concerns and let me shoulder your burdens. Then you may mourn all you want.” He glances briefly at the dais, but I cannot see who he is looking at. Madame Dinan? Marshal Rieux?

There is a long quiet moment during which it looks as if the duchess is considering the idea. “I see you have thought of all my needs, Lord d’Albret. Even so, I must beg more time.”

The count’s face grows red as he tries to keep his anger in check. He turns to address the barons directly. “This is a dangerous time for our kingdom. War beckons, and enemies circle. It is no time for young girls or old men to whisper behind closed doors and plot and plan. It is time for action. Time to face our enemies on the field of battle.”

But at what cost to the duchess, I wonder, as I watch all the color drain from her young face. Duval’s mention of the man’s six former wives rustles through my head, as does Nemours’s disturbing whispers of his cousin’s marriage to a d’Albret.

There is a disturbance in the middle of the room as the French emissary Gisors steps forward. The crowd opens up around him, much as it would if a wolf were emerging from its lair. “It seems to me,” he says into all that silence, “that this would be a good time to remind you of the Treaty of Verger, which clearly states that Anne may not marry without France’s approval. I’m afraid her marriage to Count d’Albret is out of the question. She is a ward of the French Crown and thus everything must be negotiated through us.”

And praise the saints for that small mercy, I think.

“How did he get in?” Duval asks no one in particular. To Beast and de Lornay, he says, “Get him out of here.” With grim, satisfied smiles they begin making their way through the throng of nobles. Before they can reach Gisors, however, he turns and heads to the back door. Before him, the crowd moves aside quickly, eager to get out of his path before de Lornay or Beast catch up to him.

It is as elegant and unhurried a retreat as one can imagine, but it is a retreat nonetheless.

“And see that he is confined to his chambers!” Duval calls out after them. By the way the councilors on the dais snap their heads around to stare at Duval, I am guessing this is a great overstep of his duties or a disregard of protocol.

D’Albret moves smoothly into the breach created by Gisors’s departure. Ignoring Anne, he speaks once more to the nobles. “If you wish to keep your independence, you must support my marriage with the duchess. I will keep you safe from the French.” He smiles, but there is no warmth or humor in it. “Me and my five thousand troops.”

He turns to face the duchess and council, his voice growing hard. “But if you do not support this marriage, I will have no choice but to hold the house of Montfort in breach of contract and will use all of my considerable resources to get by force what I could not gain by reason.”

The room explodes in an uproar. I lean forward slightly, hoping that the count will now bear a marque. But there is nothing. I turn my attention to the dais, hoping that a marque will at least appear on whoever called this meeting and set this trap for the duchess, but again, nothing.

Chancellor Crunard rises to his feet, his cheeks flushed with anger. “You are but one of many who was promised the duchess’s hand in marriage; there is no way we can honor all such agreements. Indeed, if we were to take them in the order they were made, yours would be the fifth in line.”

D’Albret’s face is expressionless, but his eyes burn with an intensity that is most disturbing. “But do all those others have an army of five thousand just outside your borders?”

The blood drains from Chancellor Crunard’s face. Satisfied at the effect his words have had, d’Albret turns on his heel and quits the chamber.

The newly adjourned courtiers erupt in excited, nervous voices. Crunard motions for the guards and they throw open the large doors at the back of the chamber so the nobles may begin filing out of the room. I do not have a clear plan, but unable to help myself, I move to follow d’Albret. I am like a small boat moving

against the tide of the crowd, but I ignore the bumps and stares that come my way, my attention never leaving my target.

A practical knight at arms opens the small door to the side of the chamber in order to allow some people out that way. D'Albret moves in that direction, and so I too begin making for that door, silently cursing the laggards and dullards who stand between me and d'Albret. I cannot accept that Mortain has not seen fit to *marque* d'Albret for his threat—for after all, he is half Breton and owes some allegiance to the rightful duchess.

When d'Albret steps out into the hall beyond, he is surrounded by nearly a score of his own men-at-arms. *Merde*. I cannot take on that many armed men.

“Demoiselle Rienne!” There is a tug on my skirt and I glance down to find a young page. “What is it?” I ask.

“Chancellor Crunard requests you attend him immediately.”

I cast one last frustrated glance at d'Albret's retreating back, then give my full attention to the boy. “Did he say what it was about?”

“No, milady, but please come.”

Hoping that the chancellor has received news from the convent, I let the boy lead me to his chamber. The page knocks once on the door, then opens it. If Chancellor Crunard is ruffled by the disastrous Estates meeting, he hides it well. “Come in, demoiselle,” he says as the page scampers away.

His desk is nearly as large as a bed and has a neat stack of correspondence on one side and three maps on the other; there is also a small pot of ink and a handful of quills. He does not offer me a seat. Instead, he rises and moves to the window. After a long moment of silence, he turns to face me, his expression impassive. “Where were you hurrying off to?”

I meet his gaze steadily. Only my promise to Duval of utmost secrecy prevents me from telling him of the duchess's newest suitor and the hope he offers her. “To see if I could convince Mortain to give me permission to remove Count d'Albret.”

He blinks in surprise. Whatever he expected me to say, it was not this. His face relaxes and I detect a glint of humor in his eyes. “By all means, search d'Albret for one of those *marques*. Then we can be done with him and move on to equally pressing problems.”

While I am surprised to learn that Crunard knows of the *marques*—he is even more in the abbess's confidence than I realized—I am pleased that we are in agreement on this. He turns back to the window. “Have you learned anything further of Duval and his true motives?” he asks.

“No, my lord. I have found nothing to warrant your or the abbess's suspicions.” I am aware that I must tread carefully here. “He seems most

devoted to the duchess, and she seems to trust him above all others.”

“And does that not seem highly suspect to you?” he asks. “That she would trust her bastard brother above all her others? It speaks to me of undue influence.”

“Or perhaps he just puts her interests before his own,” I suggest, thinking of Madame Dinan and Marshal Rieux.

Crunard’s head whips around and he fixes me with a piercing stare. “As do we all.”

“I meant no disrespect, my lord, only that Duval appears to have her best interests at heart.”

“And you trust his word on this?”

“No, my lord. I trust my own eyes and ears. Everything I have seen and heard speaks of his absolute loyalty to his sister.”

“But is that not the best way to avert suspicion? To profess deep and abiding loyalty?”

I do not know what to say to this. I have no words with which to convince Chancellor Crunard of what I feel in my heart to be true.

“Nevertheless, it is not wise to place too much trust in Duval.” His voice drips with contempt. “I know him to be an oath breaker.”

I bite back a gasp. That is no small thing. “What oath did he break?” I ask before I can stop myself.

The chancellor brings his steepled fingers to his lips and studies me. “The one he made to his saint,” he says. “I was there when he broke it, saw his blasphemy with my own eyes.” When I say nothing more, he nods his head curtly. “You are dismissed. Inform me as soon as you hear anything from the convent.”

For a moment, the briefest moment, I consider telling him of the wonderful new possibility Duval has found for his sister, but something holds me back. What if the chancellor fears that I, like the duchess, have fallen under Duval’s spell and sends me back to the convent? Instead, I promise him I will keep him informed, and then take my leave.

If the duchess is still up to the task, it is time for her to meet Nemours.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE DUCHESS HAS WITHDRAWN to her solar, surrounded by her ladies of the court. Her younger sister, Isabeau, is well enough to join them and reclines on a couch that has been pulled next to Anne's chair. The atmosphere in the room is tense and nervous, everyone's mind on the claims and accusations heard in this morning's meeting. Even though the duchess's face is pale and the skin around her eyes drawn tight, she greets me as if we are old friends. "Demoiselle Rienne! Come join us and let us see your pretty handiwork."

Would that I had thought to warn the duchess of my inept fingers. "Thank you, Your Grace. You do me great honor, but my handiwork is not worthy of such compliments."

She pats the chair next to her. "Come. Sit. It cannot be that bad."

From behind her sister's shoulder, Isabeau gives me an impish grin, and I wonder if her sister has confided in her. I return the smile and take my place next to the duchess.

"What are you working on, demoiselle?" she asks.

"Well." I pull the basket onto my lap and begin to rummage through it, looking for a suitable project. "Ah, here it is. An altar cloth for milord Duval, to thank him for sponsoring me here at court." I stumble painfully through my words, like a toddler learning to walk. I have less talent for small talk than I do for embroidery.

The duchess and Isabeau make a kind fuss over my embroidery pattern while the other ladies eye me with distrust. To them, I am nothing but an interloper, a cuckoo bird who has come to nudge them from the duchess's favor and take their spot.

At last everyone turns back to their needlework, and I am left to blunder on with my own. As I try to decide how best to approach it, the duchess leans close so that only I will hear her words. "It will cause the linen no pain if you stick it, demoiselle."

I bite down on a small bubble of laughter.

"Have you no practice at needlework?" she asks.

"Only with a much larger needle," I mutter.

She smiles grimly at my joke. "Ah. Perhaps we can find some larger pieces for you to practice on."

I incline my head solemnly. "Any project you desire, Your Grace."

Then she winks at me and adjusts her arms so that I may watch her hands at their work. Biting my lip, I study the angle at which she applies her needle, the twist of her wrist as she brings the thread through, the easy rhythm with which she sets the needle to the piece again.

I turn to try it on my own work. I am able to poke the needle through the cloth well enough, but when I try to pull the thread through, it snarls and knots so that I have to set the needle aside and untangle the mess. I catch Madame Dinan watching me with her cold eyes, a hundred questions lurking in their depths. Angling my shoulder to block her view of my clumsy work, I pray for the hour of the chapel visit to arrive.

In the end, I manage well enough, but I am heartily glad when the hourglass runs empty. The duchess notes the direction of my gaze and smiles.

“Demoiselle, I would grant you a boon and free you from your embroidery so you may accompany me to chapel. Perhaps you can pray for more nimble fingers.”

“Your Grace,” Madame Dinan says sharply. “I do not think—”

“And you, Madame Dinan, may sit with Isabeau,” the duchess says. Ignoring her governess’s raised eyebrows, she rises to her feet.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” My thanks are heartfelt enough as I set aside my embroidery, only too gladly follow her from the solar.

Once alone in the hallways, we exchange glances and some of the strain leaves her face. Even so, I am compelled to ask, “Are you sure you wish to do this today?”

“Now more than ever,” she says, her voice firm. “The only path open to me is one I cannot take. It is weak of me, I know, but . . .” Her voice falters and she turns stricken eyes on me. “I cannot,” she whispers. “D’Albret terrifies me.”

“I do not blame you, Your Grace. He terrifies me as well. No one should ask such a sacrifice from you.”

She is somewhat comforted by my words, and we walk in silence a short way before she speaks again. “You have seen Lord Nemours, yes? How did you find him?” She is every bit the twelve-year-old girl eager to meet her new suitor.

“Were you not betrothed to him once before?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Yes, but I have not ever *seen* him.”

“We-ell, he is quite old, with a long white beard and crooked back. And his teeth are yellow.”

Her look of horror turns to one of exasperation when she realizes I am joking, and then she laughs. “You are as bad a tease as Duval,” she says. But my jest has worked. When we reach the chapel, the remnant of her laughter lingers in her eyes and plays about her lips.

The chapel is small and nearly empty, and I am pleased to see the nine niches under the crucifix honoring the old saints. The only other supplicant in the chapel wears a dark green cloak with the hood drawn close around his head. At our approach, he rises to his feet and pulls the hood from his face, revealing the red-gold hair and handsome face of Fedric of Nemours. He and the duchess stare at each other for a long moment, and then he gives an elaborate, courtly bow.

“Lord Nemours?” she says, a small spark of hope lighting her face. “You may wait by the door,” she murmurs to me, then lifts her skirts and joins Nemours in a pew at the front of the church.

I take up position at the door, folding my hands and trying to look as if I am praying rather than pining of curiosity.

Their voices are but soft murmurs, and Anne’s manner is somewhat awkward at first, but Nemours quickly puts the duchess at ease. Once I see their heads draw together and hear soft laughter, I turn my thoughts to my own plans.

Chancellor Crunard’s words still echo in my ears: *By all means, search d’Albret for one of those marques*. Why had I not realized that I must search d’Albret before I can be certain there is no marque upon him?

Because I am a coward, that is why.

But surely Crunard is correct in where my duties lie, and the abbess would want me to create every opportunity to determine if d’Albret bears a marque anywhere on his body.

A strike to the head is not the only way to kill a man.

Unwilling to face her fractious barons that evening, the duchess decides to dine in her chambers with her sister. I cannot help but wonder if it is also to hide the smile she now wears. Truly, she and Nemours are well matched, and his suit is a gift from both God and the saints. Even better, if there is no formal court tonight, it will be easier for me to go in search of some answers.

My brief meeting with Chancellor Crunard and an afternoon of prayer have convinced me that I have made a grave error in assuming Mortain would marque d’Albret in plain sight. As the abbess is so fond of reminding me, that is not how our saint works. Indeed, the man may well have been marked for days—someplace where I cannot see it.

I glance around the dim hallway, trying to get my bearings in the east wing of the castle, the section assigned to d’Albret. A pair of doors stand wide open. Raised voices and laughter spill out into the hall along with the candlelight. The laughter has an unpleasant edge to it, a faint tinge of cruelty that makes my heart beat faster and my hands long to reach for the knives at my wrists. Instead, I force them down to my sides, where they grip the heavy velvet of my gown.

I have given much thought as to how I will extricate myself should d'Albret not bear a marque but have yet to come up with a satisfactory plan. I would like to believe I can just turn and walk away, but I fear it will not be that easy. The boys in the village had ugly names and taunts for girls who promised kisses but never delivered them. Even so, I take a deep breath and slip silently into the chamber.

The room is full of noblemen and their retainers, and half the nobles sprawl in chairs drinking wine. D'Albret himself sits in the middle, arrogance apparent in every line of his body, from the way he lounges in his chair to the disdainful gaze with which he surveys the room.

Even as anticipation surges through me, my mind whirs. I know I cannot just glide up to him and ask that he unlace his doublet so that I might peer at his chest. Once again I curse my awkward, graceless nature. Sybella and even Annith would know what to do.

And then it comes to me. I have only to pretend I am Sybella.

She would find an excuse to approach her target, then she would wrap her delicate web of seduction around him. I glance at the room, pleased when I spy a half-full flagon of wine on one of the chests. I pick it up and make my way toward d'Albret.

Feeling more sure of myself now, I slip around the knot of men so that I can approach d'Albret from behind. The fact that he and his men have eyes only for their own magnificence makes this easier than it should be. I take a deep breath and remember Sybella's throaty laugh, the way her lip curls delicately so that you cannot be certain who she is laughing at, the tilt of her head and the slant of her eyes as she peers at you, trying to decide if you are worth her efforts.

At my approach, the man on d'Albret's left looks up. Having been spotted, I can delay no longer. Even though my fingers are desperate to pull away, I force them to rest lightly on d'Albret's shoulder. He smells of wine and sweat and the braised venison he had for dinner. I curl my lip in a knowing smile and lower my voice. "My lord," I purr. "May I refill your wine cup?"

He lifts his head and somehow manages to look down his haughty nose at me even though I stand over him. He holds up his goblet, and his eyes narrow in recognition. "Ah, what do we have here?"

As I pour his wine—slowly—my eyes inspect every inch of exposed flesh, looking for the faintest hint of Mortain's dark shadow. There is none. *Merde*. That means I must take this even farther. When his goblet is full, I clutch the flagon to my chest and cast my eyes downward. "It is just as you said, my lord. I fear I am left alone far more than I would like." I glance up from under my lashes in time to see a triumphant smile spread across his thick lips. My heart

skips a beat and I look down once more so he will not see how badly I wish to strike that smile from his face.

“Leave us,” he tells the others abruptly. There is a moment of surprised silence, then, with knowing winks and a bold comment or two, the other men file out of the chamber. The last one to leave shuts the door behind him.

I can feel d’Albret’s eyes on me, as cold and hard as winter hail. “Now it is just us, demoiselle.”

I carefully set the flagon down, and my mind scrambles for the best way to get him out of his shirt and doublet as quickly as possible. However, before I can say anything, d’Albret rises to his feet and reaches for me. As his thick, coarse hand clamps down on my arm, I am nearly overcome with fear and loathing.

“Jumpy, demoiselle?” His voice is mocking.

As I start to answer, the door behind me bursts open. D’Albret’s head snaps up and his eyes narrow. Before I can turn around, there is an iron grip on my other arm.

It is Duval, tight-lipped and glaring at me, and I am ashamed at how glad I am to see him, how relieved I am to be kept from completing this task I have set for myself.

The count’s expression shifts when he sees who it is. “Eh, Duval? Have you lost something?” I do not know why d’Albret’s good humor returns. Does he take that much pleasure in taunting Duval? “Perhaps we can make a little trade, you and I,” d’Albret says, letting go of my arm. “I will return your mistress to you if you will give me your sister.”

“They are not horses to be traded at the fair,” Duval growls.

“No? Is that not a woman’s role, to act as broodmare to a sire?”

The pulse in Duval’s jaw beats fiercely. “We must agree to disagree on that point.” He gives a curt, shallow nod, then drags me from the room. I feel d’Albret’s chilling gaze at our backs until we are well clear of him.

Out in the hallway, Duval releases me with a little shove. “Sweet Jesu, do not poison him so openly! Has the convent not taught you any better than that? Why not just create a trail of blood leading to my door?”

I glare back. “I was not poisoning him.”

All the color drains from Duval’s face. “What were you planning then?”

When I do not reply, he reaches out and shakes me. “Have you heard nothing I’ve told you about Count d’Albret?” His voice is low and urgent and tinged with fear. Fear for me.

Suddenly it is all too much. His concern, my relief at being found. Frustration and impotence boil up inside me. I reach out and push Duval—hard—so that he stumbles back.

“This is *my* job, *my* calling. It is why I am here. My duty is to my god, not to you and your political maneuverings. I am here to do His will, not yours.” I turn away from him. My frustration is so great, I am afraid hot angry tears will spill from my eyes, and I will not let Duval see that.

When he speaks, his voice is filled with certainty, and I so envy him that certainty that I want to hit him all over again. “Whatever it is your saint demands of you, I am certain it is not what would have happened in that room.”

I glance back at him. “What do you know of gods and saints?” I ask, filling my voice with scorn.

His fingers drift to the silver oak leaf of Saint Camulos on his cloak. “I know that what our saints want is not always made clear to us. Sometimes, it is their wish for us to flail and struggle and come to our own choices, not accept ones that have been made for us.”

Easily enough said by one who forsook his own vows.

“Everything I know of the saints and old gods,” he continues, “is that they and Brittany are one. Anything that serves our kingdom, and by extension our quest to remain independent of France, serves them.”

I am sorely tempted to throw his forsaking of his saint in his face, but something stops me. Instead, I spin on my heel and begin making my way toward the main door of the castle.

Outside, the night is cool, but the moon is full, casting a bright, silvery light on the streets of Guérande. We walk in angry silence, using back ways and alleys, both of us clinging to the shadows, our dark cloaks rendering us nearly invisible. Small tendrils of mist have begun to creep in from the sea, bringing with them the moist tang of the nearby salt marshes.

When we have nearly reached his residence, Duval speaks. “The duchess is well pleased with Nemours’s offer.” His voice is wooden, formal. “We will put the proposal before the Privy Council in a few days to gain their approval.”

And though I have vowed never to speak to him again, I am surprised into looking up. “Is that wise? I thought secrecy was of utmost importance.”

He grimaces in frustration. “We do not have much choice. She has not yet been crowned duchess, so she does not yet have the ability to act on her own behalf. We must have the Privy Council’s signatures on any agreement we enter into. After that, we will move quickly to maintain the element of surprise.”

When we reach his residence he takes us through the front door, merely nodding at the surprised man-at-arms. He pauses at the bottom of the stairs and motions for me to go on ahead. “I think we have shared each other’s company enough for one night. Besides, I have much to prepare for tomorrow’s council meeting.”

I am all too happy to bid him good night. When I reach my room, I do not undress but instead go to the window and kneel in the puddle of moonlight spilling onto the floor.

I pray to Mortain for the insight and clarity to see my way through the thicket of loyalties and alliances that surround me. I pray for the wisdom to discern His will in this matter. And most of all, I pray that I am not falling in love with Duval.

I do not know why I am drawn to him. He is not as pretty as de Lornay or as easy to be with as Beast. His brother has more charming manners, and yet . . .

It is Duval who sets my heart to racing, who addles my wits, who makes me short of breath. For even when he is angry, he is kind, and not the mere surface kindness of good manners, but a true caring. Or at least, the appearance of true caring, for I am well aware it could all be an act. An act designed to earn my trust. And just like some poor, dumb rabbit, I have stumbled into his snare.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

IT DOES NOT TAKE BUT three days for the duchess and Nemours to fall in love, and who could blame them? Nemours is young and handsome and kind, but there is a depth to him as well, for he has known sorrow, just as our duchess has. It does not hurt that he has come to rescue her, nor that she is a true damsel in distress, surrounded as she is by fire-breathing barons. It is as romantic as any troubadour's tale.

But she does not let this go to her head. During these three days, she and Duval hammer out the most favorable betrothal terms possible. If they can present a strong, solid contract for marriage to the Privy Council, it will be all the harder for her councilors to refuse.

Everyone is in an uproar over d'Albret's threat of war. There are meetings upon meetings as the council and barons discuss how best to address this newest menace. Meetings the duchess begs off from now and then, pleading a headache. Her ambitious guardians are all too happy to have her out of the way while they plot and plan her duchy's future.

The Privy Council meets in the duchess's private chamber, away from the prying eyes and straining ears of the court. Two men-at-arms stand at the door to her rooms. However, no matter how well trained they are, they cannot see around corners, and there is an antechamber that abuts the solar that could easily be used to eavesdrop.

Duval has put me in this room to act as secondary guard. But there is no rule that says I cannot guard and listen at the same time.

This wall is every bit as thick as the last one I tried to listen through, so I head directly for the window and perch myself on the sill. The murmur of voices is stronger here, although I will be hard-pressed to explain why I am embroidering while hanging out the window if someone should happen upon me. Even so, I know the abbess will want a full report on the deliberations.

Chancellor Crunard's deep rumble calls the meeting to order. Someone wants to know why this unexpected meeting has been called, and by the way his voice sets my teeth on edge, I am sure it is Marshal Rieux.

"I have called this meeting." Anne's voice is easy to discern. "But I will let my lord Duval explain the why of it."

When Duval finishes telling of the Nemours offer, there is a small uproar from the council members.

“How has this happened?” Madame Dinan asks, as if it is a disaster and not a boon. “There has been no envoy from Nemours.”

“No open one, no,” Duval says. His words cause another wave of outrage from the council.

“Why did Nemours come to you?” Marshal Rieux asks, his vanity and pomposity sorely pricked by this breach in protocol. “You are not regent here; stop acting like one. Or is that what you are angling for?”

“If he wanted to seize a regency, I doubt he would be putting this before all of us,” Captain Dunois points out.

“Enough,” Chancellor Crunard says, and they all quiet down. “This is good news for our duchess and our country, let us not forget that. How much aid will Nemours bring?”

“Three thousand men-at-arms and fifteen hundred pikemen.”

There is a long, painful silence. “Surely you jest,” Marshal Rieux says at last.

“That is not nearly as many as d’Albret has offered,” Madame Dinan points out.

“Madame.” There is a faint tremble in Anne’s voice. “As I have said more times than I can count, I will not wed him. He is more than fifty years old and a grandfather.” She does not say that he is ugly and coarse and makes her skin feel as if it wants to crawl off her bones, but I know that is so.

“But he brings with him an army compared to Nemours’s paltry offer!” Rieux sputters. “An army we will need to stand against the French.”

“Let us put it to a vote,” Crunard says. “All in favor?”

Anne’s voice is first to answer “aye,” but Duval’s “aye” is a close second.

“Nay,” says Rieux, followed by Madame Dinan’s softer “Nay.”

There is a pause, then Captain Dunois speaks. “I am sorry, Your Grace, but as captain of your army, I must point out that without d’Albret fighting by your side, we will need to find additional allies, and as yet we have had no luck in convincing others to our cause. But as a father, I cannot help but be glad of this newest development.”

“Chancellor?” says Anne. “What say you? How will you vote in this matter?”

“I am most pleased at this new development,” Crunard says. “Although it does create problems of its own. Even so, I vote aye.”

I sigh in relief on the duchess’s behalf. Just as Duval is reminding them to speak of the Nemours offer to no one, there is a faint whisper of sound behind me. I whip my head around in time to see the latch lifting.

Moving quickly, I pull my long dagger from my ankle sheath and cross the room to stand behind the door.

It creaks open, momentarily blocking my view and trapping me between it and the wall. Madame Hivern again? I wonder. Or perhaps François?

Or maybe Sybella, for why is she in Guérande if not to protect our duchess?

Almost as if sensing the relaxing of my guard, the intruder slams the door into me. I swear as my shoulder crashes into the unforgiving stone, then I spring forward, dagger ready.

Too late. The intruder is already fleeing down the hallway. I step into the corridor in time to see him disappear around a corner. Determined to catch up, I break into a run.

The labyrinth of palace hallways work to my advantage, for every time he turns a corner, he must slow down just enough that I can catch sight of him. One of the circular stairways looms ahead, and the spy takes the steps two at a time. Cursing my cumbersome court garb, I lift my skirts and follow. When I am but halfway up the stairs, I hear the click of a door opening and then shutting.

When I gain the landing, I am dismayed to see a dozen chambers stretching out as far as the eye can see. Swearing in frustration, I approach the first one on my right but sense no spark of life behind it. The first room on the left is similarly empty. I pause at every door until the fifth, where I sense a pulse of life.

I stop long enough to draw my knives, then, moving as silently as possible, I lift the latch and push open the door.

There is a whisper of movement at the open window, then nothing. I race over and peer outside just in time to see a dark figure disappearing through an archway at the side of the courtyard.

At least he is limping. Hopefully, he broke his bedamned leg when he jumped. I sheathe my knives and return to tell Duval of this new twist.

Two days after Duval informed the Privy Council of Nemours's offer, his brother François invites me to play chess. I accept, wondering if there is some ulterior motive to the invitation.

François is waiting at a table in the grand salon, his attention on setting up the chessboard, which gives me a moment to study him unobserved. That he would betray his own sister makes him dishonorable. That he is Duval's brother makes him fascinating.

He glances up just then and I smile shyly, as if I have been caught admiring him. He rises to his feet and bows. "Good morning, demoiselle."

"Good morning," I reply as I take my seat.

"Duval let you out for the morning?"

“Duval is busy with the duchess and her councilors.” I grimace with distaste, and François clucks his tongue in sympathy.

“What will you choose, my lady, white or black?”

I look down at the ornately carved pieces in front of me. “Black, I think.”

His brows raise in surprise. “You give up the first move then?”

“Is not the defensive position the stronger?” I ask sweetly.

He laughs. “You have been spending too much time with my brother and his strategies. Very well, I shall go first.” He reaches for his king’s pawn and moves it forward two paces. I respond by moving a knight’s pawn forward one pace.

François gives me a sly look. “No hesitation; I like that in a lady.” It would be hard to miss the double meaning in his words.

“I hesitate when it is called for, my lord, and your game has not called for it yet.”

He laughs, and I am pleased at how artfully I fall into this flirtation. “A challenge,” he says, his eyes glittering at the prospect.

I let my face grow sober. “Speaking of challenges, what did you think of the Estates meeting? Were you as shocked as everyone else with Count d’Albret’s threat of war?”

François’s cheerful face turns grave. “I was. He is not known for idle threats.”

I cannot tell if he is concerned for the duchess or his own aspirations. “Your poor sister already has her hands full with France, she does not need d’Albret’s rebellion on top of everything else.”

“Indeed, she does not.” He smiles tightly. “But I am certain Duval will take care of it. He always does.” He sneaks his bishop out from behind the pawn and takes my knight. When he looks up, our eyes meet. “Your move,” he says softly.

I keep my expression light and turn the conversation to other matters. “Your brother serves Saint Camulos,” I say as I consider the board. “What saint do you serve, if any? Saint Amourna, perhaps? Or Saint Salonius?” The moment the name crosses my lips, I wish to take it back. As François is a bastard, there is a very real chance he was dedicated to Saint Salonius, patron saint of mistakes.

Overlooking my blunder, he claps his hand to his heart. “You wound me, demoiselle! Arduinna?”

I shrug. “You are most charming, so it seems fitting to me.”

François’s brown eyes grow serious. “There is more to me than that, demoiselle.”

“Is there now?” I ask, putting just a touch of doubt in my voice so that he will be compelled to prove it to me.

In spite of the seriousness that has fallen over him, he smiles. “I was dedicated to Saint Mer,” he says, “with the hopes that I would have a naval career.” He

gives a self-deprecating grimace. “Until we discovered that I become deathly seasick and am of absolutely no use to anyone on a boat.”

I laugh, as he intends me to, but I am more than a little surprised to find that I grieve for him as well. It is no small thing to be dedicated to a saint you cannot serve. “And your sister the duchess?” I ask.

“Ah, Saint Brigantia,” he says, then falls silent.

Of course. The patron saint of wisdom.

“You are not close to your sister, are you?”

He looks up at me again, and this time his normally open gaze is unreadable. “I was not given a chance. From the time of her birth, Duval was her champion; I could never get close.”

I study him. It is not the faint bitterness in his voice that surprises me but the faint echo of abandonment. “You miss him,” I say in surprise.

François picks up his rook and studies it. “Aye, I miss him. We spent our youth doing everything together. He was my older brother, the one who taught me how to hold a sword and how to draw a bow and where to fish for the fattest pike. When Anne was born, that all fell away, and he became consumed by duty.” He moves his rook down eight spaces. “Check,” he says quietly.

I study the board a moment, trying to force my mind back to the game. At last I move a pawn. It is a feeble move, and François looks at me with mild amusement. “Does speaking of my brother distract you so very much?” he asks.

“No,” I say, managing a dismissive laugh. “It is just that I am so very bad at chess, as I warned you.”

He smiles, but it does not reach his eyes. Something behind me draws his attention. “Gavriel, you finally decided to come up for air?”

I look over my shoulder, surprised to see Duval glowering in the doorway. “No,” he says shortly. “I came because I must speak with Demoiselle Rienne. If you’ll excuse us?” His voice is filled with ice and I cannot fathom why.

“But of course.” François stands.

As soon as I reach Duval’s side, he takes my elbow in an iron grip. I wince as he begins walking me to the door. His face is unreadable and I have to quicken my pace lest I end up being dragged. Even so, something compels me to glance back at François. His eyes are fastened hungrily on Duval and filled with yearning.

Once Duval and I are in the hall, I pull away from him. “Have I done something wrong?”

He stops, twirls me around to face him, then backs me up against the wall. His eyes spark in fury as he leans in close. “Did you receive orders from the convent that you did not share with me?”

Before I can utter so much as a word, he gives me a little shake. “Did you?”

“No!”

“Do you swear to it? Swear on your service to Mortain, if that is what you hold most dear.”

I frown at him. “Yes, I swear it. Tell me what’s happened.”

He stares at me a long moment. “Better,” he finally says, “I will show you.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

DUVAL TUCKS MY ARM THROUGH his—none too gently—then leads me deep into the castle. His face is set in harsh lines and there is a grimness I have not seen for a number of days. “How long have you been in the grand salon?” he asks.

“An hour. Maybe more.”

“Has François been with you that whole time?”

“Yes, my lord, but—”

“What of my mother? Did you see any sign of her while you were there?”

“No. What is amiss?”

He does not answer as we hasten through the hallways, past closed doors and empty chambers. “Why are we in such a hurry?” I ask, breathless.

“Because there isn’t much time before news begins to spread through the castle faster than the plague.”

We finally reach a closed wooden door. Duval nods at the guard posted there, who steps aside to let us enter. Duval leads me into to a well-furnished room with an outside balcony. Winding steps lead from the balcony to a private courtyard. Duval points to a still, twisted body on the flagstones below. “Fedric, Duke of Nemours.”

“No!” I whisper, then lift my skirts and hurry down the staircase. I curse my sense of death, wishing to hold out hope one moment longer, but there is no mistaking that Nemours is dead.

When I reach the body, I kneel at his side. “When did this happen?”

“I was hoping you could tell me.”

I glance sharply back at Duval. One eyebrow is raised in a sardonic question that does nothing to mask the fury and disappointment he feels.

“You cannot think that I did this!”

“I cannot?”

“No, milord. I have received no instructions from the convent, nor has my god revealed His will to me. Are you so very certain he did not fall?”

Duval grunts. “I am not.”

Nemours’s body still holds traces of warmth. He cannot have lain here long. “Who found him?”

“I did.”

When I raise my eyebrows in inquiry, he shoves his hand through his hair. “Do not look at me so. We were to meet to review the final betrothal

arrangements, but when I arrived his chamber was empty.”

“Did you question his men?”

“Yes. They confirmed he spent the morning alone and had no visitors.” He glances up at the window, two floors above us. “When I found his chamber empty, I looked out here to see if he was waiting in the courtyard and saw his crumpled form.”

Our eyes meet. “But he told no one of his true identity; he introduced himself as a wool merchant from Castile. Only the Privy Council knew who he was . . .”

“Precisely.” His lips twist in a smile that has nothing to do with humor. “After yesterday’s meeting, they all knew about Nemours, and any one of them would have had time to act.”

“So one of the duchess’s closest advisors must have been involved with this.”

Duval nods in agreement. “Although, it is not impossible that Gisors learned of Nemours’s identity through one of his many spies. Or perhaps he paid off one of the council members. Nor is it beyond the bounds of reason that d’Albret arranged this in retaliation, for I can very easily believe Madame Dinan told him of Nemours.”

“No matter which of those is correct, you still come back to the fact that someone from your Privy Council said something. To someone. With ill intent.”

Duval’s jaw clenches. “Does his soul still . . . linger?” He waves his hand awkwardly. “Can you speak with it?”

“I will try.”

I turn my face from Duval and bow my head. Do the people of Nemours worship the same gods and saints as we do in Brittany? I have no idea, but it is worth trying.

I close my eyes and allow this world to fall away until I no longer feel the hard stone beneath my knees or see the fading light of the sun against my eyelids. The faint chill of Death caresses my cheek, like a loving mother who has greatly missed her child.

When I peel away the thin veil between life and death, Nemours is there waiting. His distress at being outmaneuvered is thick and solid, a veritable wall of grief. But it is the despair he feels at leaving the duchess without a protector that touches my heart, for his last thought proves what an honorable man he was. I, too, am filled with despair. Why must the honorable die when so many dishonorable live?

Sensing the presence of life, Nemours’s soul moves toward me. I gently reach past the cloud of grief and misery that surrounds him, searching for more of his last thoughts in this world, looking for something that will help us. There: The solid feel of a hand against his back, a sharp push, the sense of falling. The force

of his landing sends me reeling. I do not realize that I have almost fallen myself until I feel Duval's hand on my shoulder pulling me back into life and breaking the connection with Nemours. A gasp escapes me and I open my eyes.

Duval stands over me, his warm, solid hand grounding me in this world, his face full of concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, my lord. I am fine," I say.

Duval's free hand touches my cheek. It feels far warmer than Death's caress but is just as gentle. "Then why are you so pale?" he asks softly.

"I am not." I shove his hand away and cast my eyes down to avoid meeting his. "Nemours was pushed. From behind. He does not know whose hand it was, for he never saw it." We are both silent as we digest the full implications of this news.

Someone on Anne's Privy Council is a murderer.

Chapter Thirty

DUVAL STAYS LATE AT THE palace so he can inform the duchess of the events and see to the necessary letters and arrangements required by Nemours's death. I sleep not a whit. I am furious that this chance at happiness has been snatched from the duchess, that such an honorable man has died by such a dishonorable hand. I want to fix it, to put things right, but it is beyond even the skills of Mortain.

But perhaps I can grant the Duke of Nemours a small mercy.

At daybreak, Louyse bustles in with a full pitcher of water and a cheery "good morning," shutting the door behind her with her ample hip. "After I lay out your clothes, I will bring a tray to your room to break your fast. Also, my lord Duval left you a note."

"A note? Is he not here?"

"No, demoiselle. He and the other lords have gone off on a hunt to stock the castle larders."

She hands me the note and turns to my garderobe. I am torn between opening it at once and using the moment to slip into my fresh chemise. Shame wins over curiosity, and my scar is securely hidden by fine linen by the time she returns. Once she has helped me into a gown, she excuses herself to fetch my tray. I tear open the note, cracking the seal and spilling small bits of red wax to the floor.

Ismae,

I have decided that we will be moving into the palace to be nearer the duchess. If last night's activities are a sign of things to come, I would be close at hand when she needs me.

Also, after much discussion, the council has decided to go on with the planned hunt—indeed, all court activities—as if nothing has happened. There is no reason the death of an unannounced stranger would alter our behavior, and thus are we bound and trapped by our own deception. It is better that as few as possible know the extent of this disaster.

*Be well,
Gavriel*

He is right. No one but the Privy Council and he knew Nemours's identity, so

it would not make sense to accord Nemours any particular honors. But in denying him those, surely we are adding to our grievous insult against the man.

I move toward the bed and fetch the sacred bone dagger from under my mattress. The reverend mother has given it to me for some purpose. Perhaps easing Nemours's death is precisely what the misericorde is to be used for. I do not know if it is some whim of my own or some higher purpose of the god, but I am filled with an urgency to grant Nemours a small act of mercy.

Even as I secure the misericorde at its customary place at my waist, a plan begins to form in my mind. I go to my small trunk, unlock it, and withdraw a long, thin dagger. I place it in a supple leather sheath and then strap it to my left ankle. I slip the plainest garrote bracelet on my wrist, and last, I remove the small crossbow and attach three of the quarrels. The bow is designed to be carried by a thin chain at my waist, under my overskirt. If someone were to press close against me, they would feel it, but other than that, it is undetectable.

I do not expect to be questioned at the palace, but I have an excuse prepared just in case. I carry a small offering to leave on Saint Arduinna's altar in the chapel in the hope that she will smile on today's hunt.

The castle is nearly empty since all the nobles are off chasing stag or boar or whatever it is that has caught their fancy today. The servants and attendants are busy at their tasks, relieved, no doubt, to be spared from dancing attendance on so many nobles and courtiers.

I pause for a moment, wondering where Nemours's body might be. Remembering the strange, unerring way I found Martel's grave, I cast out my senses, searching for Death.

It is harder here, with so many sparks of life flickering about their duties, but even so, I am drawn to Death like a moth to a flame. As I follow the trail, I quickly realize the path leads to the small chapel where Anne and Nemours first met.

The chapel is empty and I make my way to the bier, the soul's despair guiding my steps more surely than the small, sputtering candles in the nave. When I reach the body, the soul seems to recognize me and rushes toward the familiarity and life that I offer.

I open myself to it, let it warm itself against me, surprised when it curls up and settles into me like a despondent hound with nowhere else to go.

We sit together for a while, this soul and I. When I am certain no stray mourners or triumphant gloaters will appear to pray over this mystery corpse, I allow myself to turn my mind fully inward to Nemours's soul.

I have brought with me the means to unite you with your god at once, if you wish it.

When the soul stirs hopefully at my words, I rise to my feet and step closer to the bower. The poor twisted body has been straightened, but the grimace of shock is still on his face. I slip my hand through the slit of my gown, and my fingers close on the handle of my misericorde. My hope, my small plea to Mortain, is that by my setting this dagger on Nemours's flesh, his soul will be able to depart immediately.

Before I can draw the dagger from its hiding place, a scrape on the stone behind me stays my hand. "What an interesting surprise." Count d'Albret's deep, grating voice destroys the sanctity of the chapel. "I had not thought to find Duval's cousin grieving next to a lowly wool merchant from Castile."

Stiffly, I turn and face the count. I have not seen him since my attempt to examine him for a marque and I brace myself, unsure whether to expect mockery or anger. I find neither. Instead, his dark eyes glitter with unholy mischief. I cannot help but wonder if it was his hand that pushed Nemours. "Surely not a surprise." I keep my head bent low, as if reluctant to cease my prayers. "I was convent raised and have been taught to honor the dead and pray for their mercy." I blink innocently. "Have you come to pray too?" I know full well he has not. Whatever he has come for, it is not prayer.

"I am afraid I have come out of morbid curiosity, demoiselle," d'Albret admits without a hint of shame. "I confess to being fascinated by this poor merchant who met his death in our fair city. Besides," d'Albret continues, "I have little belief in accidents." He looks pointedly at me. "Or coincidence."

"Ah," I say. "Then you and my lord Duval have something in common."

There is a movement back by the door of the chapel, and the duchess and her governess enter. I drop into a deep curtsy. "Your Grace."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see d'Albret sketch a perfunctory bow. "My dear duchess," he says. "Have you come to pray for a lowly wool merchant as well? Surely he is blessed beyond his station."

The duchess meets d'Albret's insolent gaze. "I would pray for any poor soul who met his death under my roof." Her voice is sharp with disapproval. "And you, sire?"

D'Albret shrugs and throws his arms out to his sides. "I have been found out! My motives are nowhere near as fine as you ladies'."

The duchess smoothly changes the subject. "I am curious as to why you chose not to join the others in the hunt today."

D'Albret's hooded eyes capture Anne's and I feel my pulse quicken at the affront in them. "They do not hunt for prey that interests me."

The duchess pales; her fingers gripping her prayer book turn white. My hand hidden on the dagger in the folds of my gown tightens as well, and I imagine

what it would feel like to stick d'Albret like a pig.

Perhaps he senses my thoughts, for he makes another short bow. "I will leave you to your prayers."

Still pale, the duchess nods, and d'Albret departs. Anne turns to Madame Dinan. "You may leave us as well. I know you have no love for this task I have set myself. I shall pray with Demoiselle Rienne."

And while it is clear her governess does not want to be here, she wants the duchess left to my influence even less. "But Your Grace—"

"Leave us." The duchess's voice brooks no argument. After a moment's hesitation, during which a multitude of resentments crosses Madame Dinan's lovely face, she curtsies and leaves. When she is gone, the duchess turns to me. "She does not like you, you know."

"She no doubt thinks you should not be in the company of Duval's dubious cousin, Your Grace."

A smile of satisfaction crosses her lips and I am suddenly aware of just how much she enjoys thwarting her overbearing governess's wishes. Then her smile disappears. "So, why *are* you here?"

"You do not believe I came to pray for the man's soul?"

"Oh, I believe you pray, but I cannot but wonder if it is something else that brings you."

The Breton court—indeed, all the kingdoms of Europe—would do well not to underestimate this duchess. "There is something else that brings me, Your Grace." I look down at Nemours's still form. "Did you know that he cared deeply for you? Not just your duchy or your power, but you. He was filled with a desire to rescue you from an unpleasant fate."

The duchess blinks, then looks down at the man who would have been her husband. "I had begun to hope so." Her pale cheeks blush. "It seemed as if he cared. I sensed within him an enormous capacity for kindness and felt I would be able to grow to love him. That is a great blessing for someone such as myself, who feared love would have no place in a marriage between two kingdoms."

I say nothing. Since the age of four, she has been dangled before half the kingdoms and duchies of Europe, like bait at the end of a stick. The best she had hoped for was a marriage of mutual respect and no cruelty. But to have the potential for love snatched away by a false hand . . .

She looks up at me and says again, "So, why are you here?" Her firmness of manner will not tolerate any falsehood or evasion.

"I had thought to release his soul from the misery of his death." I am careful to keep my voice pitched low so that any lurking outside the chapel will not hear it. "Souls must linger near their bodies for three days after their deaths before

moving on. But Lord Nemours's soul is so tormented by what he sees as his failure to protect you that I thought to hasten him to his forgiveness."

The duchess's eyes widen. "You can do that?"

I think so. "Yes."

She nods. "Do it then. And may his soul rest in peace."

"As you command." I am pleased with this authority she has given me.

Neither Duval nor the abbess can find fault with me for acting under her order.

"What are you waiting for?" the duchess whispers.

I meet her clear brown gaze. "Solitude, Your Grace. The rites of Mortain are most private."

Arguments and orders flit across her face, her desire to watch and know these mysteries at odds with her desire to honor the sanctity of death. "Very well," she says at last. "I will leave you." She reaches across the body and clasps my wrist. "Thank you," she whispers. With one last look at her betrothed, she turns and quits the chapel. "Madame Dinan?" she calls as she reaches the doorway.

Her governess appears so quickly that I am thankful we kept our voices low. The two women make their way down the hall, their voices echoing faintly behind them.

Once again I grip the bone dagger. Using my other hand, I pull aside Nemours's shirt collar and the fur trim of his doublet. It is best if this scar remains hidden.

Casting up a brief, heartfelt prayer to Mortain to guide my hand, I lift the dagger and run the edge lightly across Nemours's neck.

I feel, rather than hear, a gasp. Not of pain or shock, but of release.

"Go in peace and with our prayers," I whisper. There is a rustling sensation, as if a score of doves are flying past my cheek, their pale wings filling the air with a joyous sense of flight. *Protect her*, his soul begs me as it departs.

I will, I promise. Then there is naught but silence and I am left alone to stare at a thin cut along his dead white flesh that does not bleed. I carefully put his collar back in place.

Chapter Thirty-One

UPON LEAVING THE CHAPEL, I am pulled toward Nemours's chambers, almost as if tugged by an unseen hand. I have no idea why, but an insistent itching at the back of my neck bids me hurry. Mayhap my god is on the move at last.

Just outside Nemours's apartments, the itching at my back grows stronger. Without bothering to knock, I reach out and open the door.

One of Nemours's men-at-arms is behind a desk, rifling through a saddlebag. He is dressed in riding leathers and a breastplate, and his helmet is tucked under his arm. A small black *marque* sits in the middle of his forehead. Smiling, I close the door behind me.

He does not start guiltily, as he should, but frowns in annoyance. "Who are you?"

I slip my hand through the slit of my overskirt, and my fingers close around the hard wood of the crossbow tiller. "Vengeance," I say softly.

His eyes widen slightly at my words, then he grows alarmed as I draw the crossbow from its hiding place. Within the space of a single heartbeat, I cock the bow, fit the quarrel to the string, and level it at his head, aiming directly for the *marque*. For a moment I am torn, balancing the duchess's and Duval's need for information against my desire to prove myself to my god and my convent. I decide it cannot hurt to ask. "Who paid you to push your lord to his death?"

The man's face pales. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No? I think you do. I think you are the man who betrayed the Duke of Nemours. If you tell me what I need to know, I will kill you as quickly and painlessly as possible. If you do not, it will be slow and lingering. Your choice. Either way, you *will* die." My blood is singing in my veins, so happy am I to be doing my god's work.

Keeping his eyes on mine, the man comes out from behind the desk. "Who says I killed my lord Nemours? Do I get no chance to defend myself? Be tried and judged?"

"You have been," I say. "By Saint Mortain Himself. And found guilty. Now, I will ask you one last time: On whose orders did you push?"

I see in his eyes the moment he decides to rush me. Grunting in annoyance, I release the bolt. It flies straight and true and strikes him in the forehead, precisely where Mortain has *marqued* him. As he falls, his eyes shift from my

face to the door behind me. Swearing, I drop the crossbow and go for the knife at my ankle.

The action saves my life.

There is a breath of air at my back followed by a searing pain, then I am turning toward my assailant, thrusting upward with my knife before I have even laid eyes on him.

My aim is good, and the knife plunges into his gut. His brown eyes widen in surprise, then in pain, as I shove the blade upward, hastening his death. In spite of my threat to the other man, I do not deal in long and lingering deaths.

Before I can do more, however, the soul of the first man flees his dead body. It rushes at me, swirling with cold hostility. I force myself to concentrate on the myriad images it sends flickering through my mind, desperate to find some small tidbit of information that will tell us to who is behind this disaster. While I am distracted by this task, the second man's soul also rushes at me. I gasp as if I have been plunged into a frozen river and stagger back against the wall, shivering so hard I can barely stand. As the second soul floods me, I am filled with anger and pain and regret. An aching sense of loss. A sense of fear so thick it coats the back of my tongue with its bitter taste.

Then, as quickly as they came, they leave, and I sag against the wall. The faint, faraway blare of the hunting horns sound outside. The hunting party has returned.

I kneel on the floor next to the second body long enough to retrieve my knife and wipe it clean on his tabard. When I rise to my feet, I am surprised at the small wave of dizziness that passes through me. I turn for the door, then blink at the smear of red where I leaned up against the wall. I am injured.

Desperate to be away from here, I grab a rough woolen cloak from the bed and use a corner of it to wipe the wall clean as best I can. Then I throw it around my shoulders and hide the crossbow beneath my skirts once more. I can hear the faint clatter of horses' hooves on cobbles and the excited barking of the hounds. Satisfied that everything is as it should be, I step from the chamber out into the hall and begin the long walk down the corridor and away from the evidence of my actions.

As I wind my way through the palace corridors, I debate whether to return to Duval's residence or meet him outside. In the end, I decide he must know what has transpired sooner rather than later, and better from my own lips than a stranger's. Besides, someone must clean up the mess.

The wetness at my back spreads as the injury burns and pulls. I glance behind to be certain I am not dripping a trail of blood behind me.

Outside in the courtyard is a confusion of prancing, blowing horses; dismounting men; barking, wagging hounds; and shouts of greeting. Two large stags hang from poles and I find myself smiling. Today was clearly a good day for hunting, inside the palace and out. I hang back, searching for Duval.

Almost as if I have called his name, his head comes up and his gaze latches on to mine. I do not care for this connection between us.

Duval dismounts and makes his way to me. "What are you doing here?"

I say nothing, but simply stare at him.

"God's Teeth!" he says. I would be heartily impressed by his ability to read my thoughts if it were not so exasperating.

He leans in closer, dipping his head as if he will kiss me, and I must remind myself that it is simply so no one will overhear. "Who?"

"Nemours's guards."

One dark eyebrow shoots up. "More than one?"

"One because he was guilty of treachery; the other was in self-defense."

"Did the convent send you orders?"

"No. I went to pray for Nemours's soul. Then I was drawn to Nemours's chambers. There I saw a guard who bore a marque, and so I acted."

I cannot read the expression on Duval's face. "I *did* try to question him first, my lord, but he gave nothing away. At least, not then."

Duval pounces on that like a wolf on a fallen bone. "Did you read his soul?"

I nod, then swallow before continuing. "He was paid a bag of ducats, and those who paid him held his wife and child. His last thought was of them, a quick prayer that they would be allowed to live now that he had done what he had been asked."

"He spared no last thought for those who had ordered him?"

I shake my head, then wince, as it pulls the cut on my back. "He did not know. The man he dealt with wore a deep hood, and they always met in the shadows."

Duval sighs. "Where are the bodies? I assume you need me to clean up after you."

"They are in Nemours's chambers. If you will see to them, I will be on my way."

For the first time Duval notices the unfamiliar cloak I wear. "Whose cloak is that?"

I start to shrug, then wince again. "One of the men I—"

With a sound of impatience, Duval lifts the cloak from my shoulders, then sucks in a breath. I look around to see the gown beneath is soaked through with blood. "We must get you attended to," he says, letting the cloak fall back in place.

“Shouldn’t you see to the bodies first, before someone discovers them?”

He thinks for a moment, then gently cups my elbow with his hand. “We will do both,” he says, then leads me toward the palace.

“Where are we going?”

“To my rooms here. We will tend to your wound and I can oversee the cleanup. Although I will now owe Beast a favor.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

ONCE INSIDE THE PALACE, DUVAL snags the first page he sees. “Here.” He gives the boy a coin. “Go find the Baron de Waroch, the one they call Beast. Do you know who he is?”

The boy’s eyes shine as he nods his head.

Duval ruffles his hair. “Tell him to come immediately to my chambers in the north tower.”

The page sketches a quick bow, then takes off at a run, neatly dodging around mingling courtiers and servants, who barely notice his passing.

Duval is quiet as he escorts me through the palace to his rooms in the north tower. When we reach them, he leads me through a jumble of trunks and furnishings in the outer rooms to his bedchamber, where a valet is unpacking his clothes. Duval brusquely waves the man away, and I blush when I realize what the servant will think.

Duval sits me on the bed and angles me so that my back is to him.

“I am not a doll, my lord. If you but tell me what you wish to do, I can do it myself.”

His only response is a grunt, then the mattress dips as he sits down behind me. His body is so close I can feel the heat rising off it. Chilled by the wet blood on my gown, it is all I can do to keep myself from leaning into that warmth.

He removes the borrowed cloak from my shoulders, and I hiss as the cold air sets the cut stinging.

He is silent for so long I nearly squirm, except I worry the movement will bring me more discomfort. When I feel his fingers on my neck, I pull away before I can stop myself. “What are you doing?” My voice sounds unnaturally high to my ears.

“Removing the ruined bodice so I can tend your cut.”

“No, milord!” I jump up from the bed and spin around, putting my back safely out of his reach. Panic flutters in my breast. *He cannot see it. He mustn’t see it.*

Duval looks at me as if I am mad. “Would you rather I send for a physician?”

“No!” I say, beginning to feel trapped. I have no love for the court physicians, and they will ask questions I do not wish to answer. But I cannot bear for Duval to see my ruined back. “If you will leave me, I can tend it myself.”

He snorts in disbelief. “Is that yet another miracle of Mortain? That His acolytes are able to contort themselves enough to tend their own backs?” His

voice turns gently chiding. “If you are worried about the gown, I am sure the reverend mother will understand.”

But of course, it is not the gown that worries me. The sense of panic in my chest grows until I can hardly breathe. Every taunt thrown at me by the village boys, every slur cast my way, every insult echoes in my head. And those were all from villagers and peasants, people much accustomed to ugliness and deformity. Duval is of noble blood, was raised amid the beauty and finery of court. I cannot bear that I will be the ugliest thing he has ever seen. “No.” I take a step backwards, determined to stay out of his reach. “I do not need your help.”

He frowns at my unreasonableness. “If we do not tend your injury, you could well lose the use of your shoulder and arm, and how would that serve your god or your duchess?”

I hiss in frustration. Trust Duval to find the one argument that will remind me of my true purpose here. My *only* purpose here. My service to Mortain comes before all else. There is no place for modesty or shame. Perhaps the god is testing me even now to see if my vanity is stronger than my duty to Him. Feeling raw and exposed, I cannot help but grumble. “What would a man know of stitching anyway?”

Duval laughs outright at that, and a small hidden dimple winks briefly at the corner of his mouth. “If a man expects to survive in battle or help his fellow men-at-arms afterward, he will indeed learn to stitch, and to stitch well, if not prettily. Now quit putting this off.”

Slowly, I return to the bed, sit down, and turn my back to him. I feel hollow inside and remind myself that what Duval thinks of me or my scar is of no importance. Indeed, perhaps his disgust and revulsion will help rebuild the barrier that once stood between us. The words he spoke when we left the convent echo through me. *Being sired by one of the old saints puts your lineage into a class all its own, a class as untouchable by the nobility as the nobility is by turnip farmers.* He may claim such lofty ideals, but it is another thing altogether to see with one’s own eyes what marks such parentage leaves behind.

I hold myself rigid as he unlaces my bodice. It starts to fall forward and I catch it with my hands, hugging it to me like a shield.

There is a rustle of movement as he takes a dagger from his belt. The tearing sound as he cuts away my ruined chemise is loud in the quiet room, and the rush of air against my damp back makes me shiver. I clutch the front of my gown tightly and steel myself against what must surely happen next.

The silence grows impossibly long and I am painfully reminded of the hideous silence when Guillo saw my back. Of his fear and anger and revulsion. I force myself to breathe.

“Ah,” Duval says. “So this is what you didn’t want me to see. Poor Ismae.” His voice is as soft and tender as a caress. I square my shoulders and stare straight ahead. “How did you come by it?” he asks.

“’Tis where the herbwitch’s poison burned me when my mother tried to cast me from her womb.”

When he touches my shoulder again, I bite back a yelp of surprise, and my skin twitches beneath his fingers. Slowly, he traces my scar. It is exquisitely sensitive, and pleasure unfurls across my skin, so intense and unexpected that it feels as if I have been brushed by an angel’s wing.

It is all I can do to keep from leaping from the bed and bolting.

Perhaps sensing this, Duval speaks, his voice low. “There is no shame in scars, Ismae.”

I long to laugh at his gentle words, to throw them back in his face and claim I do not care what he thinks. But I do care. Far more than I have any right to, and his acceptance undermines every last defense I possess.

“We’ll need to wash this,” he murmurs, and even though I welcome this practical task, when he rises from the bed I am torn between relief and disappointment.

He pours water from a ewer into a shallow basin, then carries it back to the bed. After settling the basin in his lap, he dips a piece of linen into the water and uses gentle, efficient strokes to wash the blood from my wound. It is a practical, matter-of-fact touch, much like Sister Serafina would use were she tending to me. Even so, my entire back is alive with awareness. Every inch of my skin, every knob of my spine, and even my scar seem to gain pleasure from his touch. Indeed, the whole world narrows so it is all I can think of.

I close my eyes and try to break this spell he is weaving. “Do you have scars, milord?”

“Oh yes.” He removes the cloth from my back and wrings it out in the basin. “One received in service to my lord father, and another received in service to my sister.” He touches the re-wetted linen to my back and I shiver. I want to lean into that touch, lean into *him*, feel his warmth wrap around me. Instead, I force myself to pull away. “I’m sure it is clean by now.”

His hand clamps down on my good shoulder. An unwelcome thrill flutters somewhere deep in my belly. “Aye, it is clean, but deep enough that it will need to be stitched. It did not tear the muscle, though, so it should not take long to heal. You are not afraid of a few stitches, are you?”

“Of course not.” His taunt works and I hold myself still.

I welcome the bite of the needle as it jabs my flesh. Pain, at least, is familiar to me. Each little prick and burn helps clear away the heady intoxication of Duval’s

more gentle touches.

“This is the last one,” he says. I feel an extra tug as he knots the end. He leans in close, his breath warm upon my skin, then bites the thread with his teeth.

“There. Done. Raise your arm, but slowly. I want to see if it pulls.”

Still clutching the front of my dress, I lift my arm. The stitches bite and burn, but not unbearably. Just enough to remind me to use caution until it heals.

“It will do,” he says gruffly. “Although I shall refrain from moving on to fancy stitchery anytime soon.”

“And here I imagined you embroidering altar cloths with the duchess and her ladies in the afternoon.”

Duval snorts. “Hardly. But it would be wise for you to do that for a few days while this heals.”

“Methinks not. In case you hadn’t noticed, the schemes and plots around here are beginning to thicken.”

“It has come to my attention, yes,” Duval says dryly.

“May I stand up now?”

“If you wish.”

I rise to my feet, careful to keep the loose bodice clasped firmly in place, then spin around, anxious to remove my naked back from his view.

But facing him is worse, I realize, for his expression is soft, unguarded, and there is a tenderness there that I have only seen when he is with the duchess. Our eyes meet, and in that moment everything alters. It is as if he has only just now realized that we are alone in his bedchamber with me barely clothed. The tenderness in his face turns to something else, something that makes me aware of the cold air on my bare back and of my tattered bodice. He takes a step closer, then another, and suddenly we are almost touching. His eyes never leave mine, but his hand comes up and brushes a strand of hair away from my collarbone. Without even realizing what I am doing, I lean toward him.

His hand moves up to cup my face. Slowly he draws me closer, lowering his head to meet mine. His touch is careful, as if I am fragile and precious. And then his lips are on mine, firm and warm and impossibly soft.

A fierce heat rises up inside me, as sharp and bright as a blade. I move my lips against his, wanting more, but more of what, I cannot say. He steps closer, until our bodies touch, then his other hand comes up, the warm fingers grasping my waist, pulling me even closer still. I am lost in his kiss, and all my defenses give way before this hot, hungry mystery that lies between us.

And then he pulls away, slowly, as if loath to do so. That is when I hear the rap at the door. I blink, reality crashing in around me. I take three giant steps back until I reach the cold stone wall, my lips still tingling from Duval’s kiss.

“Coming,” Duval calls out, his voice somewhat hoarse. Like a drawbridge being pulled up and slammed into place, he composes himself, and the sure, practical Duval is back. He takes his eyes from me and goes to answer the door. I lean against the wall and try to pretend my entire world has not just tilted in the heavens.

He stands there talking with whoever it is, blocking the view into the room with his body. After a moment he closes the door and returns to where I stand. I cannot meet his gaze.

“That was Beast,” he says. “He found the bodies and removed them. As best as he can tell, they were simply two of Nemours’s guards, one of whom was responsible for the treachery.”

I nod but do not trust my voice just yet, so I say nothing. He is silent for a long moment. I risk glancing at him. He stares sightlessly at the bloodied chemise on his bed, his hand raking through his hair as he thinks.

I clear my throat. “My lord, what would you have me do?”

He pulls himself from his distant thoughts and returns them to our predicament.

“Can we patch my clothing together enough so that I can return to your residence? Perhaps with a cloak thrown over it?”

He glances ruefully at the ruined linen. “I do not think so. But maybe they have begun to move your trunks into the palace. I’ll check. Sit, before you fall down,” he orders.

I lock my knees and press my back against the wall, welcoming the bracing cold of it. “But the servants . . .” I protest.

“Even though I am a bastard born, I am also the son of a duke. It is not my servants’ place to question me or what I ask of them.”

Stung by this rebuke, I simply nod and wave him away. Once he has left the room, I do indeed sit down, although not on the bed. I perch on one of the unopened trunks.

I should do something. Search through his things, or try to escape to my own room, or . . . in truth, my wits have left me, for I cannot think what I ought to do. My back is burning and my heart still races. In the end, I decide to remain seated and try to compose myself. Surely recovering my wits is the highest priority.

Duval returns a short while later, a look of triumph on his face. He carries a wad of clothing in one arm—my clothing, I realize. “One of your trunks has been delivered,” he says. “Let’s get you dressed, then I must go follow up on Nemours’s guards and inform the duchess of this latest development.”

“Surely you do not intend to help me dress, my lord?”

He shrugs. “Neither Agnez nor Louyse is here just now. What do you suggest? Who would we risk giving explanations to?”

“I can do it myself.” Even as I mutter the words, I know I cannot.

In the end, I have no choice but to let him assist me. The most awkward task is getting into a clean chemise without fully exposing myself to him. I finally order him to lay it on the bed and then turn and face the far corner of the room. Even though he cannot see me, I move quickly, not caring if I rip the stitches he has so carefully made. I let go of my bodice, which falls to the floor, step around it, slip my good arm into my chemise, then slither in the rest of the way, grimacing as I wriggle my bad shoulder to get my arm through the sleeve. “Very well,” I say when it is securely in place.

“Here.” His voice and manner are matter-of-fact as he holds out my bodice much as a squire holds out a chest plate. I thrust my arms in, then turn around so he can lace up the back. Next I untie my skirt, let it fall to the ground, and step out of it. He takes the new skirt he has brought, shakes it out, then holds it open for me to step into.

With the bulk of my clothing in place, we become less awkward, and our movements cease fighting each other. The rest of the task goes smoothly until he pulls my last sleeve up my arm and his knuckles brush against my breast. I wrench away at the unexpected touch, tearing the sleeve from his fingers. He sets his teeth, takes up the sleeve again, and ties it in place.

When he is done, he gives a short, formal bow. “I will leave you to compose yourself.” While I am pained by his formality, I also welcome it. “Meet me in my study when you are ready.”

I nod—for I still do not trust my voice—and he departs. I am blessedly alone. Even though I am fully dressed, my skin feels raw and exposed. Tender, like the new skin under a blister that has ruptured. Even as a giggle threatens to climb up my throat, tears form in my eyes. What madness is this? Something has changed—something dark and alarming now sits between us.

When I am finally calm enough, I leave Duval’s private chamber and go in search of his study. It is not difficult to find as he has been given only a handful of rooms here at the palace. I pause in the doorway. He sits brooding in front of his chess set. “Milord?” I say softly.

His head comes up and his face relaxes somewhat. “There you are.”

I blush and try to pretend it has not taken me the better part of an hour to find my composure. Ill at ease, I pluck at the silver threads embroidered on my skirt as I move to join him at the chessboard. “Where do we stand?” I am anxious to discuss strategies and tactics, troop levels—anything but what has just happened between us.

“That’s what I am trying to discern.”

The white queen sits with but a handful of white pieces around her as she faces a board full of black. “Someone on the council bribed Nemours’s guard or told someone else who did.” Duval’s fingers rest lightly atop the queen. I shiver, remembering the feel of those fingers on my cheek, the weight of his hand on my neck. They are strong, capable fingers, and yet he held my face so gently. Irritated, I shake off this pall that has fallen over me. “Madame Dinan could easily have confided in d’Albret,” I point out.

“True enough, but they are our known enemies. It is the ones we do not know who concern me more. Has France bought someone on the Privy Council, and if so, who?”

“Why would anyone on the council want the French to know?”

“That is the question, is it not? That and what their next move will be.”

“What is *our* next move?” I ask. “What is the duchess’s second best option, now that Nemours has been removed?”

Duval answers without hesitation. “The Holy Roman emperor.”

“Then perhaps a visit with his envoy is in order,” I suggest.

“Clearly.” Duval thinks for a moment longer. When he lifts his eyes from the board, I see how tired he is. “Beast needs help with the cleanup. I took the liberty of ordering a supper tray to be brought to your room so you wouldn’t have to dine in the great hall with the others tonight.”

“That is most welcome, my lord.”

He gives a brisk nod. “Do you need anything before I go?”

I want you to return my wits, I long to say. Instead, I merely ask if I may use his desk and quills to write the abbees of the most recent events.

“But of course,” he says, then takes his leave.

Once he is gone from the room I can breathe again. In an effort to prove he has no hold over me, I make a cursory search of his chambers, but I find nothing of interest. No secret correspondence, no hidden weapon, nothing to indicate he is anything other than what he claims to be: Anne’s devoted half brother.

When that is done, with a heavy heart, I turn to the letter I must write. There is much I need to tell the abbess, but there is much more I long to ask. Does she have any counsel to give as to who would have assassinated Nemours? Has Duval’s name been cleared of suspicion yet? May I work with him on our duchess’s behalf? And what of love? Is loving someone a sin against our god? Surely not, for according to de Lornay, there was love of a sort between him and someone from the convent.

Or perhaps that was merely lust. I suspect the convent does not mind if we take lovers, for the nuns have spent much time training us in that art and no

doubt wish us to practice. But to fall in love? That, I fear, is a grave offense. One heart cannot serve two masters.

Of course, I put none of that in my letter. Instead, I explain all that has happened over the last few days: d'Albret's announcement that he would force Anne to fulfill her betrothal promise and the Duke of Nemours's stepping forward with a new offer. Sadly, I must also inform her of Nemours's subsequent murder and of Mortain's guiding me to the guard who betrayed him. By the time I am done with it, the letter is weighty and full of grim tidings.

After I finish that letter, and with no pressing duties to attend to, I take the time to write to Annith. The quill flies across the parchment, the questions and concerns pouring out of me. I ask her if she knows of the misericorde and the grace it bestows upon Mortain's victims. I tell her of the small, green shoot of love that sprang up between the duchess and Nemours, and how cruelly it was struck down. Last, I ask her if she knows if any of the initiates had a special lover outside the convent.

When I am done writing, I am nearly limp with the effort. I fold and seal both letters, then return to my room to wait for Vanth to be brought along with the rest of my things.

The rest of the afternoon and evening drags by and I spend it torn between wanting and not wanting. I do not want Duval to come to my room tonight; I am drained and weary and more confused than I have ever been. And yet . . . and yet I fear that he will not. The truth is, I can no longer imagine my nights without him.

I need not have worried, however, for Duval is as steady and constant as the tides. He even comes early so he can see how I and my wound are faring.

"You're not asleep," he says, slipping in silently through the door.

"No." I start to sit, then wince.

"Do not get up," he says sharply, and hurries to the side of the bed.

The fire has been built up in my room to keep me warm, and I can see him clearly in the faint orange light from the flames. The stubble on his face is heavy, and I long to touch it, to see what it feels like. I quickly busy my fingers with the rich silk of my coverlet instead.

"Do you need anything? For the pain? To help you sleep?"

"No, milord."

He is quiet for a moment, and I can feel him looking down at me. "I should check your wound to be sure it isn't festering."

That shocks me enough to look up at his face. "No! I could tell if it were. I am sure it is fine."

He smiles wryly. "I suspected you would say that." He reaches toward me and I freeze. A lone finger touches my cheek, as soft as a snowflake falling. "I do not think it wise for me to linger." His voice is full of longing and regret. "Not tonight," he says, then he takes his leave.

Sleep is a long time coming.

Chapter Thirty-Three

IN THE MORNING, DUVAL AND most of the other nobles and courtiers are off on another hunt. Even though it is Advent and fasting is required for three days each week, the castle supplies are quickly being depleted. The nobles are ill-tempered and tense, and it is hoped a hunt will release some of their pent-up humors as well as fill the larder.

I have been assigned to attend to the duchess in her solar. I am loath to spend the day under Madame Dinan's critical eye, but I am not good for much else. I had thought to skulk about the palace, spying on those I could until Duval pointed out that nearly everyone would be on the hunt.

The duchess sits in the cold winter sunshine spilling in the solar's windows. Her sister, Isabeau, lies on a couch that has been placed beside her. The rest of her ladies in waiting are perched about the room. The mood is somber, and the duchess is pale and drawn. Only Madame Dinan seems to be in cheerful spirits. I look at her anew. Could she have ordered Nemours's death? Is she that committed to placing her half brother d'Albret on the Breton throne?

Young Isabeau sees me first. She waves shyly, and the duchess's head turns to follow the movement. "Come in, Demoiselle Rienne!" the duchess calls out in her high, musical voice. I curtsy quickly, then enter the solar. The younger ladies stare at me in open curiosity, while Madame Dinan's eyes glitter with challenge. "What brings you here, demoiselle?" Madame Dinan's voice is distant and cool, meant to send me scurrying for cover.

I grip my sewing basket tightly and raise my chin. "I am here at my duchess's command," I tell her.

Madame turns her head to the duchess and raises one elegant eyebrow in question.

"I invited her to join us." The duchess's impatience makes me think all is not well between her and her governess.

"Your Grace." Madame Dinan lowers her voice, pretending she does not want me to hear. "I know that she is a special friend of your brother's, but it is inappropriate for someone in your position to include her in your pastimes. You have your rank to consider. Besides, have you not enough friends here to keep you company?" Her graceful hands gesture to include the other ladies, and I find myself wondering just how many of them are beholden to Madame Dinan in some way. Perhaps even loyal to her outright.

The duchess keeps stitching and ignores her governess, not deigning to address her protests. As the long silence draws out, one of the ladies in waiting clears her throat nervously. “Did they ever learn who the man was that fell to his death?” she asks the room at large. “They say he was quite handsome.”

What little color remains in the duchess’s face drains away, and she concentrates carefully on her stitching. Madame Dinan clucks her tongue. “No such morbid talk today, ladies. What do you wish for them to bring back from the hunt? Venison or boar?”

As the ladies turn to discussion of the hunt, I take a seat next to young Isabeau.

She smiles, and I smile back. She is pale and wan and it seems to me as if her life spark burns but dimly. I rifle in my basket and retrieve the altar cloth I worked on last time. I pick up the needle threaded with blood-red silk and vow to try harder this time. I intend to be capable of stitching any wound of mine I can reach. I grunt and stick the needle into the linen.

The ladies talk of the upcoming Advent festivities and discuss the court poet’s latest romantic verse. I ignore their voices and focus on my embroidery, pleased to see my stitches are growing neat and even.

After they have thoroughly discussed every aspect of the upcoming holiday merriment, Madame Dinan speaks with a casual, artful slyness that raises the hairs on the back of my neck. “Your Grace, my lord d’Albret did not ride out with the hunt this morning. He thought this afternoon would be a good time for the two of you to discuss some things. Alone,” she says, glancing at the rest of us.

Remembering how she squawked when Duval requested similar privacy, I cannot help but poke at her hypocrisy. “Alone?” I put one hand to my lips, as if scandalized. “You would leave her alone with him, madame?”

“No, you fool,” Madame Dinan all but hisses. “I would remain here as chaperone.”

“It does not matter,” the duchess says primly, “because I will not see him.”

“But Your Grace, you owe it to him to let him plead his ca—”

“He has done so,” Anne says sharply. “Before all the barons of Brittany, if you remember. I refused him then and I refuse him now.”

Madame Dinan stops sewing and leans forward. “You must marry someone. He is half Breton and has the troops you need.”

“He is also old and fat and crude. He has seven children and is a grandfather!”

Madame Dinan’s nostrils flare in annoyance. “Your marriage must strengthen the duchy.”

The duchess keeps her eyes on her embroidery, but she is stitching blindly. “While I know that I must marry for duty, I do not think I must bear him.”

Beside me, Isabeau begins to wheeze slightly. She has grown even paler, and her eyes are fastened on the two women arguing. I quickly stitch a small frowning face on my linen square. I nudge her with my elbow and she looks up at me, then down at my embroidery. The silly face—or perhaps it is my poor stitching—manages to coax a smile from her lips.

Madame Dinan leans farther forward, her eyes burning with intensity. “You have a duty—a *duty*—to your country and Count d’Albret to honor the agreement your father made.”

The spell of my trick with Isabeau is broken, and the child begins to cough. With a cluck of frustration, Madame Dinan throws her embroidery down. “Fetch the court physicians,” she says.

Isabeau shrinks back onto her couch. “No, please, no,” she whispers. “I’ll stop coughing.”

Madame hurries over and smooths the child’s brow. “It is not a punishment, child. They merely want to make you well.”

“But I hate the leeches,” she whimpers. “See?” she says, her face brightening. “I stopped now. I don’t need to see the doctors.”

Anne leans close and brushes a few strands of hair from her sister’s face. “She is not feverish,” she tells Madame Dinan.

The governess pinches her lips. “Very well, but if it happens again, she will need to see them.”

Dinan returns to her chair, and the rest of us stitch silently, none of us wanting to be the one that sends poor Isabeau into another coughing frenzy that brings the court physicians down upon her.

It stays quiet for so long that the little girl dozes off. Anne smiles in relief, and her shoulders lose some of their tension.

Madame Dinan rises to her feet. “If you will excuse me, Your Grace, I have something I must see to.” She speaks softly so as not to waken Isabeau.

Anne nods her permission for the governess to leave. As Dinan slips out of the room, I look at the duchess and raise my brows in question.

One corner of her mouth quirks up. “Did you see your saint’s *marque* upon her?” she asks so quietly that it takes me a moment to be certain I have heard.

I blink in surprise. “No, Your Grace.”

“Pity,” she murmurs, then nods her head, indicating I should follow Dinan. I drop a quick curtsy, then hurry after the governess.

I am careful to stay well behind the older woman. With her head start, it is not difficult. The lack of courtiers also works to my advantage, for with so few

others about, her footsteps echo quietly, making them easy to follow even when she slips out of sight.

At the east tower of the palace, she pauses to look behind her, and I quickly duck back around the corner. I hear her rap on a door. A man's voice greets her, and then her voice fades as she moves into a room. I poke my head around the corner just in time to see which door shuts.

Giving thanks once again for the deserted hallways, I hurry to the door and lean in close.

"What do you mean she refuses to see me?" It is the rough, coarse voice of d'Albret.

"She is but a young, foolish girl, my lord. Do not take it too much to heart."

"I thought you and Marshal Rieux were her appointed guardians. How much influence do you hold if she sees fit to ignore your counsel?"

"It is that brother of hers. I believe he encourages her stubbornness."

"Do you need me to take care of him?" The casual way in which d'Albret asks this sends a chill up my spine.

"No, no. Do not worry. At the next council meeting, I will make it plain she has no other choice."

"Well, do it before the French eat up the entire countryside, will you? I grow bored waiting for this spoiled child to agree to do what she has already promised. If she is old enough to rule a country, certainly she is old enough to marry." There is a moment of silence, then d'Albret speaks again. "And what of Rieux? Is he still in favor of the match?"

"Absolutely, my lord. He believes joining your forces with Anne's is the only way to keep the duchy safe from the French. When it is time to act, Rieux will support us. You can be certain of it."

D'Albret's voice drops lower then, and I can no longer make out the words. Shaking with anger, I back away from the door and hurry down the hallway.

It is worse than I feared. Madame Dinan does not simply wish Anne to marry d'Albret but has fully committed herself to his cause. Indeed, she has promised him that he shall marry the duchess. And what can she possibly say at the council meeting that will prove Anne has no choice? I am so deep in thought on my way back from the east tower to the solar that I almost stumble upon Sybella before I see her.

She is thinner than before, more drawn and pale. Her features are sharper, as if she has grown even more brittle and fragile since I saw her enter the city gates. She has a fresh scar upon her cheek, and I am certain I can see madness lurking in her eyes. It is hard to believe she is the same person who coaxed Annith and

me into all sorts of mischief at the convent, from stealing jugs of wine to teaching us how to kiss when Sister Beatriz said too little on the subject.

“Ismae?” she whispers as if she has seen a ghost.

“Sybella!” Suddenly, I am afraid for her, although I cannot say why. Without thinking I throw my arms around her, hugging her close, whether for her comfort or my own, I cannot be certain.

For a brief moment, she relaxes into me, returns the embrace as if drawing strength from it, but then, too soon, she pulls back, her eyes unnaturally bright. A thousand questions crowd my mind, and nearly as many worries, but before I can voice a single one of them, we hear the echo of boots upon stone. Sybella looks frantically toward the sound, true fear flaring in her eyes. “Trust no one,” she finally whispers. “No one.”

And then she is gone, her light, hurried steps carrying her out of sight just before Chancellor Crunard rounds the corner.

“My lord chancellor!” I say with a curtsy.

He frowns for a moment, as if he can’t quite place me. “Demoiselle Rienne,” he says at last. He glances at the empty corridor. “What are you doing in this part of the castle?”

I debate how much to tell him. “My convent’s business, my lord.”

“Indeed? My correspondence with your abbess did not indicate you were to take any action against Count d’Albret.”

I blink, wondering how deep in the abbess’s confidence he is. And how he knows that I am spying on d’Albret. “I am not only to act, my lord, but to be the convent’s eyes and ears as well.”

He purses his lips. “True enough. Have your eyes and ears given you any answers in the Nemours debacle?”

“What do you mean, my lord?”

The chancellor spreads his hands, rings glittering. “I mean, Duval handled this Nemours matter most poorly. The Duke of Nemours is dead, is he not? Furthermore, I have just heard a most disturbing rumor.” He leans in close, his breath stale against my cheek. “His mother is plotting even now to put his brother on the throne in Anne’s stead. Could there be any connection?” He cocks his head like a bird and studies me with a piercing eye. “And how is it that you have been here nearly a fortnight and have not learned of this?”

My heart begins to beat painfully. He knows! “I have only just discovered this myself, my lord, but I’ve heard rumblings only. I have been trying to ascertain Duval’s involvement, but he and his mother are most estranged. I do not believe she speaks to him of her plans. Indeed, they barely speak at all.”

Crunard's eyes glitter coldly. "That you know of. What if the estrangement is feigned? Perhaps Duval is only waiting for Hivern to line up enough barons behind François, and then he will make his move, displacing his brother and claiming the throne for himself."

"Why would you think that, my lord?"

"Why would I not? What possible evidence do you have that he is trustworthy?"

None, except my own heart, and that is not nearly enough.

"Someone close to the duchess is working for the French. It could very well be Duval. Do not let your youth and naïveté cloud your vision, demoiselle."

"I assure you, my vision is clear, my lord."

"Good. See that it remains so. Be vigilant, demoiselle. Do not let his charm or good manners sway you to his cause. The abbess would not be pleased to hear of it." And with that final warning, he takes his leave.

That night, when I get in bed, I do not lie down but instead lean back against the bolster and wait for Duval. Once again, I cannot be certain of my own desires. I do not care for this new awkwardness that has sprung up between us, even as I know I should use it to my advantage and sever the fragile ties we are beginning to form. This seems especially prudent, given Crunard's warning earlier today. My wanting to trust Duval does not make him trustworthy.

And yet I feel in my heart that he is.

I try to be honest with myself, to remember when I first started trusting him. Was it before I began to have feelings for him? Or after?

It is clear the chancellor wants me to keep Duval under suspicion, which in and of itself makes me hesitate. I have no good reason for my reluctance and would be hard-pressed to justify this to the reverend mother. The truth is, while I take great pride in serving Mortain and the convent, I do not wish to be a political pawn of the chancellor's.

The faint snick of the door pulls my thoughts away from the chancellor, and my pulse quickens as Duval slips into the room. "Ismae," he says, then closes the door behind him. Instead of going to his customary chair, he makes his way toward me. Twin bolts of panic and anticipation shoot through me. Does he think to kiss me again? Pursue something more than a kiss? I hardly dare to breathe, waiting to see his intent.

When he reaches the bed, he looks down at me, his soft expression stealing the breath from my lungs. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." The word comes out in a whisper. I clear my throat. "The stitches hardly pull."

“Excellent.” He gives a crisp nod, and I wonder if he will ask again to see how the wound is healing, but he does not. Instead, he lowers himself onto the small, thick rug on the floor and leans back against the bed. My whole body stills, and my heart beats even faster. His head is so close that I could reach out and touch his hair. What would it feel like beneath my fingers? I clench my hands into fists. “How was the hunt?” I manage to ask.

He smiles then. “Fruitful. I sent the Holy Roman emperor’s envoy a message late last night, suggesting it would be worth his while to attend the hunt. He did, and we were able to snatch a few moments together and arrange for a more formal meeting. This way, we evaded Gisors’s spies and lackeys.”

“Were none of them on the hunt?”

“I am sure they were, but since I had a few moments of private conversation with any number of men today, my discussion with the emperor’s envoy will not appear overly significant.”

“That is good then.”

“The Privy Council has called another meeting tomorrow. Isabeau has requested you attend on her while Anne and Madame Dinan are in the meeting.”

I study him with narrowed eyes. “Did you put her up to this as a means of having me close by?”

“No. Apparently she’s become fond of you all on her own. It seems you grow on a person,” he says dryly, then changes the subject. “And you? What did you learn today?”

“Nothing good, I’m afraid. Madame Dinan met with d’Albret and spent most of the meeting assuring him that Marshal Rieux would support him when the moment was ripe.”

He sighs. “I fear his duties as marshal are overshadowing his duties as Anne’s guardian. All he can see is d’Albret’s military might.”

“I also ran into the chancellor today. He was most aggrieved with me for wasting my time on d’Albret. He wanted me instead to focus on your mother and brother.”

“And me,” he says.

“And you,” I agree.

“Did you tell him we decided to work together in this?”

“No, I did not. It did not seem . . . wise, although I cannot say why I think so.”

“Your instinct is good. Better we keep our own counsel till we sort out this mess.” He begins to rub his forehead and I am filled with a desire to run my hands through his hair and soothe the pain from his brow. Instead, I tuck them safely beneath the coverlet, away from such temptations.

When he speaks again, there is a hint of amusement in his voice. “You cannot will it away, you know. Pretend it never happened.”

I open my mouth to ask what he means, to indeed pretend it never happened. Instead, I surprise myself by saying, “But I do not know what else to do with it.” My voice sounds small and lost, and I am grateful for the darkness of the room.

“It is not convenient for me either.” His voice is dry and he addresses his words to the fireplace.

“I imagine not,” I concede.

“However, it appears we have both been pricked by St. Arduinna’s arrow.”

St. Arduinna, the patron saint of love. Is that what he thinks is between us? And is the fluttering in my belly panic or joy? I cannot help but think uneasily of the false offering I made to her a few short days ago at St. Lyphard.

“We are both bound by other duties, other saints,” I remind him. “Our hearts are not ours to give.”

He turns his head to look at me then. “Is that what they teach you at the convent? That the gods demand the hearts from our bodies?”

“I fear it is what my convent expects,” I tell him. “They may train us in the arts of love, but in their minds our hearts belong firmly to Mortain.”

“I disagree with your convent,” he says. “Why give us hearts at all then?”

Slowly, as if afraid I will bolt, he reaches for my hand, which has somehow escaped from the covers. When he laces his fingers through mine, my heart does its now familiar panicked flight, bumping painfully against my ribs. My shoulder twitches as if to pull my hand back, but my heart overrules it.

His hand is warm, the skin firm. We sit together in silence. I do not know what is going through his head, but my own mind is unable to form a single thought. At least, not a coherent one. After a long while, he squeezes my hand, then leans down to kiss the back of it. His lips are warm and soft and I am filled with the memory of them on my mouth, my throat. Slowly, as if with great reluctance, he pulls away, and I shiver. “Perhaps,” he says. “When this is all over.”

“Perhaps, my lord.”

He gives my hand another squeeze, then rises gracefully to his feet. “Until tomorrow,” he says, then leaves. I am alone in the darkness.

Knowing I have done exactly what the convent would want brings me little comfort.

Chapter Thirty-Four

WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE duchess's solar the next morning, one of the older ladies in waiting ushers me into Isabeau's smaller chamber. The young princess is in bed, sitting up against the pillows, clutching a doll in one hand. A cup of warm, honeyed milk sits nearby. Her cheeks have two bright spots of pink, and her dark eyes are glassy with fever. "Hello, demoiselle," she says shyly.

"Hello, my lady." I curtsy, then draw close to her. "My lord Duval said I should sit with you while the others are in their meeting." The assignment is a good one for me, for although my shoulder is healing, it is not yet fully recovered.

"Yes, please, demoiselle."

I sit on the stool by her bed and try to think of something to say. "Are you looking forward to Christmas?" I ask, then want to bite my tongue. It will be her first Christmas without her father.

"My sister says we are to have a feast and a mummers' parade." Her face glows with excitement.

"Truly?"

She nods. "Will you be there?"

"If the duchess wishes it, yes."

"I am sure she will. She likes you quite a lot." She is overcome by a fit of coughing just then, and her small, thin shoulders heave with the effort. When she is done, there is a faint sheen of sweat on her brow. "Do not call the physicians," she pleads.

"No, no. I will not," I say, smoothing her hair back. There is little the court physicians can do for her. Little anyone can do for her, her life spark flickers so weakly. "In fact, I have brought you medicine of my own, from the convent where I was raised. It is very good at settling coughs, although it might make you sleepy."

"I will gladly suffer sleepiness if it means no physicians, demoiselle."

"Very well." I pull the small vial of Mortain's caress from my pocket. It is a poison, true, but Sister Serafina used it on the younger girls when they were sick. It is good for coughs and lung fever, for it allows the patient to rest and get much needed sleep, but only if it is given in small doses. I carefully measure two drops—no more—into her milk, then swirl the cup to stir it all around. "Here." I hand her the cup. "Drink it all down now."

She takes the cup from me and does as she is told, draining the last drop from it. She hands it back to me. "It does not taste bad. Just a little sweeter."

"That is because I do not believe in foul-tasting medicine," I say. She smiles, which pleases me more than it should. The muffled voices coming from the other side of the thick wall call to me. I would dearly love to hear what they are discussing, judge the inflections and timbres of their voices. But as I look into Isabeau's shadowed eyes, I find I cannot leave her to struggle for breath on her own.

"Do you know any stories?" she asks as I settle myself on the stool once more.

I hate to disappoint her, but I have no stories. No one told them at my house when I was growing up, and the stories told at the convent are not meant for such young, innocent ears. Just as I start to shake my head, I remember one tale. One of Annith's favorites. Perhaps Isabeau will find some comfort in it. "Have you heard the story of how Saint Amourna captured Saint Mortain's heart?"

Isabeau's eyes widen. "The patron saint of death?" she whispers.

"It is not a frightening story, I promise you, but one of true love."

"Oh." Her face relaxes. "Very well, then. I would like to hear it, please."

"One fine moonlit night, Mortain and his Wild Hunt were riding through the countryside when they spied two maids more beautiful than any they had ever seen before. They were picking evening primrose, which only blooms in the moonlight.

"The two maids turned out to be Amourna and Arduinna, twin daughters of Dea Matrona. When Mortain saw the fair Amourna, he fell instantly in love, for she was not only beautiful but light of heart as well, and surely the god of death needs lightness in his world.

"But the two sisters could not be more different. Amourna was happy and giving, but her sister, Arduinna, was fierce, jealous, and suspicious, for such is the dual nature of love. Arduinna had a ferocious and protective nature and did not care for the way Mortain was looking at her beloved sister. To warn him, she drew her bow and let fly with one of her silver arrows. She never misses, and she didn't miss then. The arrow pierced Mortain's heart, but no one, not even a goddess, can kill the god of death.

"Mortain plucked the arrow from his chest and bowed to Arduinna. 'Thank you,' he said. 'For reminding me that love never comes without cost.'

"Such gallantry surprised Arduinna, and in the end, she let her sister ride with the god of death to his home, but only after Amourna promised she would come back and visit her twin at least once a year."

"Wasn't she scared?" Isabeau asked, her voice naught but a whisper. "To go with death?"

“No.” I reach over and tuck her hair behind her ear. “For death is not scary or evil or even unmerciful; it is simply death. Besides, His realm has much beauty of its own. There is no hunger, or cold, or pain. Or nasty leeches.” This last makes Isabeau smile.

“Is she happy there, do you think?”

“She is.” I do not tell Isabeau the rest of the story, of how Arduinna grew so jealous that she vowed that from then on, love would always bring pain. Or of how in the sorrow of missing her daughter, Dea Matrona brought bitter winter to our land.

By the story’s end, the medicine has begun to work, and the young girl’s eyes drift closed. Her chest rises and falls easily, and her breath is no longer labored. Perhaps I fool myself, but she looks more at peace. If I trusted Madame Dinan at all, I would leave some of the medicine with her, but I do not. If only I had coltsfoot or hyssop. Even comfrey or balm would help, but all I have is poison, and I am loath to give it to the girl’s governess.

In the quiet of the room, I hear the muffled sound of raised voices in the next chamber cease suddenly, and then the sound of a door being thrown open. I rise quietly and go to the solar, shutting the door to Isabeau’s room behind me.

Anne strides into her antechamber, face white. Duval storms in behind her. “How dare she?” he explodes.

At his display of temper, I hurry forward, putting my finger to my lips. “Isabeau has finally fallen asleep,” I say. “We do not want to wake her.”

That checks Duval’s outburst somewhat, but I can still see his pulse beating, furious and erratic, in the hollow of his throat.

“I cannot believe she has done this.” The note of heartbreak in Anne’s voice is harder to bear than Duval’s anger. “She is supposed to serve *my* interests, not her own.”

A look of pain crosses Duval’s face, as if he is saddened that she has had to learn this unpleasant lesson so young. “Your Grace has enough experience with the Breton court to know just how little truth there is in that notion.”

“But she was my governess,” Anne says. “I was her charge. Not the treasury or the armies or the royal household.”

“For the love of Mortain, will someone please tell me what has happened?” I ask.

Duval whips his head around and spears me with his intent gaze. “Have you received no orders from the convent?” he asks.

“No! Why?”

“Perhaps your crow is not working properly,” he mutters.

I dismiss his jab at the convent and turn to the duchess. “What has happened?”

“My governess, Madame Dinan, has plucked from her sleeve a betrothal agreement between my father and Count d’Albret. One that, apparently, I signed.”

This is well and truly disastrous. I glance quickly at Duval and he gives a nod of confirmation. So far all the betrothal agreements have been verbal, giving them all equal weight in the eyes of the law. But if there is a signed agreement with d’Albret, that may very well be more legally binding. The duchess might have no choice but to marry the brute. “Did you get a chance to speak to them of your plans with the Holy Roman emperor?”

Duval and the duchess exchange a look, one I do not care for at all. “They would not hear of it,” he says. He lifts his finger and wags it at me. “‘Not so fast,’ they said. ‘You were wrong about the English sending aid and you gave us false hope with Nemours. We shall make the decisions now and you shall merely carry them out.’”

“It is worse even than that,” the duchess says, following Duval’s pacing with worried eyes. “They flayed Gavriel with their lying, twisted tongues, and blamed him for Nemours’s death.”

“What?”

Duval drops his head and rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. “They said it was my fault for having kept Nemours a secret, for not having assigned a larger body of guards to him.”

“Did you point out that Nemours was perfectly safe until they learned of his existence?”

“Oh, yes, and you can imagine how well that went over. Marshal Rieux nearly flew across the table to strike me, and would have if Crunard had not held him back.”

We are all silent as we consider the full magnitude of this disaster. When the duchess finally speaks, her voice is laced with desperation. “Surely there is something we can do.”

“Oh, there is much we can do,” Duval says grimly. “But each action will have a cost. We can begin negotiating with the Holy Roman emperor now, the Privy Council be damned, but it will turn them more firmly against me. We can send a letter to the ecclesiastical council pointing out that the agreement was made without your consent and you had no idea what you were signing.”

Anne halts her pacing and whirls around to face Duval, determination writ plainly on her face. “Yes!” she says. “Yes to both of those things.”

“The rest of the Privy Council will not be pleased. They already think that you and I collude too much and that I am overstepping my station. They may follow through on their threat to bar me from your meetings.”

The duchess lifts her chin. "Then I will consult with you in private."

Duval hides a smile. "Very well. I will arrange a preliminary meeting with the Holy Roman emperor's envoy tomorrow, and if you will show me where you keep quill and ink, we shall draft your letter to the ecclesiastical council. D'Albret shall not have you. Not while I still draw breath."

A chill scuttles across my shoulders just then, and I wish Duval had not made such a vow. It is never wise to taunt the gods.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I AM SCHEDULED TO ATTEND the duchess this morning, but when I arrive at the solar, Madame Dinan will not let me in. She informs me that Isabeau took a turn for the worse during the night, and Anne is with her. Her refusal to allow me access is sharp and pointed and intended to make clear to me that I am not welcome. Ever.

The old familiar shame nearly chokes me as I return to my chamber. Duval is off meeting with the envoy, so I cannot vent my anger and frustration to him. Instead, I spend the morning tending to my weapons: oiling and sharpening the blades, replacing the poisoned pearls on my golden hairnet, generally making ready for whatever comes. My healing shoulder itches fiercely. Perhaps that is the cause of this sense of restlessness that plagues me. I feel as if we are on a vessel moving inexorably toward some unseen destination. There is no one steering or tending the sails; only the dark tides and currents carry us to their preordained destination. It is not a pleasant feeling and there is little I can do to prepare myself.

Just as I am putting away the last of my knives, there is a knock at the door. My heart lifts. Is Isabeau feeling better then? When I open the door, a page thrusts a sealed parchment in my hand, flops a short bow, then scampers away. Puzzled, I close the door and turn the message over.

The wax seal is black, and the handwriting Sybella's. I rip it open and read the loose, looping scrawl.

Meet me where we last spoke, at noon.

S

Immediately I remember her drawn, pale face, her brittle manner. Is she in trouble? As it is nearly noon now, I grab my cloak and head for the east tower.

The church bell strikes noon just as I enter the main hall in the palace, and I quicken my steps, keeping my eyes peeled for signs of Sybella as I hurry toward the east wing.

At the top of a wide staircase, I nearly bump into Madame Dinan. "Madame," I say, dipping a curtsy and cursing my ill luck. She is in a hurry herself,

however, and barely pauses to acknowledge me. “Demoiselle Rienne. The duchess asked that I fetch her embroidery,” she says in passing.

I frown. She has never explained herself to me before, and I cannot fathom why she would do so now. “Very well,” I say, then continue down the stairs.

She stops. “Are you on some errand for Duval?” she asks.

I decide it is as good an excuse as any. “Yes, madame,” I say, and start to leave, but she speaks again.

“Where is Duval? I have not seen him all day,” says this woman who has ignored me most of my time at court. That is when I realize she is trying to detain me.

Without bothering to answer, I turn and race down the stairs, a sense of dread growing within me. I am nearly there, only one more corridor. As I turn into the last hallway, I hear a man’s voice—a deep, cajoling rumble that slithers across my skin. D’Albret! Every instinct I possess comes alert. I hear another voice then, a young girl’s voice. Not Sybella.

Anne.

Pulling my knives from my sleeves, I rush forward, panic pounding in my breast. When I round the final corner, I see the duchess backed against the wall and d’Albret looming over her. One of his hands is braced on the wall, trapping her. The other grabs at her skirts as she furiously tries to bat him away.

At the sight of his filthy hands on her, fury explodes in my heart, and a red mist rises up before me. I must make a sound, because d’Albret jerks his head up and swears. He snatches his hands away from Anne as if he’s been burned. The duchess sags in relief against the wall, her face pale as death.

D’Albret’s eyes widen at the sight of my daggers, and he holds his arms out wide, far away from his sword. “Do all Duval’s mistresses walk about armed to the teeth?”

My eyes never leave his face. “Surely it does not surprise you that Duval does not cavort with simpering maids.”

His tone turns cajoling. “Now, demoiselle, my betrothed and I were merely having a private moment. It is not so very unusual as all that. There is no need to overreact.”

“I am not your betrothed,” Anne tells him coldly. Her face is pale, but her voice is strong and steady, and I have never been more proud of her. “I have no memory of signing that agreement, and I have written to both the pope and the ecclesiastical council asking that it be nullified.”

D’Albret whips his head back to Anne. Something frightening glitters in his eyes. “Be careful, little duchess, for I will not give you many more chances to spurn me.”

“I will never marry you.” Her voice is low and furious.

I take a step closer. “You heard Her Grace. She has given you her answer. Now move away.”

With one last furious glance at Anne, d’Albret turns his attention back to me. “You are making a grave mistake.”

“Am I?” I draw even closer, my eyes searching desperately for the *marque* of Mortain. Surely assaulting the ruler of our duchy counts as treason. But there is no *marque* on his forehead, nor on his neck above his fur-lined collar. Perhaps that is not where his deathblow will be. Perhaps Mortain intends for him to be gutted like a fish.

Before I have fully thought it through, I reach out and slash at him. His scarlet doublet parts like a wound, exposing his fat white gut. It is pallid and covered in coarse black hair, but there is no *marque*. A thin red line wells up where the tip of my knife has scored his flesh.

Disbelief and rage clouds his face, and his eyes burn with something that looks like madness. He reaches for his sword, but I bring my dagger down on his hand. “I do not think so.”

His eyes narrow, and the rage in them nearly flays the skin from my bones. “You will pay dearly for this.” The cold flatness of his voice is somehow more terrifying than his fury.

Footsteps sound behind us and d’Albret looks up. Fearing some trick, I do not remove my gaze from his face, but my shoulders itch in warning.

“Madame Dinan!” Anne calls out, her voice hitching in relief.

The governess ignores Anne and hurries toward d’Albret. “What have you done, you stupid girl?” she asks me.

“I have kept our duchess safe. What have *you* done, madame?” Our eyes meet and she knows that I see just how heinous a betrayal this has been. The duchess catches the accusation in my voice and takes a step back from her governess, her features stark with disbelief.

I am unable to act against either of these two traitors, and my temper flares. “Get out.” I gesture with my knives. “Both of you.” I make no effort to hide the contempt I feel for them.

“But the duchess . . .” Madame Dinan starts to say, then trails off.

In that moment, the balance of power shifts. I have caught her in an act of rank betrayal, and she knows I can use this against her. “I will tend to the duchess. You, my lady, have lost that privilege.”

Dinan’s nostrils flare. She raises her chin and glares down at her charge. “If you had but listened to your advisors, Your Grace, and not acted like a stubborn child, all of this could have been avoided.”

“And if you had but honored the sacred trust placed in you by the duke,” I point out, “this could have been avoided.” I wave my knives as if I am about to lose my patience, which in truth I am. “Go.”

D’Albret pulls his tunic over his belly and holds it in place with his arm. “You have just made the biggest mistake of your short life,” he says. “Both of you.” He turns and storms down the hallway. With one last reproachful glance at the duchess, Dinan follows the count, fluttering nervously behind him.

When they are out of sight, I turn back to Anne. Slowly, she slides down the wall until she is sitting on the floor. A single tear escapes her bright eyes, and she swipes it away angrily with a trembling hand. Gone is the proud, brave duchess, and in her place is a young, frightened girl, using anger as best she can to shield herself from what has just happened. Not stopping to think of stations and rank, I kneel beside her on the floor and put my arms around her shoulders, hugging her to me. I have no fine or fancy words to bring her comfort, so I say the only thing I can. “You are very brave, and he will think twice before trying that again. On anyone, I hope.”

Anne takes a great, shuddering, sobbing breath. “Madame Dinan said she needed to fetch a page, as she had a message to send. I thought it odd, but she has been much distracted of late, and there has been great discord between us. I never thought . . . never suspected such a . . .” Her voice falters as her throat tightens up, closing off her words.

“Come,” I say gently. “We should get you back to your chambers. Can you walk, do you think?” I do not know what I will do if she says no. I cannot carry her, and I dare not leave her side to fetch help.

“I can walk,” she says, her face full of steely resolve. I stand first, then help her to her feet. We slowly make our way back to her solar. We pass a few courtiers and nobles, and when we do, Anne makes an effort to straighten up and raise her head proudly; her regal bearing drives away any curious glances.

When at last we reach the solar, I am relieved to find that Madame Dinan has not returned. A handful of ladies in waiting are in attendance.

“Leave us,” Anne orders. I have never heard her speak so sharply, and neither have her ladies, for they look startled, but they do as she demands nonetheless. “Wait!” she calls out. They stop like dogs that have reached the ends of their leashes. “Have water sent up for a bath. Hot water.”

The ladies in waiting look among themselves. One brave soul finally speaks. “Shouldn’t we stay here to assist Your Grace?”

Anne glances at me, a silent question in her eyes. I nod my assent. “No, Demoiselle Rienne will attend me. Now go.”

Flustered as a flock of pigeons disturbed from their roost, they scuttle from the room. As soon as they are gone and the door firmly shut, the duchess begins ripping off her fine clothes. At first, I fear she is having a fit, until I hear her words: "I can still feel his fingers on me." Her voice catches, and I hurry over to help her.

She claws at the collar and tears at the sleeves, pulling the gown off before I have the lacings undone. The fabric rips and there are tiny pinging sounds as a dozen seed pearls fall and scatter across the floor. "Your Grace, you will destroy your dress," I murmur.

"That is the point," she whispers, staring at the tattered gown at her feet. She kicks at it. "I will not wear it again. Not ever." She is shivering in her shift, looking younger and more vulnerable than even poor Isabeau.

There is a knock at the door. I remove my cloak and wrap it around the duchess's shoulders, then admit the attendants so they may set up her bath. They politely fill the copper tub with hot water, stoke the fire, lay out fresh linen towels, then hover uncertainly.

"Leave," Anne says, her voice weary.

When they are gone, I turn my back to give her a moment of privacy to step into the bath. As a person of rank, she has always had ladies to attend to her, to scrub her back, hand her a towel, brush her hair. Except when she needed them most, I think, anger rising up again. "Would you like me to wash your hair for you, Your Grace?"

A corner of her mouth tilts in a valiant attempt at a smile. "Part of your assassin's training?"

I smile back. "No, merely something my sisters in arms and I used to do for one another."

Her dark brown eyes meet mine. "Today I feel as if we are sisters in arms, and I would be honored if you would do for me what you have done for your friends."

I bow my head low, humbled by this gesture. "But of course, Your Grace."

I retrieve the ewer and fill it with warm water from the tub, then pour it over her long brown hair. I have never seen her without her headdress, and her hair is as rich and thick as mink. We scrub and rinse in silence; the soap she uses smells of roses.

When she speaks again, her voice is steadier. "Once I am clean and dressed, I must send for Gavriel."

"He is whom you would speak with first?" This pleases me, this trust she has in him.

She turns to look at me. “Above all others,” she says, her face and eyes solemn. She turns back around, and I pour another pitcher of water on her hair to rinse the soap from it.

“When I was born, my father took Gavriel aside and explained that I was to be his first duty from then on. My happiness and my safety were his to guard.”

“How old was he then?”

“Twelve or thirteen, I believe.”

Not much older than she is now. “So much responsibility for one so young.”

“Ah, but he welcomed it. It gave his life purpose. He now had a reason to excel at his lessons, beat his tutors in chess, practice for hours in the sword yard.” Her voice changes, growing softer. “And he doted on me. He told me once that from the moment he first held me, he was besotted. I demanded no cleverness or victories of him, asked only that he love and protect me. And that he has done ever since.”

“Were there so many demands on him at that age?”

“Have you not met his mother, demoiselle?”

I laugh outright at that. “Yes, I have, Your Grace.”

“She has been working on schemes and plots since his birth, most involving him. Until I was born, he tolerated it. Once I was put in his charge, he would have nothing to do with her plots. Even then, his honor shone brighter than most men’s. I believe she quite hates me for it.”

“No doubt,” I murmur, captivated by this peek at the young Duval.

“And if ever I had any doubts—which I did not, although others did—they were erased when I was five years old. Did you know I was betrothed to the English crown prince?”

“Yes, Your Grace. At the convent we study the actions of your family, as your safety and well-being is our first priority.”

She looks around and dimples prettily at this. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

“No wonder that you and Gavriel are so well suited,” she says, turning away again so I can continue rinsing her hair. I frown at this, but before I can protest, she is speaking again and I am loath to interrupt her.

“Anyway, the betrothal enraged the old French king, who had spent years fighting the English and had no wish to see Brittany come under English rule. So he hatched a plot to send his agents into Nantes and abduct me so that I might become his pawn rather than such a liability.

“We received news of this even as they entered the city. As my father’s advisors stood around arguing about what action to take and how best to respond, Gavriel grew impatient, fearing the French would knock down our door

any moment. Instead of listening to their arguments, he came to our nursery and roused Isabeau and me from our beds. He tucked one of us under each arm and, accompanied by his staunch companion de Lornay, spirited us away to safety. Even as he galloped out of the stables, the French plotters broke into the nursery. I will never forget the terror of that night, the feeling that my whole world had been turned upside down. Nor will I ever forget the safety of Gavriel's arms as he carried us out of harm's way."

I stare at the back of her head, my mouth open in surprise. And yet, some small part of me is not surprised. It all fits with the Duval that I see, if not the one seen by Crunard and the abbess.

The duchess shakes her head. "I still do not know how he managed two young girls on that horse of his." She turns around to look into my face. "How could I not trust such a man as that, Demoiselle Rienne?"

"Indeed, how could one not?" I whisper.

"I know some call him oath breaker, for although the oath he swore to Saint Camulos required him to stand and fight, he turned his back on the fighting and instead carried me to safety. But as he explained to me later, what good is fighting if what you are fighting for is lost?"

"True enough, Your Grace." Then we both fall silent, consumed by our own thoughts, while she finishes her bath. My heart feels lighter now that I know the circumstances behind Duval's oath breaking. From what I am learning of my own god, it seems just the sort of thorny trial they love to torment us with.

When all the traces of d'Albret have been scrubbed from her skin and she is dressed and warm and calm, we send a page to find Duval.

He arrives shortly after, tugging off his riding gloves and looking slightly mussed, as if the wind is blowing mightily outside. His gaze darts from her to me, then back again. "What has happened?"

The duchess grips her hands together tightly. "There has been an incident," she says, then falters and looks to me for help.

"D'Albret assaulted her in the hallway."

Duval grows impossibly still and I am reminded of a viper before it strikes. "What do you mean, *assaulted*?" His voice is deceptively quiet.

"I mean, he backed her up against the wall and fumbled at her skirts." Anger at the memory makes the words come out harsher than I intend.

Duval's face grows pale.

"Mumbling all the while about how I would like it if I would only give it a chance," the duchess adds.

I look at her in horror. "I did not know that."

"You were too far away to hear."

Duval's entire body is as taut as a drawn bowstring. Rage fills his eyes, but he tries to tamp it down for his sister's sake, as concern wars with fury. "Are you all right?"

"I am fine. Ismae arrived in time."

He turns then and bows low to me, which shocks me to the core. "Our debt to you is immeasurable," he says. When he rises, his face is calm and still. "We will kill him," he announces, then looks at me thoughtfully. "Unless you already have?"

"Alas, no, milord. He ceased his attack when I approached, and he did not bear the marque."

"Saints take the marque! Look harder." He begins to pace.

A faint glimmer of amusement touches the duchess's features. "She fair gutted him looking for it," she says.

At her words, I feel sheepish. "I admit I did not stop to give thought to maintaining the deception we had in place."

"Good," Duval says. "Perhaps others will think twice before trying something similar."

I clear my throat. "There is more."

Duval stops pacing and stares at me. "More?" Even the duchess looks at me curiously.

"Madame Dinan set the duchess up. She made an excuse to leave her alone in the hallway when she knew d'Albret would be there."

"How do you know this?"

"I met her on the stairs. I was heading toward the duchess and she was moving away. She tried to detain me."

Duval explodes. "That traitorous sow!"

The duchess looks uneasy at this rare display of temper from Duval. I try to say something to turn the conversation to strategy rather than anger, though Mortain knows I have plenty of that as well. "We knew she favored her half brother, but I never guessed she would go this far in pursuit of his claim."

"None of us did," Duval says. "We must ban him from court. Her too."

The duchess promptly agrees, but this plan worries me. "Excuse me, Your Grace, but I think we must tread carefully here."

Duval's head snaps up. "What do you mean?"

"We cannot risk word getting out that the duchess was assaulted. In this world of ours, it matters not what actually transpired. The mere suggestion that she was exposed to such a situation could be enough to bring her virtue into question. What would that do to her chances of marriage?"

All the blood drains from the duchess's face, and Duval swears a black oath and resumes pacing.

"I will not marry the baron, no matter if he is the last man in Christendom!"

"Nor would we let you, Your Grace." Duval's pacing is making me dizzy. I keep waiting for him to step in and say something helpful, to come up with some strategy that will find us a way out. Instead, he is indulging in a fit of temper.

"I know," he says suddenly, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "We will issue an edict stating that you repudiate the betrothal agreement with d'Albret and have no intention of marrying him. If we do so publicly, he will have no choice but to accept it."

I shake my head. "Will that not simply back him into a corner and cause him to take even more drastic measures?"

Duval spears me with a feral gaze. "What do you suggest instead?"

And there he has me. I have no brilliant strategy or clever tactics. That is Duval's gift, not mine. "I have no better plan, my lord. In truth, I am sorely disappointed in my god's justice so far."

Duval stares at me a long moment, his eyes bright as if with fever. "Perhaps that is because you mistake death for justice, and they are not the same thing at all."

Chapter Thirty-Six

IN THE MORNING, VANTH ARRIVES bright and early, pecking at the window even before Louyse comes in to stoke the fire. I throw off the covers and hurry over, my toes curling away from the cold stone floor. When I open the shutter, Vanth hops in and cocks his head as if to ask what took me so long. “I was sleeping,” I tell him, then grab for the note on his leg before he can peck me.

He squawks in annoyance when I retrieve the missive, then flutters off to his cage and puts his head under his wing.

Much to my frustration, it is not instructions from the abbess but instead a note from Annith. I check the seal, then crack it open and read.

Annith writes to say she has never heard any rumor or gossip about initiates of Mortain taking permanent lovers but begs that I tell her why I wish to know. Luckily for me, she spends little time pressing me on that issue; she is much preoccupied with her own situation.

Sister Vereda has taken ill, she writes, and has not had a vision in over a week.

Is that why I have received no orders from the convent? Because Sister Vereda is ill? If that is the case, then surely I must be even more watchful for Mortain’s marque.

The nuns have been meeting behind closed doors more than usual, so of course I had to listen to see what they were about. Ismae, I overheard the reverend mother herself tell Sister Thomine that she thinks I will be able to serve as the convent’s seeress once Sister Vereda passes into the realm of Death! A seeress! After all that I have trained for, all that I have studied and practiced. I have spent my whole life preparing to step outside this convent in service to Mortain—and now she thinks to lock me up inside these thick stone walls forever. I won’t do it. I can’t do it. Indeed, the thought has kept me up the last four nights. Just the idea of it makes me feel as if I am suffocating. So please, in your spare moments, pray for Sister Vereda that she may recover and that I will not be consigned to the convent’s inner sanctum for the rest of my days.

Yours in misery,

Annith

Poor Annith! Can the reverend mother be serious? Does she intend never to let Annith step outside the convent? Annith's plight is so dire, it takes my mind off my own misery, but eventually, I have no choice but to dress for the special meeting of all the barons that the duchess has called.

As the church bells strike noon, Breton nobles, courtiers, barons, and the Privy Council file into the great hall. Duval takes special care to be certain that Gisors attends. "Let him read it as a gesture of goodwill, even if it is nothing of the kind," he says.

I scan the faces of the gathered crowd. There is much gossip and speculation as to why this meeting has been called. Many glance at d'Albret, no doubt wondering if it has something to do with the betrothal he has been boasting about for the past two days.

The back door to the chamber opens and two men-at-arms stride in. The duchess comes next, followed by her Privy Council. The privy councilors are clearly disgruntled that such a meeting has been called without their approval. My gaze goes to Madame Dinan, whose face has an annoying air of smugness to it. Does she really think she has won? Can she know so little of the girl she helped to raise? Once again, Sister Beatriz's words come back to me: *People hear and see what they expect to hear and see.*

Madame Dinan smiles at d'Albret and he smiles back. I am eager to see just how long those smiles hold.

The duchess takes her seat and motions for Duval to hand her the parchment. As she unrolls it, the room falls silent. I cannot help but admire her fortitude—it is not an easy thing to renounce a man in front of his peers.

"I, Anne of Brittany, do hereby declare that the betrothal agreement made between me and Count d'Albret is null and void, as I did sign it with no knowledge of the commitment I was making. While we appreciate the count's valiant service during my father's reign and continue to value him as an ally, I will not now nor ever enter into a marriage arrangement with Lord d'Albret."

When she is finished, every head in the room turns to Lord d'Albret. His face is a deep, mottled red, his jaw clenched so tight I fear his teeth will snap. Next to him, Madame Dinan sways a little. Marshal Rieux surges to his feet and opens his mouth, but Chancellor Crunard puts a hand on his arm and holds him back with a small shake of his head.

Aware that everyone's attention is on him, d'Albret makes a small, mocking bow to the duchess, then turns on his heel and strides away. The crowd parts before him like butter before a hot knife. Madame Dinan rises to her feet, lifts

her skirts, and hurries after him, two bright spots of color burning in her normally pale cheeks. Moving as if in great pain, Anne rises to her feet and turns to leave the hall.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

TWO DAYS AFTER THE DUCHESS reads the edict against d'Albret, she, Duval, and I stand at her window and watch him ride away. He has so many retainers and attendants that it feels as if half the castle goes with him. I fear Sybella is among them. How else would she have been able to warn me of the trickery planned in the corridor?

The idea that the abbess would place Sybella in d'Albret's household is so repellant that I thrust it aside and pray to Mortain that I am mistaken.

If d'Albret has taken a large part of courtiers with him, he has also taken a fair amount of the court's gloom. The serving maids in particular have a renewed bounce in their step now that they no longer have to endure his pinches. Even young Isabeau's health seems to improve, as if it were d'Albret's presence that had clouded her lungs.

One week before Christmas, the duchess calls for a full court dinner, complete with entertainment. The night before the feast, Isabeau is so excited she nearly makes herself sick. At the duchess's request, I give her another tisane so she can sleep.

The castle steward has spared no luxury for tonight's feast. The tables are covered with rich damask cloth embroidered with silver thread. Liveried servants stand near the walls, and gold and silver vessels adorn the table. In an especially fancy touch, notes from a horn summon us to the great hall. We are all, as ordered, dressed in our gayest finery. Long fur-trimmed capes mingle with embroidery-encrusted waistcoats and colorful slashed sleeves. Shoes of brightly dyed leather or rich velvet peek out from beneath thick satin skirts.

The duchess and Isabeau take their places at the high table on the raised dais, and the privy councilors join them. And while it seems as if I have done nothing but drink Duval in with my eyes for the past two weeks, tonight he looks different. He has grown thinner, and there are deep shadows under his eyes as well. The negotiations with the Holy Roman emperor have been fierce. Both the duchess and Duval know they bargain for the very life of their country. The Holy Roman emperor's envoy knows it as well and tries to use it to his best advantage. I worry that the strain is getting to Duval. He grows edgy and has taken to checking the doors and windows, certain that someone is listening in.

Most likely someone is.

I am shown to a seat at one of the lower tables with the lesser ladies and knights, but I do not mind. In truth, I need to pinch myself, for I fear this is all a dream. I can scarce believe that one such as I has been allowed into so fine a celebration.

Once we take our seats, servants bring us basins of warm water scented with verbena so we may wash our hands before eating. While we dry them on soft linen towels, the food is carried in on platters. Meat carvers set to work slicing venison and roasted boar, peacock and pheasant. There is also braised rabbit and roast goose, porkpie, pastries, and frumenty.

I am pleased to find myself seated next to Beast and wonder if Duval had something to do with this. "I have not seen much of you of late," I say.

His face creases into a grotesque smile. "Duval has kept me busy overseeing scouting parties. We scour daily, looking for signs of d'Albret making good on his threat or of the arrival of the French."

"Which is the greater danger?"

Beast shrugs his huge shoulders. "I do not know. If d'Albret has retired to his holdings in central Brittany, all he must do is prevent loyal barons and their armies from answering the duchess's call for troops. That will play havoc enough with our defense."

I take a pinch of salt from the saltcellar and sprinkle it on my venison. "And the French? Where do you anticipate they will come from?"

"From the north and east. They still hold Saint-Malo and Fougères per the terms of the Treaty of Verger. They will use those as strongholds and strike out from there. But enough of this depressing talk, demoiselle. Surely you have spent your days more pleasantly than I?"

I grimace. "Actually, no. I am not overfond of either embroidery or the chattering of ladies in waiting."

"What would you rather be doing?" Beast's eyes sparkle with mischief.

"Something helpful," I mutter, then I take a sip of wine to wash the sense of helplessness from my tongue. It is not a feeling I relish.

His face grows somber. "Is it not helpful staying by our duchess's side, offering her peace of mind?"

"But of course, if my presence brings her peace of mind, it is most worthwhile. In truth, she seems most vulnerable since her governess's betrayal."

"What of young Isabeau?" Beast's eyes turn to the high table. "She looks frail to me."

"Her health is not good. Her lungs are weak, and, I suspect, her heart."

Beast sends me a strange look. "Does your assassin's training tell you this?"

His bold question makes me sputter on the wine I have just sipped. I look around to be certain no one has overheard. “No, my lord. But I worked closely with our herbalist at the convent, and it was she who tended to our illnesses.”

“I had hoped she would recover by now. That she has not is unwelcome news,” he says, then tosses back the contents of his goblet. The lord on his right asks him a question, and Beast begins talking with him. Remembering the social pretenses I must uphold, I turn to the knight on my left, but he is leaning so close to the lady next to him that I fear he will fall in her soup. Only too happy to ignore him, I look out among the feasting nobles, their chins greasy with meat, eyes slurry with wine. This celebration has the doomed feel of trying to raise a Maypole in a thunderstorm. I can only hope an order from the convent comes through. This entire room stinks of desperation and betrayal.

Madame Hivern sits between two of the coastal barons and I wonder just how close she is to making her move. Her hand was brilliantly played; she waited for d’Albret to quit the field, and now her opposition has been reduced by half.

My gaze then turns to François, who is always at the heart of whatever festivities are taking place. Twice he has tried to pull me into his merrymaking, but both times I have politely refused. I do not have the heart for his flirtations.

The blare of a sackbut heralds the arrival of the evening’s entertainment, and a parade of masked performers troop into the great hall. The leader wears a donkey-headed mask and is followed by an ape, a lion, and a bear. The bear is real and reminds me uncannily of Captain Dunois.

An old bent-over man pushes a cart holding two fools. Another fool gambols in, a pig bladder hanging from the stick over his shoulder. It is mayhem as they cavort and frolic, looking both humorous and grotesque. The fools draw up to the tables and begin dicing with the diners.

The duchess has eyes only for Isabeau, who laughs and claps her hands, delighted. Another mummer comes in rolling a great barrel. There is a rapid beating of drums, a dark, primitive sound. A stag-headed man bursts out of the barrel and leaps into the fray; he represents the patron saint of horned creatures, Dea Matrona’s consort. He is killed every year at the end of harvest so he may rise again when Dea Matrona gives birth to the new year.

The music changes yet again, and a man dressed as a young maid and holding a bouquet of flowers frolics between the tables. The music deepens, grows more terrifying. Out from the shadows steps the black-robed, skeletal figure of Death Himself. Everyone gasps.

The maid tries to run, but four masked men leap out of the shadows riding four stick horses. Their red and black masks obscure their faces, and I shudder. They are hellequin, the Wild Hunt who came for Dea Matrona’s daughter and

carried her away to Death's underworld, leaving Dea Matrona to make our world stark and barren in her sorrow.

The maiden evades them. Once. Twice. But the third time, the hellequin surround her. My heart begins to beat faster. Surely this is too frightening for young Isabeau?

I look to see how she is faring, and my breath catches in my throat when I see how close the hellequin have drawn to the high table. Some inner alarm—perhaps Mortain's own whisper—sounds in my head, and I am on my feet, pushing through the cavorting mummers, reaching for the crossbow hidden beneath my overskirt.

The entire court gasps as a hellequin leaps onto the table in front of the duchess and draws a knife. Most think it is part of the play. Duval and Dunois know better and reach for their swords, but they are too far away. With a heartfelt prayer to my god, I slap the quarrel in place and pull the trigger.

The quarrel catches the hellequin in the back of the neck, just below the protection of his mask. He freezes; the knife drops from his spasming fingers, and he topples forward.

The duchess just manages to leap away in time to keep from being crushed by his falling body. Dark red blood splatters onto her pale face.

The pandemonium is instantaneous.

Ladies scream, courtiers shout and scramble away. Men-at-arms pour in from the corridor and surround the mummers, who look in shocked silence at the dead hellequin.

Captain Dunois's eyes widen in admiration. "Excellent shot."

I incline my head in acknowledgment of his compliment. "Catch Isabeau," I tell Duval just before she crumples. But Duval's reflexes are quick and he snatches her before she hits the floor. "Waroch! De Lornay! Question them." He nods his head toward the stunned mummers. "Your Grace, I think we should get you back to your quarters," he says to the duchess.

Pale and trembling, the duchess nods shakily and follows him as he carries their sister back to the solar. Marshal Rieux stares at me as if he fears I, too, have sprung from the mummer's drum. "What is the meaning of this?" Rieux thumps his hand on the table.

Chancellor Crunard steps in to smooth things over. "I think explanations are best made in private. Perhaps we should all adjourn to the duchess's chambers." His eyes seek out mine. "You as well, demoiselle," he says.

Now that the moment is over and the danger passed, my body begins to tremble. So close. *Too* close. Ignoring the whispers and the pointing, I follow

them out of the hall. Was the assassin a parting gift from d'Albret? Or an opening shot fired by some new enemy?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“WHO IS THIS WOMAN?” MARSHAL Rieux demands.

I ignore his question, go to the ewer near the duchess’s canopied bed, and pour water into the basin. I grab a linen cloth from the stand nearby, wet it, then carry it to her. “May I?”

She looks at me in puzzlement.

“You have blood on your face,” I explain.

Her eyes widen in horror and she gives a frantic nod. Gently I begin sponging the spatters from her cheek. Now that she is safe, I am calm. The god truly guided my hand, for I could never have made that shot otherwise. Let the others say what they will, they cannot take that away from me.

“Who is she, Duval? We knew she was not your niece. I, for one, did not begrudge you a lightskirt—”

“Careful.” Duval’s voice is a warning growl.

“—but clearly she is much more than any of us guessed.”

“Some knew.” Duval shoots a glance Crunard’s way. It is an excellent strategy. This whole idea was cooked up between the chancellor and the abbess, so let Crunard answer to his irate fellow council members.

“Chancellor Crunard? Did you know about this? Who is she and what just happened out there?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Crunard’s signet rings flash as he steeple his fingers. “She has been sent to court by the abbess of St. Mortain.”

I feel all the eyes in the room staring at my back.

“I thought they were the stuff of nightmares,” Rieux mutters quietly.

“But no,” I say innocently. “I am saint sent to aid our duchess and our country, Marshal Rieux. Unless our duchess’s triumph is your nightmare, you have nothing to fear from me.”

He turns accusingly to Anne. “Did you know her identity, Your Grace?”

The duchess raises her chin. “I knew that she served Saint Mortain and that He had sent her to me in my hour of need.”

“Why were the rest of us not told?” the marshal asks.

Crunard shrugs. “We thought the fewer who knew, the easier to keep her identity hidden. Surely, Marshal, you do not tell me every bit of your military strategy?”

Rieux’s face reddens, but he cannot deny the truth of Crunard’s words.

“I do not see why you are so angry.” It is the duchess herself who speaks. “If it were not for Demoiselle Rienne’s quick actions, I would even now be lying in a pool of my own blood.”

There is a resounding silence, then Marshal Rieux rushes in. “You misunderstand us, Your Grace. We are overjoyed that you were not injured. But are we so sure that poor man was not merely part of the entertainment?”

“We are sure,” I say.

Rieux whips his head around to stare at me. “How?”

My eyes meet his. “Because Saint Mortain guided my hand.”

Rieux’s lips flatten into a thin line and he takes a step closer to me. I do not know what he intends, but Chancellor Crunard stops him. “Marshal Rieux!”

Nostrils flaring in annoyance, Rieux checks himself. “Whoever this woman is,” he says, “she should not be privy to our council meeting. You are dismissed, demoiselle.”

I make a great show of ignoring him and look to the duchess. It is she whom I serve, not him. “I await your command, Your Grace.” I can hear Rieux’s teeth grinding in frustration.

I see plain on her face that she is loath to dismiss me because Rieux has ordered her to. “If Your Grace allows it,” I explain gently, “I have duties I must see to regarding your assailant.”

She nods her head graciously. “By all means, demoiselle. See to your duties.”

“Where has the body been taken?” I ask Duval.

His eyes narrow as he realizes what I am planning. “I will show you myself,” he says. “We are done here.”

“We are not done, Duval!” Marshal Rieux says in frustration.

“I am,” Duval says, then takes my elbow in an iron grip and escorts me from the room. When we are alone in the hallway, I shift my elbow. He immediately lessens his hold and grunts an apology. We go the rest of the way to the dungeon in silence, the twitching under Duval’s left eye discouraging any questions. There is a lone guard standing outside a row of cells. “Where is the body?” Duval asks.

He points to a larger cell. “In there, my lord.”

Duval leads me inside. If the guard thinks this odd, he is wise enough to keep it to himself.

The hellequin’s body has been laid on the floor, the crossbow bolt removed from his neck. No one has thought to remove the ugly red and black mask. I kneel on the hard stone floor and gently lift it from his face. What strikes me most about the man is his ordinariness. He is neither handsome nor plain, looks

neither highborn nor of peasant stock. It is as if he is a blank canvas, waiting for an artist and his paints to bring him to life.

Duval comes to stand beside me and stares down at the body. “Do you know him?”

“No, my lord. I have never seen him before.”

Duval frowns as he ponders this. “Where did he come from then?”

“I will do my best to find out.”

It takes him a moment to realize my intent. “Is it safe, do you think? With someone as dangerous as this?”

Even though his concern pleases me, I shrug, pretending a confidence I do not feel. “Anyone could have sent him. We are no closer to knowing who moves against the duchess than we were a sennight ago. What other path is open to us? Besides, he is dead now, what danger can he be?”

“Even so,” he says, his face grim. “You will be careful, Ismae.”

“Always, my lord.” I give him a reassuring smile, then turn back to the dead hellequin. I close my eyes, take a steadying breath, then slowly lift the barrier between life and death. At first, there is nothing, so I step more fully into death. Still, there is nothing but a great, black abyss and then I realize that the hellequin has no soul with which to communicate—I feel only a gaping void. Is that the price of acting without Mortain’s blessing? To be emptied of our divine spark?

There is a slow, deep tug from the void. To my horror, the darkness reaches out to me, embracing me and pulling me into its nothingness. I struggle to resist, but its grip is firm, unyielding. It is like night falling, only darker, blacker, more absolute. And so very chilling. Just as one’s skin sticks to ice atop a pond, so does my soul cleave to this freezing emptiness. In no time at all, the normal chill of death disappears, and in its place I feel numbness. Emptiness.

Hands are on my face, slapping gently at my cheeks, a voice murmuring. I feel a faint trickle of warmth begin to work its way into my body. With immense effort, I open my eyes.

Duval is kneeling beside me, his eyes wild with concern. I shiver uncontrollably. “Praise God!” he says, then hauls me up into his arms and holds me close against his chest.

His heart beats strongly against my ribs, its rapid rate nearly matching my own. Warmth pours from his body into mine.

“There is color in your face again,” he says. Indeed, I can feel the blood moving under my skin once more. He places a hand on my cheek and turns my face to his, searching to be certain I am all right.

I give him a reassuring smile that does nothing to ease my own dread. I have seen my own destiny now and know precisely what will happen to me if I step

outside Mortain's grace.

The corridors are empty as Duval escorts me to his chambers; all the feasters and revelers having returned to their own rooms. Once we reach his apartments, he tucks me up in a chair near the fire and orders hot spiced wine to warm me. Between the fire and Duval's cloak, I finally stop shivering and am able to hold the wine when it arrives. I take a sip, savoring the rich, sweet taste on my tongue. "What is our next move?"

"We must finalize the betrothal agreement with the Holy Roman emperor and find a way to get the entire council to agree to it."

My mind goes immediately to Madame Dinan and Marshal Rieux. "What if they will not?"

"Then we must get Anne crowned so she may act in her own sovereign interest."

"Do you have a plan to evict Gisors from the palace so he will not interfere with her coronation?"

Duval snorts. "I am still puzzling that part out," he says, then takes a sip of wine.

"Why *can't* you simply evict him? Escort him out and bar the door behind him? At least long enough to have Anne crowned?"

"The French regent has plenty of other spies who will inform her soon enough, and they will undoubtedly use that as an excuse to invade."

There is a knock on the chamber door just then. Duval and I exchange a glance, then he goes to answer it.

It is Captain Dunois, looking uncomfortable as he nods to Duval. "I must speak with you. Alone," he adds, shooting me a glance. Duval waves his hand in dismissal. "She will only listen at the door."

Captain Dunois's lips twitch ever so slightly. "The council continued to meet after you left," he explains. "The news is not good. They feel that, whether by accident or by design, your counsel and influence have placed the duchess's life in grave danger."

If Duval feels any pain at being stabbed in the back by the council, he does not show it on his face. I set my wine down, afraid I might spill it or hurl it into the fireplace in outrage. "On what do they base this accusation?"

Dunois looks even more uncomfortable. "On the attempt made on the duchess's life this evening."

"How is that Duval's fault?"

"I can speak for myself," Duval mutters.

Dunois ignores us both. “They believe it is the inevitable result of all the decisions and moves Duval and Anne have made so far. Consorting with the known traitors Runnion and Martel, bringing an assassin to court without informing anyone, negotiating a betrothal agreement with Nemours without authorization that resulted in his death. And finally, encouraging the duchess to publicly repudiate one of our most powerful barons. Not to mention your mother’s planned treachery. They are still not convinced you are not part of it.”

Duval does not react to this long list of crimes until he hears the last one. “Who brought that up?” he asks sharply.

“Marshal Rieux.”

Duval buries his head in his hands, but whether in defeat or frustration, I cannot tell.

“Surely the duchess or the chancellor spoke on Duval’s behalf?” I ask. “Explained the true nature of his actions?”

“The duchess did,” Dunois replies, “but since the issue before the council was whether Duval was exercising undue influence over her, no one listened.”

“But what of Chancellor Crunard?” I ask. “It was largely his decision to install me in Duval’s household. He also knows the reason Duval was meeting with Runnion and Martel. And he voted for the Nemours alliance rather than the d’Albret one. Did he not explain any of that?”

“Not in detail, no. He argued forcefully on Duval’s behalf, but the others would not be swayed.”

“What do they plan to do?” Duval asks.

“They think to arrest you in the morning. At the chancellor’s suggestion, they are considering putting you under house arrest rather than sending you to a prison cell. We will meet first thing in the morning and take a vote.”

The rank unfairness of this has me gaping at Dunois. “How can they ignore all those who have moved so openly against the duchess but lock up Duval based on a thin web of unfounded accusations?”

Dunois glances uneasily at Duval. “Because they feel powerless and wish to take *some* action, even if it is not the right one.”

When Duval speaks again, it is as if he dredges up the words from some great hollow pit inside himself. “And that is the true danger,” he says. “They will think they have addressed the threat when they have not. Whoever planned that attack will be free to act again.” He looks up and meets Dunois’s gaze. “Thank you for the warning.” Something solid and bittersweet passes between them.

When Dunois leaves, Duval rises to his feet and begins pacing in front of the fireplace. I wait for him to speak. When he doesn’t, I cannot keep silent. “Why did the chancellor not explain the reasons behind your actions to the council?”

Duval shrugs. “He is a wily old fox and plays a deep game. Perhaps he did not want the others to see his own hand in this and cause them to direct their accusations and suspicions his way. Who would be left to see to Anne’s safety then? Or perhaps he simply knew he was greatly outnumbered and did not wish to fight a lost cause.”

“It was he who told me of your breaking your oath,” I blurt out.

Duval stops pacing and snaps up his head. “He told you of that? When?”

I shrug. “When I was in his office after the meeting of the Estates.”

“And yet you said nothing.”

I shrug again, not sure I can explain my reasoning. Not even to myself. “I did not ask you because it was clear that he wanted me to.”

Duval barks out a laugh. “My little rebel.”

I ignore the small flush of pleasure his words bring. “But it also seemed to me that I had no right to ask you of your saint when I have refused to tell you anything of mine.”

The look he gives me is long and considering.

“And,” I am compelled to add, “the duchess herself told me of the incident. But later.”

“Did she?”

“Yes, when I was tending to her after d’Albret’s attack.”

Duval’s eyes stay on mine a long moment before he pulls himself away and heads for the chessboard. I join him there and together we look down at the meager forces left protecting the white queen.

“What will happen if they remove you?” I ask.

Duval studies the board intensely, as if trying to conjure secrets from it. “Then there is no one left to speak on Anne’s behalf. Beast cannot do it, nor de Lornay. They are not high enough in rank to sway the council.”

“What of Dunois?”

“Captain Dunois is as solid and loyal a man you could ask for, but politics and treaties and the games of kingdoms are not his gifts. Leading men in battle, grasping tactics and strategies of war, those are his strengths.”

I stare at the board, thinking of the poor duchess surrounded by an entire council that has so little interest in her personal welfare. “Then you must not be taken,” I say.

“But if I leave, it ensures the same result, does it not? It is a brilliant plan they have concocted. Perhaps they even wished for Dunois to speak with me. Whether I am arrested or leave of my own accord, the result is the same: I am unable to help Anne. Unless . . .” Duval begins tapping at his chin with his finger.

“Unless what?” I ask impatiently.

He turns to look at me, his face alight with a touch of unholy glee. “Unless there is some way to remove myself yet not. What if they think I have left, but I haven’t?”

“You mean to disguise yourself? Surely your face is too well known—”

“No. I will hide under their very noses.” Duval turns to stare at the fireplace. More accurately, the wall beside the fireplace. “The castle holds a number of hidden passages. With our country so often at war, the ducal palaces have always had escape routes out of the castle.”

“You would live in those tunnels and passageways?”

He shrugs. “It cannot be worse than being imprisoned. And it will give me a chance to finalize the agreement with the Holy Roman emperor’s envoy Herr Dortmund and send him on his way with a signed contract. I fear that is Anne’s last chance if she does not wish to end up in the arms of either the French or d’Albret.”

“But will you not need the privy councilors’ signatures?”

“I will forge them. This is only the preliminary agreement anyway. Hopefully, when the final document is ready, Anne will have been crowned and can act on her own behalf.”

It is a desperate plan but the only one available to us. We spend the next several hours working out the details, trying to anticipate all the obstacles that could lay waste to our strategy.

Duval will continue to visit my chamber each night. He does not think the council will go so far as to post sentries at my bedchamber door. I am not so sure.

While he is in hiding, I will pretend to mope and will ask for my meals in my room, which will make it easy enough to set aside food for him.

“What shall I tell the others when they ask where you have gone? For Crunard, at least, will surely question me.”

“Simply tell them the truth. You do not know where I am. For you will not. I could be anywhere in the castle, I could even leave it, and no one—including you—will know where I have gone.”

“And the duchess? What will she think when you disappear?”

“The passageways open up into the royal bedchambers. I should be able to get to her. But it would not hurt for you to try to get a message to her as well.”

“What shall I tell her?”

He looks down at the chessboard again. “Tell her we no longer know whom she can trust. We will keep her apprised as we learn more.” He glances at the window, then back at me. “I have a few preparations I must make before I go.”

We are close enough to kiss, and for a long, heart-stopping moment I think that he will do just that. Instead, he runs his knuckle along my cheek. “Until tomorrow night, then.”

I shiver. “Until tomorrow.”

He turns to leave, then stops and snatches the white queen from the board, wrapping his fingers around it as if to keep her safe.

It is not surprising that I cannot sleep that night. I lie awake and think of Duval crawling around the hidden tunnels of the castle like a rat trapped in a wall. I think of the duchess abandoned by every one of the guardians her father appointed for her. But mostly I think of the council, of Chancellor Crunard and Marshal Rieux, and wonder who is telling the truth and who is lying.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

WHEN I DRAW ASIDE THE curtains the next morning, the icy fingers of winter come through the glass and pinch me awake. The true season of Mortain is upon us, everything cold and barren and gray.

Behind me, the door opens and Louyse bustles in. “My lady! Come away from there before you catch your death!”

Her words bring a smile to my lips. Does she think Death is some small bird with my name written on it, beating at the window in the hope that I will catch it? “Something subdued,” I tell Louyse as she moves toward the garderobe. “I am feeling somber today.”

“Aye, you and the whole palace,” she mutters darkly.

I turn from the window and rub some warmth back into my arms.

When she has set out the gown, I send her off to fetch a breakfast tray and hurry to dress, a plan forming as I do. My first task is to write to the abbess informing her of the attempt on the duchess’s life.

I pause partway through the letter as I realize that not once did the Privy Council discuss who might be behind the assassination attempt. At least, not in my hearing.

It cannot be d’Albret, for if Anne dies, there is no way he can become duke. France, then? Do they assume Isabeau is too weak to hold the crown?

The only one who gains by Anne’s death is France, at least as far as I can reckon. And no matter how I turn that over in my mind, I cannot reconcile it with Chancellor Crunard’s lukewarm support of Duval. Hoping the abbess will be able to shed some light on the possibilities, I finish the letter and send Vanth on his way.

With that task done, I turn my attention to the rest of the day and try to think what to do with myself. I have already oiled all my weapons, and Madame Dinan will not admit me to the solar. Besides, the Privy Council is meeting there this morning—

And then I have my plan.

With everyone in the Privy Council meeting, it is easy enough to slip into Madame Dinan’s and Marshal Rieux’s chambers unobserved. All it takes is a well-chosen moment and the twist of a needle-like blade, then I am inside.

Dinan's apartments are much like the woman herself, coldly beautiful but containing no warmth or heart. Marshal Rieux's rooms are grand and sumptuous, which is no surprise. He seems the sort to demand luxury, not so much for his own pleasure but because it is befitting for someone of his stature. Even so, his chamber holds no proof or evidence of any treacherous dealings.

That leaves only Crunard.

Fear scuttles across my shoulders at the thought of searching his rooms. He is the convent's liaison, after all, and appears to be a great confidant of the abbess. Somehow, I doubt very much she will thank me if I expose him as a traitor.

But she is hundreds of miles away, and the young duchess is running out of options. Her needs seem more urgent than the tender sensibilities of the abbess.

I make my way back through the halls to the chancellor's office. It is early afternoon and I fear their council may well be over. Not to mention they have no doubt discovered Duval's absence by now. Even so, I must try.

As I reach the chancellor's door, I cast my senses out and realize he is in there. And he is not alone. Since there is no one else in the hallway, I put my ear to the door. The two male voices are close. With a start, I realize they are at the door itself. Less than a second later, it opens. I try to look surprised, my hand raised as if to knock. "Chancellor Crunard," I say.

He scowls. "Demoiselle Rienne. What are you doing here?"

I try very hard not to look at the man Crunard is escorting out of his office. "I have come to see if you know where my lord Duval is." It is a bold move, but I can think of no other reason to explain my presence at his door.

"No, I do not know where he has gone," Chancellor Crunard says. "I was going to send for you to ask the same question."

Unable to help myself any longer, I glance at Crunard's visitor. It is the French envoy, Gisors. His brilliant green eyes study me intently.

Crunard follows my gaze and gives Gisors a brusque nod. "I think I have said all there is to say." The heat of his anger comes through clearly in his voice. Gisors's nostrils flare, then he gives a precise bow and strides off. When he is out of sight, Crunard turns back to me. "Have you really not seen Duval today?"

"No, my lord." Since it is no lie, I am confident he can hear the ring of truth in my words. "I have not seen him since last night after we left the duchess's solar. Did you not find him in his chamber?"

Crunard shakes his head. "He has not been there all day. His steward said he was gone this morning when he went in to wake him. If you see him, tell him I am looking for him, will you? Remind him that running away only makes him look more guilty." His eyes are cold and hard upon me and put me in mind of a bird of prey's.

I tip my head to the side and crease my brow in puzzlement. “Guilty, my lord? Running away? I am not sure I understand you.”

His face relaxes and he looks somewhat less fierce. “It is nothing, demoiselle. Only leftover arguments from the council meeting. That is all.”

“Very well.” I sink into a curtsy and then turn and head down the hall, careful to keep my steps slow and measured, as if I have nothing to hide.

When I reach my room, I quickly shut the door, then lean against it. That was a near thing.

A scratching at the window makes me jump. When I see that it is a crow, my pulse quickens in anticipation. Once I open the window, the crow waits patiently for me to remove the message.

Dearest Daughter,

I have received much information from Chancellor Crunard but very little from you, although perhaps your message is even now on its way to me.

The chancellor has informed me of the French whore’s plot to put her youngest son on the Breton throne. There is no question that this is open treason and the French whore must die.

See to it immediately.

It has been so long since I have used the name that it takes me a moment to realize the note means Madame Hivern.

The convent is ordering me to kill Duval’s mother.

Chapter Forty

NO MATTER HOW LONG I stare at the note, the order simply makes no sense. The threat Hivern and François present is small compared to all the others the duchess faces. Nor have they made any open moves.

Has Sister Vereda recovered then and Seen this? Or is the decision based solely on Chancellor Crunard's report? My head is so full of questions it feels ready to burst.

When Louyse brings a dinner tray, I do not so much as glance at it. Instead, I sit staring into the fire, tying myself in knots over this problem that should not be a problem at all. The convent has given me an assignment, one made all the easier because I do not care for Madame Hivern in the least. I find her annoying and pretentious, and yet . . . to kill Duval's mother? He may be violently at odds with her plans, but he cares deeply for his family.

And why Hivern? Why has Mortain decided I am to act against her when He has let d'Albret remain unmarqued? Is it because she is fully French? But if that was the reason, why did he not marque Gisors?

And how can I tell Duval?

In the end, I cannot. I am the worst sort of coward and pretend to be asleep when he comes. As the heavy wooden door by the fireplace creaks open, I lie as still as death, forcing my breathing to be slow and even, willing the blood to move more slowly in my veins.

I feel Duval draw close to the bed, feel him looking down at me for one, two, three breaths, then he moves away. He pours a cup of wine, swallows it in one gulp, then pours himself another. He is restless and I am filled with remorse. He has been cooped up inside the stone walls of the palace all day and is no doubt eager for news, but I do not know how to speak to him without telling him of the convent's orders. I fear I have forgotten how to lie to him, which disturbs me almost as much as my new assignment.

When he finally stops pacing long enough to eat the dinner I left by the fire, I begin to relax. My cowardice has been rewarded and I will not have to tell Duval that I must kill his mother. At least not tonight.

The next morning I tell Louyse I am not feeling well and am not to be disturbed. The first thing I do is write the abbess explaining that I was waiting for

confirming evidence before sending her the reports on Hivern's plot. I assure her I will take this lesson to heart and will inform her of events in a more timely manner from now on. Next I write Annith and ask how angry the abbess is with me. Best to know just how much trouble I am in.

I spend the rest of the day planning how I will kill Madame Hivern.

Normally, we do not worry overmuch about hiding our kills. The main purpose of the deception of posing as Duval's mistress was to allow me easier access to the court. If the barons and nobles had learned I was from the convent, they would have been cautious and wary around me. Usually the convent feels it is wise to announce Mortain's justice as a warning and a deterrent. Even so, in this case I decide it is better to be discreet.

Poison, then. I am certain that would be Hivern's choice if she were given one.

I take the thin gold chain from around my neck and use the key to unlock the trunklet. There is a faint tinkle of glass as I open the lid. The pearls would be easiest, but they leave signs of poison behind. Martyr's embrace and scourge are far too painful. Amourna's woe, so named for the pair of star-crossed lovers who were forbidden to wed, might work. So might Arduinna's snare.

I stare down at the small clay pot of thick honey-colored paste nestled in the corner of the trunk. Arduinna's snare is subtle and easily absorbed through the skin, but it is too imprecise for my taste. One can never be sure who will touch the poisoned object or if enough will be absorbed to kill one's victim.

Nocturne's malaise is painless. Hivern would simply fall asleep and never wake up, waste away into nothingness, but Madame Hivern would hate for her carefully tended appearance to wither so.

I scowl. What do I care how she feels about her death? This is what happens to traitors.

I reach for the bottle of nocturne's malaise, but my hand grows still when I see the slender white candles beneath. Night whispers. Painless death by an intoxicating perfume, the perfect death for Madame Hivern.

If for no other reason than so I will not be filled with remorse when I tell Duval how his mother died.

Chapter Forty-One

IT IS WELL PAST DARK when I set out for Madame Hivern's quarters. Luck is with me, and she is not there, so I let myself in. I fortify myself with the thought that she is likely out plotting treason. I choose a hiding place behind a thick tapestry that hangs on her wall and settle in to wait.

It does not take long. She and her maid come into the room, chatting about the charming necklace an admirer has given her and guessing its worth. I wait as the maid undresses her and brushes her hair. I block out the sound of their low murmuring voices as they talk of the recent Christmas festivities and what Madame Hivern will be giving François. Instead, I focus on Hivern's spitefulness toward me since we first met and how cruel she is to Duval.

At last the maid leaves and I hear the rustle of covers as Hivern settles into her bed. Now, I think, just as surely as if Mortain had placed His hand on my back and pushed. I step out from behind the tapestry, take the candle laden with night whispers from the folds of my skirts, and approach the bed.

As my shadow falls across her, Madame Hivern starts, then sits up. "What are you doing in here?" Her voice is sharp with surprise, perhaps even fear. Ignoring her question, I hold the deadly candle against the small flame from the oil lamp on her nightstand until it catches. Slowly, I turn to face her. There is just enough light in the room that I can see the *marque* of Mortain upon her; a faint trickle of darkness begins just under her chin and trails down her throat. The *marque* spreads, like a bruise just beginning to form, across her neck and the swell of her chest that is exposed by her low-cut chemise. This comforts me greatly, for if Mortain has *marqued* her, then the convent's order cannot be due to some trickery of Crunard's.

"You are a spy, aren't you?" Madame's voice still holds a note of alarm. She looks younger, more vulnerable, without all her fine jewels and fancy headdresses.

"Some might call me that, but it is not what I am."

She barks out a laugh. "I should have known Duval would not be taken with a mere maid."

"My lord Duval is not taken with me at all," I say tartly. "We merely work together. Our love and duty to the duchess give us much in common." I realize I should move closer so the fumes from the candle can work more quickly, but my feet are leaden and reluctant to move.

“Whoever you may be, you are quite wrong if you think Duval is not taken with you. If there is one thing I know, it is men. And I certainly know my own son. He is smitten.”

“That is not so!” It is demeaning, this arguing with a victim while waiting for Death to claim her, and my voice is sharper than I intend.

She cocks her head to the side and studies me, as if we are simply having a tête-à-tête over spiced wine. “Ah,” she says, her voice full of wisdom nearly as old as Mortain’s. “You love him back.”

I grit my teeth but say nothing.

“I do not blame you for being distraught, Ismae. It is no comfortable thing, having your heart in thrall to a man, especially one such as Duval.”

I am unable to help myself. “How do you mean, one such as Duval?”

“One who will put duty and honor before everything, no matter the cost to him. Or you.”

Her words please me, for if even she says such things about him, it confirms what I myself have come to believe: that he is loyal and true to the duchess.

“Too bad you do not hold your own honor so highly, madame.”

A delicate frown creases her brow. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you are a traitor to the crown of Brittany, and for that you must die. Saint Mortain has willed it.”

She puts her hand to her forehead. “Is that why it grows warm in here?”

I am impressed that she does not faint or scream or cry out for help. “Yes, my lady. That is the poison beginning to work.”

“Poison?” Her face relaxes somewhat. “Thank you for that. I am not overfond of sharp things. Or pain.”

Her composure surprises me, as I have always thought her high-strung and overwrought. “Who besides François is involved in your plots and conspiracies?”

At her son’s name, she grows rigid with fear. “No! Not François! Do not lift your hand against him!” She rises up from the bed, crosses the distance between us, and grabs my shoulders. I wince as her slender fingers bite into my still tender wound. “It was me, all me. François wanted nothing to do with it. You must not kill him. Promise me!”

“I cannot make such a promise. If my saint bids me act, I must, but if François is innocent, Mortain will not raise a hand against him.”

She pushes away from me, her cheeks flushed. “Do not sit in judgment of us, stupid girl. You do not know what it is like, having your life run by men. Men who care not one whit for you beyond the pleasure you can bring them in bed or the pretty way you decorate their arms.” She clenches her fists. “You have no

idea what it is like to have no choices, not one thing to call your own, not even your children.”

“But I do, madame,” I say softly. “I assure you, no woman has the choices you speak of. She cannot choose whom she marries or which family she is born into or even what her role in this world will be. I do not differ from you in that regard, only in what I did with what I was given.”

“What could I do when I was but fourteen and the aging French king decided he must have me in his bed at any cost? What choice did I have when he died? So I chose the duke. He was young and handsome and kind and, most of all, smitten with me. That power—the power to attract men—was the only weapon I had.”

To my horror, I find myself sympathetic to her.

“And once I’d borne children—do you know how hard it can be for a bastard? How dispensable they are? I tried to do all in my power to assure them some measure of respect and safety in their lives.”

Her words make me think of my mother for the first time in years. Would that she had tried to protect me as well as Madame Hivern protected her children.

Madame Hivern shoves her golden hair out of her eyes and gives me a scornful look. “This love you feel for Duval is nothing to the love you would bear your child. Believe me in that, if nothing else.”

A child. Something I have never even allowed myself to think about. Knowledge wells up from deep inside me. If I did have a child, I would protect it and serve it with every breath I drew.

It hits me with the unwelcome force of a crossbow bolt: we are alike, Hivern and I. Both women, both powerless over our own fates. Who is to say I would not have done exactly as she if I had been born into her circumstances? The life I would have led with Guillo spreads out before me, his offspring hanging from my skirts. Would I have grown to love them? Protect them? Could I have done any differently than Hivern had?

She sways on her feet, then stumbles over to the bed, all the will and fight seeping out of her at once. “How much longer will this take?” she asks, and I find I am nearly drowning in my reluctance to kill her. Not fully understanding my own intentions, and with a quick movement I am not sure is my own, my fingers reach up and snuff out the flame. I go to the window and throw it open, letting the cold, cleansing air rush in and chase away the cloying, sweet scent.

Hivern’s teeth begin to chatter. “W-what are you d-doing? It’s c-cold.”

I want to shout at her that I do not know what I am doing, that mayhap I have gone mad. Instead, I cross to the bed. “Stand up.” I grab her by the arm and haul her to her feet. “Walk.”

She looks at me as if I am addle-brained, and perhaps I am. “I don’t want to walk. I want to sleep. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Walk!” I command. “I have an idea, a plan to protect you and François.”
That gets her feet moving.

Her gaze fuzzily tries to focus on mine, urgent. “What is it?”

“You say you lack choices in your life, and I would give you a choice. But we must walk while I do it in order to chase the poison from your body, or else you will have no choices left to you at all.”

She looks at me, her lovely blue eyes confused and hopeful. I give her a shake. “Move. I need your head clear when you make your choice.” But that is only partially true. I also need time to marshal my thoughts.

I cannot believe I am refusing to carry out an order from the convent. I glance at the marquis upon Hivern’s face. It is one thing to agree to work with Duval on behalf of the duchess, one thing not to tell Crunard of Duval’s whereabouts, but this . . . this is to move in direct opposition of the convent’s orders—and Mortain’s.

But my mind has affixed itself on my first kill, Runnion, who also bore a marquis. Duval maintained that Runnion was working for the duchess in order to cleanse his soul. That knowledge has haunted me ever since, the idea that I robbed him of forgiveness.

What if I can give Madame Hivern the choice I took from Runnion?

What if I can convince Hivern to renounce her sins and thus gain forgiveness? Surely that is not going against the convent, or the saint, but simply finding another way to do His will?

If He does not remove the marquis from her, it will be easy enough to set up a second kill. And then I will also know that my actions against Runnion did not cost him forgiveness.

After three turns about the room Hivern is still shivering, but it is only from the cold now, not the effects of night whispers. Only then do I lay my offer of salvation before her. “My lady, if you and François will appear in front of the full court and swear an oath of fealty to the duchess, then perhaps I can spare your lives. But only if the oath comes from your hearts and you mean to keep such a vow, for while I might not know if you are lying, Mortain surely will, and He guides my hand in all things.”

“If you will spare my son, I will promise you anything,” she swears.

“If François is innocent, then he should have no hesitation swearing fealty to his sister.”

She grabs my arm and falls to her knees in supplication. “He will have no problem with such a thing,” she says. “Indeed, he will be glad to do it. As will

I.”

I watch her closely, but the marquee does not fade. Hoping I am not making the biggest mistake of my life, I take her arm and pull her to her feet. “Very well then. Here’s what we will do.”

Chapter Forty-Two

THAT NIGHT, THE DUCHESS ONCE again takes dinner in her chambers, so the rest of the court does the same. I am not hungry, which is just as well since Duval will need all the food Louyse has brought me.

I dismiss the older woman early under the guise of having a headache and take the precaution of locking my door. Then I take a seat by the fire and wait. I go over my actions of the afternoon for the hundredth time hoping—praying—I have made the right choice.

When Duval arrives, his doublet is unlaced and his shirt sleeves rolled up. His hair stands on end, as if he has spent the day running his hands through it. When he sees me fully dressed and sitting by the fire, his hand goes for his sword hilt and his eyes dart around the room.

“Much has happened since we last spoke,” I say quickly to reassure him. “I did not want to risk falling asleep or missing you.”

Satisfied there is no trap waiting, he comes fully into the room and takes a seat in the chair next to mine. He shoots me a cunning glance, then pulls the white queen from the leather pouch at his belt and sets it on the arm of the chair. “It is done,” he says.

“What is done?”

A smile plays at the corners of his mouth as he fills a cup with wine. “The betrothal terms between the Holy Roman emperor and the duchess have been agreed upon.” He lifts the goblet to his lips in a jaunty manner and drains it.

“But that is good news!”

A wry smile flickers briefly across his face. “You were expecting bad?”

“In truth, I was. Things seem to turn against the duchess at every opportunity.”

His head snaps around. “Has some new disaster befallen her?”

“No, milord. Indeed, I have good news as well.”

He lifts the flagon of wine and refills his cup. “Then tell it so I may hear.”

“Your mother and brother have agreed to swear their fealty to Anne before the Privy Council and all the barons at court.”

He sets the flagon down with a thump. “They have?”

“They have.”

Watching me closely, he asks, “And how, pray tell, did this miracle come about?”

I look away from his piercing gaze and stare at the flames dancing in the fireplace. While I have every intention of telling him the truth, I fear he will see far more than I want him to. "I received orders from the convent."

There is no sound but the faint crackle and hiss of the fire. "I see," he says at last. "Or rather, I do not, for if you received orders from the convent, surely they would both be dead?"

"The order came only for your mother, and when I went to . . . visit her, another option presented itself."

"Go on."

"You do not sound especially surprised, my lord."

"I am not surprised, no. I knew this was a possibility from the moment I brought you here. Remember, I have known of her plans all along."

Perhaps that is why he fought so hard against my coming. "It occurred to me that if she was consigned to death for her plots against the duchess, then perhaps by renouncing those plots, she could earn herself a reprieve and the saint would unmarque her."

"And did he?"

I clear my throat. "Not yet. But I do not think He will reverse His judgment until the oath passes from her lips." I risk a quick glance at him. His face is flushed, but whether from my words, the heat of the fire, or the wine he has downed so quickly, I do not know. "Just as Runnion's marque had not left him before he performed his act of contrition—it is the act of atonement that removes the marque, not simply the wanting to atone. Or so I believe."

"Does the convent know you have taken matters into your own hands in such a way?"

"No." I smile wryly. "Not yet."

"And Crunard?"

I shake my head. "What actions the convent does or does not take are no concern of his. Or shouldn't be. But I suspect he will figure it out soon enough, since it was he who reported your mother's plot to the convent."

Duval eyes me curiously. "Not you?"

Embarrassed suddenly, I rise to fetch his dinner tray. "I had not had a chance to write to the abbess yet, no." Still feeling his eyes upon me, I fiddle with the tray, rearranging the food and dishes. Only when he looks away do I feel comfortable enough to turn around. Even so, I am careful not to meet his eyes as I set the tray before him.

When I do manage to glance up, he is holding the white queen and studying her, his dark brows drawn together.

“I must find a way to tell the duchess of Madame Hivern’s and François’s need to swear fealty to her. I was hoping you might have some insight on how I may do that without letting her know the full extent of their betrayal.”

He tilts his head, reminding me for a moment of Vanth. “You wish to keep that from her?”

“I wish to protect her young heart from any more bruises. Truly, how many more people can betray her?”

“How many more barons are there?” is his unsettling reply.

And so it is that on Christmas Day, Madame Hivern and François kneel before the duchess and swear everlasting fealty to her. And mean it.

Madame Hivern has come within an angel’s breath of her own death and is aware of the mercy that has been granted to her and her son.

As I watch her swear the oath, the purple, bruised marque slowly fades from her throat. My breath leaves me in a rush, and my knees grow weak with relief. Mortain has indeed granted her mercy. Which means I did not fail Him or subvert His will. Joy fills my heart as I realize I have not stepped outside His grace.

When the ceremony is over, I slip away and return to my room, eager to give the news to Duval. The servants are enjoying their own feast, and my chamber is dark except for the reddish glow from the fireplace. It is nearly full dark outside, and little light comes in through the windows. Just as I turn to light some tapers, there is a scritch of sound at the window and a faint caw. Vanth.

I hurry to the shutter. When I open it, the crow tumbles in, a scramble of black feathers and rushing wings. At least he no longer tries to snap my fingers off.

Vanth lands near his cage and cocks his head. He caws and ruffles his feathers before going in. I take my time teasing the note from him, not sure I want to read the scolding I am certain the reverend mother has sent me. At last I snag the message from Vanth’s leg, break the seal, and unfold the parchment.

Daughter,

Once again I have received no word from you on the most recent developments at court and must rely on Chancellor Crunard to guide me. What he has told me is so shocking that I can scarce credit it. Not only does the French whore still live, but you have neglected to inform me of Duval’s true allegiance. The chancellor has laid out the case against Duval and there can be no doubt that he is guilty. He has driven away all of the duchess’s allies, one by one, and when that failed, he arranged

an assassination attempt on the duchess. Have you known all along that he was spying for the French regent? Or have you been blinded to his real purpose? Indeed, the only reason I do not judge you an accomplice in this matter is that the chancellor informed me that it was you who saved her life.

Duval must pay for his crimes, and you must pay for your negligence. Dispatch him immediately, then pack your things and return to the convent at once so I may decide what is to be done with you.

My heart stops beating for one—two—long beats and the note falls from my numb fingers and flutters to the floor. I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, hoping to expunge the words from my mind. But it does no good. I have been ordered to kill Duval.

The desires of my convent have collided with the path of my heart.

Chapter Forty-Three

SLOWLY, AS IF EVERY BONE in my body has turned to melted wax, I sink to the floor. How can this be? Did the abbess not get my most recent letter? And what of Crunard? Does he believe his own argument, or is there some darker purpose here? For everything he accuses Duval of could also be laid at his own feet.

My mind begins turning over every conversation I have had with the chancellor, looking for rips or tears in the cloak of loyalty he wears with such sincerity. Was it he who first suggested Duval might be guilty? Or the abbess? He was most insistent I turn my attentions away from d'Albret and back to Duval. And it was Crunard who informed the convent of both Runnion and Martel. Could he have purposefully brought about those kills in order to work against the duchess? But why?

And most important, is Sister Vereda well enough to have Seen this? Surely not, for Mortain would not send a false vision, and I know that these accusations are false. Even hearing it from the abbess does not persuade me otherwise.

When my brain has exhausted itself with questions for which I have no answers, I turn to prayer. I open my heart to Mortain and pray as I have never prayed before. But as I listen for His voice, all I can hear are those of Chancellor Crunard and the abbess.

After a while—a long while—I stand up and straighten my skirts. I am so hollow inside that it feels as if I have left some vital piece of myself on the floor. I know—*know*—that the convent is mistaken. They have been fed false information or have drawn the wrong conclusions. Or both. My own arrogance shocks me, and yet I know they are wrong. That the convent can make such a mistake unnerves me. The nuns are not supposed to make mistakes.

There is a scraping sound by the fireplace as the heavy door begins to swing open. Duval! Without thinking, I crumple the note into a ball and toss it into the fire. I watch the convent's orders turn to ash as Duval strides into the chamber. Much to my surprise, he heads straight for me and wraps his arms around my waist, then whirls me around the chamber as if we are dancing. "The tide is turning!" he says, his eyes bright. "D'Albret is gone, the agreement with the Holy Roman emperor is finalized, the English king grows closer to meeting our terms, and my family's plotting has ended!"

I am breathless with his whirling and try to smile back, to act as if nothing has changed, but my face feels frozen. I push at his hands, but they do not budge

from my waist.

“Truly,” he says, slowing down, “your saint can work miracles.” As he looks into my eyes, his smile fades and his eyes grow dark with emotion. Slowly, he leans toward me.

His lips are soft and warm as they touch mine. His mouth moves urgently, as if he is trying to experience every nuance and curve of my lips. The utter rightness of this fills me, for it feels I have waited all my life for just this moment.

His mouth opens slightly, and he shifts the angle of his kiss, nudging my mouth to do the same, and I am lost in a whole new world of sensation. His mouth is soft compared to the strong, callused hands that grip my waist. He tastes faintly of wine and victory and something bitter and astringent.

Even as the realization dawns, my lips begin to tingle, then grow numb. “My lord!” I gasp and pull away.

He looks at me, his eyes full of desire, his pupils grown so large they have swallowed up nearly all the gray in his eyes. It cannot be! I lean in close again, press my lips to his, then run my tongue lightly over his lips and inside his mouth. Even as he responds by pulling me closer, the acrid tang fills my senses.

I pull away and take his hands from my waist. “My lord,” I repeat, hoping he will hear the urgency in my voice. “Stop. Think. What have you had to eat today?”

He stares at me intently, trying to make sense of my words, as if I have spoken in some strange language from a far-off land. “Nothing but what you gave me last night. Why?”

I lean in and press one last soft kiss against his lips—to be certain, I tell myself. “You are poisoned. I can taste it.”

His pulse beats frantically in the hollow of his throat. “Poisoned?” he repeats, as if the word is new to him.

I hold my fingers to my lips, tasting them again. “Yes,” I whisper.

His eyes fill with unspeakable sadness. “You—”

“No!” I grasp his face with my hands, his whiskery stubble rough beneath my palms. “It is not I who have poisoned you. I swear it!” I hope he does not push me further and ask if the convent is behind it, for I do not know the answer. Did the reverend mother not trust me to do as she ordered? Or has someone else taken matters into his own hands?

He smiles then, a quick fey thing that displays the small dimple I have seen only twice before. Nearly stupid with relief that he believes me, I smile back. His hands reach out and cup my face. “I should not have doubted you,” he whispers, then he lowers his mouth to mine.

The taste of poison is strong on my lips and yanks me back to the matter at hand. “Are you sure you haven’t eaten any food or wine other than what I gave? Did you notice any strange taste?”

He snorts. “No and no. If so, I would not have eaten it.”

But of course, there are hundreds of poisons, many of them too subtle to be detected by the tongue. Others are administered by different means. “Then perhaps it passed through your skin.”

He holds his arms out to his sides. “As you can see, all I have left to me are the clothes on my back.”

“I know, and that is what I would like to inspect.”

“What?”

“Poison can be placed in your gloves, on the inside of your doublet, your shirt, your hat, anything that touches your skin.”

He blinks, at last understanding what I am saying. With a sudden movement, he reaches down and tears the gloves from his belt and throws them on the floor. Frantic now, as if his clothes are coated in stinging nettles, he pulls off his belt, then yanks his doublet over his head and tosses it onto the chair.

I hurry over to inspect each piece, all of them still warm from Duval’s body, but there is no trace of poison. No waxy residue, no trace scent.

“There is nothing on any of these,” I tell him. “May I see your boots?”

He recoils in horror. “You are not going to smell my boots,” he tells me flatly. He tramps to the chair, drops into it, and pulls off his boots. “What would it smell like?” he asks.

I shrug, hating this helpless feeling. “It depends on which poison was used. It can smell sweet as honey or like bitter oranges. Some have a metallic tang.” My heart falters at all the possibilities, for how can I cure him if I do not know what is being used?

He sticks his nose into his boot. “They smell nothing like that,” he says.

I am not sure if I should take his word, but he looks ready to come to blows over it, so I let it be for the moment. “Here, let me hold that one while you check the other.” I brace myself for another argument, but he grunts at me and shoves the boot into my hand. While he is busy with his other foot, I let my fingers brush against the inside of his boot. There is no tingle, no numbness, nothing.

“This one is fine too,” he says, shoving his foot back into it. He holds out his hand for the other one and I return it to him.

“Now your shirt, my lord.”

He gapes at me. “You want to examine my shirt?”

I let my impatience fill my words. “Did you not just hear me say it could be on anything that touches your skin? There are no end of ways to poison a man.

You must trust me to know this better than you.”

However, there is another reason I wish him to remove his shirt. I need to see if he bears a marque.

His eyes on mine, Duval rises to his feet, undoes the lacings of his shirt, then pulls the fine cambric over his head.

I swallow back a gasp, my eyes fixed on the map of silvery white scars that crisscross the left side of his rib cage. A deep, puckered scar sits just inches from his heart. Unthinking, I step closer, my fingers reaching out to touch the pale tracks some keen blade left. He flinches as if in pain. “Do they still hurt?” My voice comes out as a whisper.

“No.” His voice sounds strained.

I trace the longest of the scars that spans his chest. “How close you came. How very, very close.” I shiver, unbearably warm and chilled at the same time. Surely Mortain did not spare him then only to have me kill him now.

His skin under my fingers twitches and suddenly I no longer see the scars, but the shift of taut muscle and the broadness of his shoulders. Heat rushes into my cheeks and, unable to stop myself, I look up to meet his gaze. He lifts my hand and kisses it. “Dear, sweet Ismae.”

The longing and wanting that rise up inside me is as sharp as any blade and cuts as deep. It is also more terrifying. I snatch my hand out of his grip and turn to fumble for the shirt he has so carelessly dropped on the floor.

I busy myself with picking it up and turning it inside out. I can feel his eyes on me, the room full of unspoken dreams and desire. I concentrate on the shirt, checking the seams carefully, the cuffs, any place a smear of poison might hide. However he is being poisoned, it is not from his garments.

“It is clean,” I say, then slowly turn around to hand the shirt to him.

Duval is all business and takes the shirt and slips it over his head. I use that moment to inspect him for a marque. Other than his scars, there is nothing on his chest or his throat, which confirms he has not eaten nor drank this poison. But the room is lit only by the fire and a brace of candles, so I cannot tell if the grayish pallor to his skin is due to the poor light, the effects of the poison, or the marque of Mortain. But of course, it does not matter. I cannot kill him, marque or no.

“If it is not you poisoning me, who is it?” he asks as he tugs his sleeves into place.

“There are so many who wish you ill, my lord, it is difficult to say.”

He gives a wry grimace, then shoves his arms into his doublet. “What is the antidote?” he asks.

“I won’t know until we determine which poison has been used.” Even then I might not know. I was not taught how to remove the effects of poison, only how to best administer it. It will also depend on how much he has taken in and how much damage it has done to his body.

“How long do I have?” he asks.

I wrap my arms tightly around myself and keep my voice calm. “That you are not dead yet bodes well. Many poisons that will kill you in large amounts only sicken you if taken in small doses.” I do not tell him that some of those small doses can have lasting results.

The grim lines about his mouth lead me to believe he knows I am honey-coating my words. “The best we can do for now is keep your strength up. Eat and sleep, my lord, for the stronger you are, the better you will be able to fight the effects.”

When he sits down to the tray, he attacks his dinner as if it is an invading army he must vanquish. When he is finished, he lies down in front of the fire and falls immediately to sleep. But I do not. I spend the long, dark hours of the night fighting despair and looking back over the past few days, trying to pick out symptoms I may have missed.

What I told him is true; there are hundreds of possibilities. Many noble houses in France and Italy have their own poisoners on staff, each with his own secret recipe or concoction. There are dozens upon dozens of poisons that can be taken in through the skin alone. How will I ever determine which one is being used against him?

And if I cannot figure it out, he will die.

Chapter Forty-Four

WHEN MORNING COMES, DUVAL IS gone. I tell myself that his being well enough to leave is surely a good sign.

The night has brought some clarity but no solutions. I do not think the convent is behind Duval's poisoning, for who would they use to do it? I have not seen or heard from Sybella since d'Albret left. Besides, the note from the abbess made it quite clear that this task was my last chance to prove to the convent I was serious about my duties and my vow.

Which means someone else is behind the poisoning.

I think of Duval's chessboard and how the white queen stood surrounded by fewer and fewer allies. The answer, of course, has to be one of those left standing: Marshal Rieux, Captain Dunois, and Chancellor Crunard.

Of those, only Crunard has free access to the convent and only Crunard has accused Duval of spying for the French regent. Even angry as Marshal Rieux was, he suspected Duval only of acting in his own self-interest rather than Brittany's. And of course, what better way to deflect suspicion from one's own actions than to lay the blame at someone else's feet.

Like the tumblers in a lock, my mind shifts and moves. With hindsight, everywhere I look I can find traces of Crunard hidden in the background or under layers of deceit. He was one of the few who knew I was traveling with Duval to Guérande and would know extra assailants would be needed. The lone captive from that attack was killed immediately after Crunard returned to the city. I even saw him meet with the French ambassador. And while the chancellor spoke with Gisors sharply, he himself has pointed out how easy it is to fake that.

If all of that is true, then he must also be behind Duval's poisoning. I assume such poison can be found in a town of Guérande's size. Or perhaps he obtained some directly from the convent. Or—

I hurry to my trunklet, take the key from my neck, and fit it to the lock. I remove the tray of weapons and look to the poisons beneath. Frantically, I examine the bottles and jars. They are all full except one: the jar of Arduinna's snare. That is half empty.

All the symptoms fit: rapid pulse, dilated pupils, dry fever, disorientation, paranoia, numbness in the extremities, and, in the end, death.

Crunard has used my own poisons to destroy Duval.

He had access to this very trunk when he traveled with my things when they

were sent from the convent. A lock is easy enough to pick.

With shaking hands I return the vials to the trunk and lock it. I push to my feet and try to think. If it is Crunard, then to what end? Did he not think that the convent would issue the order? Or is it more than that? It is possible he has been feeding the convent false information all along, but again, to what end? And while I do not fully understand how the marques work, I know they are more complex than I—and perhaps even the convent—first thought. It would be easy enough for him to feed us information that supports his claims and withhold information that does not. When my own reports contradict his, how easy it is to dismiss them as the work of an unskilled novice.

But how do I tell the reverend mother that?

She will not like the suggestion that he has used her for his own ends. Nor am I certain she will believe me. Even so, I fetch a parchment and quill and do the unthinkable. I write a letter to the abbess to tell her why she is mistaken and that her liaison has given her false intelligence.

When I have poured out all my suspicions regarding Crunard, I seal the missive, then begin a second one. This message is for Annith and begs her to write me with the antidote for Arduinna's snare. Sister Serafina must have something, some antidote she can send. If she does, Annith will surely find it. I also inquire after Sister Vereda's health, wanting to know if she is still having visions.

When I finish, I approach Vanth's cage. He is sleeping with his head tucked under his wing and is sorely put out at being wakened. I mumble an apology and secure the notes, then carry him to the window. "Fly fast, if you please. Much depends on this." Then I toss him out the window. He spreads his wings and rises into the gray sky, and I watch until I can no longer see him.

That done, I dress quickly. There is one possible antidote I know of: a bezoar stone. I am not certain if it will work on poison passed through the skin, but it is worth a try. And there is only one person I can think of who might possess one.

It is nearly a half a day's ride to the herbwitch's cottage and even though I have never come this particular way, I have no trouble finding it. I have feared the old woman for most of my life. When I was younger and Mama had first sent me to her for tansy to treat my sister's fever, I had hidden nearby, crying for hours. I was certain the woman would take one look at me, know that her poison had failed, and finish the job then and there.

Of course, she had not. She had merely beckoned me from the shadows, coaxing me with a bit of honeycomb dripping with golden honey—a rare treat I could not resist. When at last I believed she would not harm me, I had managed

to stutter out what I had come for, which she gave to me and then sent me on my way. I had believed that she did not recognize me, and so my fear had left me.

But clearly I had been wrong, for it was she who came for me years later and whisked me away to my new life.

When I reach the small, squat cottage surrounded by a riotous garden, I dismount, tie the horse to the fence post, then open the gate. A merry little bell sounds, making me jump. I weave my way through the hawthorn hedge and the waist-high bushes of lavender until I reach the front door. It opens before I can knock and the herbwitch herself peers up at me through her rheumy eyes. “Still hovering, after all these years?” she asks. “Come in before you let all the warm air out.”

The cottage hasn’t changed much, nor has she. Her hair is still white, flyaway strands of thistledown; her eyes perhaps a bit more faded, her skin more wrinkled. Herbs hang from the ceiling, their sharp, peppery, sweet scents assailing my senses. Three small cauldrons bubble on the hearth, and all manner of clay beakers, pots, and copper dishes cover her tables. It is surprisingly similar to Sister Serafina’s workshop.

“What brings Death’s handmaiden to my humble door?” she asks, not looking the least bit humble. Mayhap she even gloats somewhat.

I open my mouth, then hesitate. It was she who sent me to the convent three years ago. Will she know that by seeking an antidote, I am going against their wishes? Will she care?

Ignoring my gaping silence, she begins to speak. “I always expected to see you again someday, wanting to know about your mother, no doubt.”

My mother. It is not until she says the word that I realize I am hungry for such knowledge. What had caused my mother to lie down with Death in the first place? Had she been forced? Or had He taken her by the hand and led her away from her harsh life for a few stolen moments of . . . what? Pleasure? Love? Respite? What could Death offer someone such as my mother? And if it had been love, why had my mother sought to expel me from her womb?

The old woman takes a seat near the fireplace and waves her gnarled hand for me to follow. “The first time I saw your mother was when your father—no, not your real father, but that lout she married—brought her to me. He marched her up to my doorstep, holding her arm so tight she had bruises for two weeks after. Gave her arnica root for that, by the bye.”

“And?”

She settles back into her chair, savoring her hungry audience. I do not imagine she gets one all that often. “And he demanded I do something to expel the babe in her womb.”

My mother hadn't wanted to get rid of me, then. It had not been her choice. Some great, dark weight lifts from me.

The herbwitch shrugs. "I thought about faking something, but he stood there and watched me mix the brew himself, asking after each thing I put in. I soon realized that if I gave him a false potion, he'd be back again, like as not. Best for everyone to get it over with as soon as possible.

"But in spite of my best efforts, it didn't work. That's when I knew you were god sired. Two weeks later, he was back pounding at my door, demanding another dose. But Matrona's curse is harsh and had already sickened your mother almost to the point of death. I told him I would not have the killing of her laid at my feet and that considering who her lover had been, he should think twice about inviting Him back." She turns her watery eyes from me to the fire, and I can see the flames reflected in them. "Your mother did all she could to protect you from that man's wrath. Reminded him often of who your true sire was. But even with that, you did not have a smooth time of it."

We are both quiet and stare into the flames, but we see very different things, no doubt. I struggle to adjust to the world re-formed. The knowledge that my mother had not hated me shifts everything. It is as if all my life I have been looking at the world through a pane of thick, distorted glass, and now that glass has shattered, and I can see clearly. "How did you come to find me the day"—I cannot bring myself to say *the day of my wedding*—"the day my father sold me to Guillo?"

"I had promised your mother I would try to keep an eye on you. Although it was unfair of her to ask, me being the only herbwitch for miles around and too busy besides. But I did what I could."

"It was you who had me sent to the convent."

"Aye."

"What is the convent to you?"

She turns her head sharply to me. "You think those nuns are the only ones who know Death? What do you think I do all day besides dance with Him, bartering for a life here, a few extra months there? Chasing Him from this old man's lungs or that young boy's fevered brain? No, the convent is not the only one to partner with Death."

That the dance goes two ways is not something I have ever considered. "So you are Death's handmaiden too," I murmur.

She looks surprised, then cackles in delight. "Aye," she says, sitting up somewhat straighter. "I guess I am at that."

"But you do not serve the convent?" I ask, just to be certain.

"No, but it was the only place I thought you'd be safe."

I weigh the risk carefully, but I do not have any choice. Wanting to avoid her sharp gaze, I study the back of my hands. “Do you have a bezoar stone?”

The herbwitch gives me a sly look. “Surely the convent has antidotes for their poisons.”

“We spent our energies creating poisons, not antidotes, and while we did have bezoar stones in case any of the girls ingested some, I do not have one with me now.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her frown. “So now you step outside the circle of the convent and begin your own dance with Death,” she says, and I curse her old eyes that see too much. She rocks back in her chair. “Alas, I have no such stone. Never seen one of them, truth be told.”

I ask her if she knows an antidote for Arduinna’s snare, but she has never heard of it. Furthermore, she has no antidotes at all for poisons absorbed through the skin, as purgatives do not work in those cases. My shoulders sag as my last hope crumbles to ash. Seeing my distress, the old woman pats me on the arm as she bids me goodbye. “It is a dark god you serve, daughter, but remember, He is not without mercy.”

As I travel back to Guérande, the herbwitch’s words roll around in my head like loose pebbles, clattering and bumping, shaping and smoothing. I walked into that cottage as one person but left as another. There is now a thin blanket between me and the harsh, cold abandonment I have felt ever since I was old enough to understand what my mother did to me in her belly.

My mind flows over old memories. With this new bit of knowledge, many of my mother’s small gestures and comforts are suddenly clear. They were expressions of the very love I thought she had denied me. They were not simply duties borne but small rebellions of her own as she thwarted her husband in the only way she could.

Even though one burden has been lifted, I return to the palace exhausted and defeated and out of ideas. I pray that I will not meet anyone on the way to my chambers, and I do not. Once I am in my room, I see a crow sitting outside the window. My heart clutches in my chest. My message of that morning cannot have reached the convent yet. Is it new orders from the abbess? A reprieve?

When I open the shutter, the crow flies in. He is a large fellow with a crooked left wing. Sybella’s crow. He is tame only for her, so it takes me a moment to wrest the message from his leg. When I do, I see that it is indeed Sybella’s writing, and I am filled with foreboding.

I tear the message open and read the words scrawled within.

Rieux and d'Albret have taken Nantes. They entered the city with men-at-arms, seized the duchess's palace, and manned the ramparts. We are besieged from within.

My heart ceases its racing and gives one slow, painful thud in my chest. The very men who are supposed to support and guide our duchess have risen up in open rebellion.

The implications of this are huge. Nantes was the duchess's fallback position, the biggest, most fortified city in Brittany. Her home. Indeed, she has only been waiting for the plague to leave the area so she could return.

But now it is taken from her. And without a sword raised or shot fired. The only piece of good news I can wrestle from the wreckage is that with Rieux removed to Nantes, there is no longer any doubt that Crunard must be the traitor.

Chapter Forty-Five

CRUNARD IS ALONE WHEN THE guard ushers me into his chambers. I drop a respectful curtsy. “My lord, I have received urgent news that I must give the duchess and request you accompany me, as she will need your guidance once she has learned what I have to tell her.” I had considered waiting to discuss the news with Duval before taking it to the duchess or her council, but I do not know how quickly we must act. Plus, it is hard to say what condition Duval will be in by this evening.

“Have you news of Duval?” Crunard asks sharply.

I meet his eyes steadily. “No, milord, I am afraid not.”

A spasm of irritation crosses his face. “Well, you have piqued my interest. Of course I will accompany you to the solar.”

“We should send for Captain Dunois to meet us there, my lord.”

Crunard raises one gray shaggy eyebrow but sends a page to fetch the captain of the armies.

Captain Dunois reaches the solar just as we do. The duchess takes one look at our grim faces and dismisses her ladies from the room. “What is it?” she asks, clasping her hands together, as if praying it will not be as bad as she fears.

Chancellor Crunard smiles wryly and shrugs. “It is not I who called this meeting but Demoiselle Rienne.”

Everyone’s eyes turn to me, and it is all I can do not to twitch and squirm out of my skin. I have been trained in subterfuge and concealment, not this standing out in the open like the town crier. To calm myself, I address my words to the duchess. “I have received grave news, Your Grace. I have learned that Marshal Rieux and Count d’Albret have taken Nantes.”

There is a moment of stunned silence, then Captain Dunois asks, “Are you certain?”

“How have you learned this?” Crunard asks, and I cannot help but wonder if he is behind this newest disaster.

“The ways of Mortain are both glorious and mysterious. I may not divulge how I know, but it has most definitely happened. If you do not believe me, send a scout to verify my claim.”

Crunard looks to Dunois, who gives a sharp nod. “Consider it done.”

“If it is so,” Crunard says, “this is well and truly a disaster.” He looks visibly shaken, so either he is a superb liar or this is not part of whatever game he is

playing.

“Marshal Rieux?” the duchess says to me, her brown eyes filled with distress. “Are you certain?” she whispers.

Meeting her gaze, I nod solemnly. The man who was appointed by her father to guard her has just betrayed her instead. She draws in a long, shaky breath, then asks, “What does this do to our position?”

Crunard and Dunois exchange a bleak look. “It is not good,” Captain Dunois says. “As marshal, he commands the troops. It will be hard to raise the barons to fight against him. If Marshal Rieux and d’Albret combine their troops, well, our only hope will be to hunker down and prepare for the coming siege.”

The duchess glances in alarm from Dunois to Crunard. “Not our only hope, surely?”

“I am afraid so, Your Grace,” the chancellor tells her, and even though he but agrees with Dunois, I find I cannot trust his counsel. “It is as Captain Dunois says; the marshal commands our troops. It will be hard to raise them against him. Indeed, it will be hard to raise them at all without his help.”

“What about Baron de Waroch?” It is only when everyone turns to stare at me that I realize I have spoken out loud. Flustered, I continue. “Did he not go through the countryside raising the peasants and farmers to revolt against the French in the Mad War? Why could he not do that again?”

Chancellor Crunard sends me a dismissive look. “It will take more than peasants and farmers to repel the French, demoiselle.”

“Ultimately, yes,” Captain Dunois says, his voice thoughtful. “But perhaps they can hold off the French forces long enough for help to arrive.”

“What help?” Crunard asks sharply.

That is when I realize that Duval—dear, ever-suspicious Duval—has told no one of the preparations he has been laboring over.

“Even as we speak,” the duchess says, “fifteen hundred troops are en route from Spain and another fifteen hundred from Navarre.”

Crunard is nonplussed, but hides it with a snort of derision. “That is too few.”

“But if combined with the peasantry,” Captain Dunois points out, “they may stand a chance.”

Hope shines in the duchess’s face. “Might this work?”

“A long shot, Your Grace, but within the realm of possibility,” Dunois tells her.

Crunard shakes his head. “I think it is but a dream, Your Grace.”

With my new suspicions filling my head, it is all I can do to keep from shouting that whatever Crunard counsels, we must do the opposite. I am saved

from such drastic measures when the duchess puts her hands to her head as if it aches. “Enough. I will think on this and we will meet again tomorrow morning.”

As we all file out of the solar, the duchess catches my eye. I nod, letting her know I will discuss this with Duval before then.

I spend the evening pacing, turning every possible idea over in my mind, looking for any small opening or crack in the walls that hem our duchess in as surely as any dungeon. But there are none. None that I can find. And it was clear in today’s meeting that none of the duchess’s other councilors can think outside the well-plowed furrows of their own thoughts.

There is a scrape at the wall behind me and I turn around to see Duval lurch out of the passageway. His hair is mussed, his face is covered in dark stubble, his eyes are wild. “My lord!” I hurry toward him, afraid he will fall to the floor. “What has happened?”

“Nothing, dear Ismae.” He waves his hand in a wild, expansive gesture, then stumbles. My heart sinks as I help him into a chair. Alarm inches along my skin. His symptoms are worse, which means he must have come in further contact with the poison. If it is not removed from his body, he will surely die.

Once in the chair, he leans forward and puts his face in his hands. “My head feels as if it is spinning on a wheel.”

“’Tis one of the effects of the poison, my lord.”

He glances up at me with a heartbreakingly confused look. “Poison?”

Not his memory. Sweet Mortain, not that. I kneel at his feet and put my face close to his. “Remember? We talked of this last night? You are being poisoned.”

He grabs my hands in his as if they are a lifeline that will lead him back to sanity. In a moment his face clears as the memory comes to him, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Do you remember what else we talked of?”

His grip tightens. “Yes. Of course.”

I pull the tray of food close to him. “Are you hungry? You should eat.”

He pushes it away. “I have no appetite.”

I shove the tray back. “You must eat. Your body and your mind need food, my lord. You must stay strong in order to fight the effects of the poison.” Indeed, he has grown thin from his days in the tunnels. To appease me, he takes the cup of tepid broth I hand him and fiddles with a wedge of cheese. I do not tell him of the latest news until he is done eating, not wanting to risk destroying his already diminished appetite.

Once he has finished, however, I can put it off no longer. “I have much news, and none of it good.” Duval leans back slightly in his chair, as if bracing himself

for a physical blow. “Nantes has been taken by Marshal Rieux and Lord d’Albret.”

“Taken?”

I nod, then tell him of the message I received. Fury and frustration spur him out of his chair, but he stumbles. He looks down and scowls at his feet. “What did the Privy Council recommend?” he asks.

“Dunois and Crunard think we should close the city gates and ready ourselves for a siege.”

“They are mistaken,” he says. “Guérande will not withstand a siege for long.”

“Dunois hopes the troops from Spain and Navarre will arrive in time.”

He is silent a long moment. “Ismae, I’m sorry . . .”

“No, my lord. You were right to keep your own counsel. I do not fault you for it. Besides, there is more bad news you must hear. I believe it is Crunard who has been working secretly against the duchess all this time. I do not think he can be trusted.”

Duval looks at me as if I am the one who flirts with madness. “The chancellor? But why, and to what purpose? The man is a hero who has fought in three wars and lost all four of his sons to the cause. He and the late duke were the closest of friends. Why would he do something that would render all of their sacrifice for naught?”

“I do not yet understand the why of it, but look at the evidence. He was one of the very few who knew to send enough footpads to attack us when we first came to Guérande. It was also just after he arrived that the sole remaining assailant disappeared.” I fold my arms in front of me to keep from wringing my hands. “Furthermore, it is my own poison being used on you, and Crunard is the only one who has had access to it.”

Duval blinks, as if my arguments are finally reaching him. Then he shakes his head, trying to clear it, and rubs his hands over his face. “But look how he has supported Anne all this time! Backed her refusal of d’Albret, voted for the alliance with Nemours. I cannot see what purpose lies behind his actions.”

Frustration bubbles through me and I cannot tell if my own logic is flawed or if Duval’s mind is too far gone. “My lord, he told the convent that you were involved in your mother’s plot of treason—that you were a traitor.”

His head snaps up and a bewildered look crosses his face. “He did?”

“Aye.”

“Then why did they not order my execution?”

I say nothing, but his addled wits are not *that* far gone. “Oh.” He looks down. “Is that why my feet are numb?”

“No, my lord. I swear it. I have ignored their order. Here, you need rest.” I jump up to catch him as he stands and sways. He sags against me and I propel him to my bed. Louyse has already turned back the covers, so I lay him down in my place. Propping his legs on the bed, I yank off his boots and, after checking them one more time for traces of poison, let them drop to the floor. Then I swing his legs under the rich, thick quilts. He tries to push up on his elbows to argue with me, but I place my hand gently on his chest and push him back down. It takes frighteningly little effort. His eyes flutter shut, and my heart leaps into my mouth. I lean in close to check his breathing.

“Are you trying to steal my breath?” Duval asks.

“No, milord. Only trying to—”

“Kiss me?” The yearning in his voice shakes me to the core.

“Yes, my lord. That is it.” And I lean in and kiss him, a long, slow kiss, as if I would drink the poison from his body. His eyes close again, and his breathing grows steadier. The lines of tension ease somewhat, but not altogether. The shadows under his eyes are darker; his cheeks are more gaunt. He is in need of a shave, and the color is high in his cheeks. My heart is so full—full of love and full of sorrow—that I fear it will burst.

His hand twitches and spasms, so I reach out and cover it with my own. He grows still then, and turns his hand up so that our palms are touching, our fingers linked. “Don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” I tell him. *Nor you either*, I long to say, to make him promise not to die. But I cannot insist he make a promise he cannot keep. Instead, I lower myself to the floor and keep watch over him through the night.

I awake to a faint kiss on the back of my hand. I open my eyes to find Duval’s head propped on his hand as he watches me. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I mumble, embarrassed. I try to disengage our tangled fingers, but he holds on long enough to give one last squeeze, then lets go.

I rise to my feet and try to ignore the various aches and pains from sleeping in such a cramped position. As I smooth my skirts and try to regain my composure, Duval gets up from the bed and crosses to the ewer and basin, where he splashes cold water on his face. His legs are steadier than they were yesterday, and I can only hope this is a sign that a decent night’s rest has done him some good. When he turns around, beads of water still dripping from his face, I see that his eyes have cleared somewhat.

I hand him a linen towel. As he dries himself, I move to the tray of food. “You really should try to eat some more before you go.”

“I will.” He puts the towel down and comes to grab a wedge of cheese from the tray. He looks to the window to check how close to dawn it is.

Very close.

As he stuffs his pockets with the rest of the food, I frown in puzzlement. He appears much better this morning. Surely that is a hopeful sign.

When his pockets are full, he comes and puts his hands on my shoulders, his eyes alight with urgency. “They must get Anne to Rennes. Guérande is not strong enough to withstand a long siege, but the citizens of Rennes will rally around her, and the town has the means to defend itself. It is the best place for her until help arrives. Convince them, Ismae.”

“I will try, my lord.”

“And beware of denouncing Crunard in front of the others. They have known him far longer than you and will be more likely to side with him should it come to that. You will need solid proof to convince them of your accusations.”

There is a sound outside my door. Louyse. He brushes a quick kiss on the top of my head, then disappears into the passage in the wall. A moment later, Louyse bustles into the room, full of her usual morning cheer. She pauses briefly and looks confused when she sees I am wearing my cloak over my night shift. I rub my arms and give a little shiver. “It is cold this morning.”

“That it is, demoiselle!” As she sets out my clothes, a plan forms in my mind. The remaining members of the Privy Council will be meeting first thing this morning. It will be the perfect time for me to search Crunard’s chamber. Surely I can find something that will convince the others of his guilt.

Chapter Forty-Six

WHEN I ARRIVE AT CRUNARD'S chambers, the door is closed and there is no guard posted. I knock and call out, "Chancellor Crunard?" There is no answer. I glance down the hall in both directions. It is clear. Indeed, the palace is very quiet today, and I wonder how many courtiers have heard what has happened in Nantes. Assured that there is no one to see, I try the door. It is locked, but that does not stop me.

I slip one of the needle-thin daggers from my wrist and slip the tip inside the lock, as Sister Eonette showed us. I gently press against the metal insides, nudging the iron to do what I want. When I hear a satisfying click, I straighten, check for witnesses, then slip silently into Chancellor Crunard's office.

I do not know how much time I have, nor do I know what I am looking for. Something—anything—that will confirm my suspicions.

The papers on his desk are what I expect: correspondence with the barons, maps of Brittany and France, everything that a chancellor needs to perform his duties. I open the cupboard that sits behind his desk and quickly rifle through the pages of the books stored there, but none of them hold hidden letters or carved-out compartments. Nor is there any damning correspondence rolled in along with the rest of the maps. It would help if I knew what I was looking for.

Frustrated, I turn back to his desk, my eyes landing on his writing box. When I try to open it, I find it locked. Why would he lock away his writing supplies?

My pulse quickens as I take out my dagger once more and work the lock. This one is smaller—and trickier—than the door's, but in the end it gives way. I lift the wooden lid and peer inside. Quills, ink pots, a small paring knife, red sealing wax, a heavy gold signet ring—

I pick up the ring and examine it carefully. Crunard wears so very many rings, why would he lock this one away? Something about it niggles at the back of my mind. It takes a moment for me to recognize it.

It is the very ring I glimpsed when Martel's soul passed through me. Which means . . . what?

That the French spy Martel had seen Crunard's ring, whether it was on the chancellor's finger when they met face to face or it was sent to him with some lesser courier. If it was sent as a sign, then Martel knew to trust Crunard.

It is not Duval who has been working with the French regent but Crunard.

I close my hand around the heavy gold ring, savoring the solid feel of actual

evidence in my hand. But the only one who would give weight to this proof is the abbess, and even that is doubtful. None of the remaining Privy Council will understand how I know this; they will not favor my word over Crunard's.

Even so, I slip the ring in my pocket. Surely flimsy evidence is better than no evidence at all.

Because I am late for the Privy Council meeting, I must suffer a scowl of disapproval from Crunard, but I smile coolly at him. Now that I know he is a traitor, I do not care what he thinks of me.

Neither Dunois nor Crunard has changed his mind during the night. As they run through their reasoning for the duchess, I study Crunard carefully, looking for any sign of a marque, but his bedamned fur collar comes up to his ears and hides any marque he might bear.

“What counsel do you have for us this morning, demoiselle?”

I blink and find the duchess looking at me politely. Crunard, too, is watching me with his cold blue eyes and I realize I must play this very carefully. “Would it not be better to use this moment of time before all our enemies descend on us to get you to a more secure location? Rennes, perhaps? The people there are loyal. They have a defensible position and the troops to defend it, as well as a bishop who can see you safely crowned duchess.”

Crunard regards me, his face carefully blank. “What makes you think that Rennes is so very loyal, demoiselle?” There is a challenging tone in his voice, and I fear I have said too much or said it too baldly and have made Duval's hand in the strategy clear to him.

I meet his gaze. “The convent has always thought highly of them, my lord chancellor.” There. Let him make of that what he will.

“That is not a bad idea,” Captain Dunois says thoughtfully.

Chancellor Crunard opens his mouth to argue, which makes me favor the idea all the more. But before he can begin his arguments, there is a knock on the door. “Yes?” he calls out, making no attempt to hide his annoyance.

De Lornay opens the door, bows low, then comes into the room. All signs of the seductive courtier are gone; he is sweat stained and travel weary. He falls to one knee before the duchess and lowers his head. “Your Grace. I beg forgiveness for interrupting your meeting, but I bring grave news that cannot wait.”

The duchess's face pales. “Go on.”

“The French have taken Guingamp in the north. The city has fallen.”

Behind me, Captain Dunois swears under his breath, but de Lornay continues. “That is not the worst of it. The French army has crossed our northern and

eastern borders as well. They have taken three of our cities, Ancenis, Vitré, and Fougères.”

Even though we have all been awaiting this news, it is different to actually hear it. There is a long, stunned silence as we realize our country has once again been invaded. The duchess is white as snow, but she gracefully inclines her head. “Thank you for bringing us word of these events, Baron de Lornay. Pray go refresh yourself.”

He rises to his feet and leaves the room.

Crunard speaks first. “It seems we are suddenly out of time.”

The duchess looks up at Captain Dunois, her eyes wide with fear she is trying so desperately to hide. “How long can we withstand a siege if it comes to that?”

“Three weeks, four at the most.”

“Is that long enough for any of the help on the way to reach us?”

“No. It is not,” he says, his voice heavy with defeat.

She gives a sharp nod. “So staying here buys us nothing, not even enough time.”

Captain Dunois starts to speak, but she silences him. “How long would it take us to reach Rennes from here?”

“Four or five days, Your Grace.”

“At best,” Chancellor Crunard points out. “We will be greatly hampered by the baggage carts and household that cannot travel by horse. Our party will be stretched out for half a mile, a ripe target for all our enemies.”

Captain Dunois nods, conceding the point. “Besides, Rennes is close to Fougères. The French could easily cut us off and might even now be marching on the city. However, these bad tidings also bring a small gift.”

The duchess frowns. “How is that, Captain?”

He spreads his hands. “Ancenis is Marshal Rieux’s own holding. If the French have seized his lands, what better rallying cry to call him back to our side? Surely he will wish to put aside this petty alliance with d’Albret in order to protect his own lands.”

A small ray of hope appears on the duchess’s face, but Crunard stares at him stonily. “Do you mean reconcile with Marshal Rieux?”

Dunois nods.

“Do you think that is possible?” the duchess asks.

Dunois shrugs. “He is a good man at heart, Your Grace, and no doubt thinks he is doing what’s best for his country.”

“By holding my own city against me?” the duchess asks tartly.

“By allying with the strongest of your suitors. However, now that the French are on the march, he will no doubt see the need to face them with a united front

and will abandon this path he has taken.”

Her face creased in thought, the duchess begins to pace. “How would we do this?”

“We would take a small party and ride for Nantes to parley with him.”

Crunard takes a step toward the duchess. “I do not think it is safe for you to leave the city, Your Grace.”

She glances at Captain Dunois, her arched brows raised in question.

“I think it is worth considering,” he says. “Whatever Rieux may hope to get from this rebellion of his, he will not want it at the cost of his own holding.”

The chancellor sighs heavily, as if deeply worried. “I think you are making a terrible mistake.”

But his is only one vote among three and he is overruled by both Captain Dunois and the duchess herself. And so it is decided. The duchess and her small party will ride for Nantes tomorrow.

Chapter Forty-Seven

DUVAL IS LATE. EITHER THAT OR he is not coming. I pace in front of the fire and try not to fret, but the most likely explanation is that he has become too ill to move. That he is huddled in some corner on the verge of death.

This idea so distresses me that I grab my cloak and head for the door. If the hidden tunnels and corridors run the full breadth and depth of the castle, I will need help searching them. Besides, I will not be able to carry him back by myself.

The sergeant at arms will not let me into the garrison, but he sends a lackey to fetch Beast for me. A short while later, he and de Lornay arrive. I have caught them dicing. De Lornay still holds a pair in his hand and is rubbing them together cheerfully. When they see it is me, the casual smiles and laughter drop from their faces and they hurry forward. “What is it?” Beast asks.

I glance at the nearby sergeant at arms, and Beast takes my elbow and moves us outside. When we are standing in the middle of the training yard, far from any corners or doorways that might conceal an eavesdropper, de Lornay asks, “Has something happened to Duval?”

“He was supposed to come to my room tonight and he has not. He has told you where he is staying, yes?”

Beast nods slowly.

“Well, I fear he is lying somewhere in there. Have you seen him in the last few days? He is very ill. He—” My throat grows so tight that it is hard to get the words out. In the end, I cannot tell them I am afraid Duval is dying but say instead, “I fear he is too weak to move.”

De Lornay’s whole manner changes and his gaze sharpens. “It is not my doing,” I tell him, but I do not think he believes me.

“We will help,” Beast says before de Lornay and I can come to blows. “Show us.”

The hour is late and the court subdued, so there are few people about to see us. When we reach Duval’s apartments, I hesitate. It would not do for loyal Louyse to see me leading two men into my bedchamber. She would never forgive such a betrayal of her master.

But there is no one in the main chamber, so I motion to Beast and de Lornay and they move through the room, silent as shadows. When we reach my

chamber, Duval is still not there. “The door he uses is here,” I say, showing them the wall by the fireplace. “But I do not know the mechanism that opens it.”

Neither, apparently, do they, for they poke and grunt and prod at the wall for long frustrating minutes until finally there is a solid thunk, and then the wall gives way. Beast puts his shoulder to it and shoves. Cool, dank air wafts into the room. “We’ll need light,” de Lornay says.

I hurry to the table and use the lone candle burning there to light three more tapers. I hand one to de Lornay, another to Beast. They glance at the candle I clutch in my own hand but do not try to keep me from coming.

The blackness inside the corridors is absolute, and the faint glow from my room is swallowed up in a matter of seconds. There are no windows, no doors, no openings of any kind. Just thick gray stone pressing down on us from all sides. It reminds me of the crypt at the convent, and I do not know how Duval has stood it all this time.

The main corridor branches off in many directions. Carefully and methodically we explore each one. It is slow going in the dark, with few landmarks to guide us. We do not dare call out his name for fear of being heard in the bedrooms and chambers on the other side of the walls.

The corridor twists and turns like a writhing serpent, and just when I fear we will never be able to find our way back, there is an “Oof” from Beast, followed by a voice in the darkness: “I think I would rather die of the poison than be trampled by a great oaf like you.”

“Duval!” My breath hitches in my throat and I dart around de Lornay and Beast. Duval leans against the stone wall, his face alarmingly pale. “You are alive,” I say, and do not add, *but barely*. It is as witless as anything I have ever uttered, but relief sings so sharply in my veins it has chased away my wits.

“Alive,” he says, then grimaces. “But unable to move my legs.”

I turn my gaze to his lifeless legs so he cannot see my face. The poison has seeped further into his body and has begun paralyzing his limbs. Surely, his lungs and heart will soon follow.

Beast shoulders past me, shaking his head and *tsking* like a nursemaid. “Never could hold your drink.” De Lornay goes to the other side of Duval and I see they mean to haul him to his feet and carry him. I know he would not want me to watch, so I take the men’s candles from them and turn back toward the corridor, ready to light the way once they have a solid hold on him.

I use the moment to compose myself. Why have I not heard from Annith? Could it be that the abbess has intercepted my note? Or is my request so contrary to the teachings of the convent that Annith will not honor it? A note of hysterical

laughter comes close to escaping. I, a mistress of poison, am willing to trade my soul for an antidote, if only I could find one.

Now that we have located Duval, I find the passageway does not seem so impossibly long or hopelessly dark. In a matter of minutes we are back in my chamber. I set the candles down and busy myself with stoking the fire, giving Beast and de Lornay a chance to settle Duval on the bed.

The men murmur softly among themselves as I take a pot of broth from the hearth. I am close to throwing myself on Duval's ruined body and weeping. Instead, I square my shoulders, put the warm broth on a tray, and carry it to the bed. "There is much news," I tell him.

He tries to push the tray away, but I glare at him. "And I will not tell you a word of it unless you eat something."

He exchanges a glance with Beast, and in that glance I see he thinks it a pointless exercise. He accepts that he is dying. Not only accepts it, but prefers it. He does not want to be carried like a scarecrow for the rest of his days. But *I* do not accept it, so I hand him the spoon.

"Tell me," he says, lifting it to his mouth.

"The French have crossed the border into Brittany and taken Ancenis, Fougères, and Vitré."

The spoon stops in midair. "Marshal Rieux's own holding?"

"Aye," I say.

Off to my side, Beast whistles.

"Keep eating." When he puts another spoonful of broth into his mouth, I continue. "Captain Dunois thinks we have a chance of using this to reconcile with Marshal Rieux."

"She must not reconcile with Rieux," Duval says, his voice fierce. "She must demand that he come to her to beg forgiveness; she must not go to him."

I cannot help but wonder if this is the poison talking, for surely the duchess is in no position to demand anything. "As much as I detest Marshal Rieux and what he has done, if there is a chance to reclaim an ally, mustn't she at least consider it?"

"How do they propose to effect this reconciliation?" he asks.

"They will ride to Nantes and attempt to persuade him to return to Anne's side so he can lead her armies against the French."

"What does Crunard say?" Duval asks around a bite of bread.

"He wants to keep her safe in Guérande, but Dunois and the duchess overruled him."

"When do they leave?"

“At daybreak tomorrow,” I tell him. “They want to get under way before word of their plan leaks to Nantes or the French regent.”

Duval swears a black oath. “Do they not realize they are most likely riding directly into a trap?”

“Not to mention that the French are inside our border, and there is no way of knowing how many scouts or sorties they have sent out,” Beast adds. “How large a company will they be taking?”

“A small one. Not more than twenty.”

“Easily overpowered by a large scouting party then,” Beast says.

Duval drops his head back against the wall in frustration. The loud thud makes me wince but he barely even registers the blow. “By the Five Wounds of Christ, this is a wretched time to be poisoned.”

“Poison!” De Lornay’s fist clenches around the dice he has been fidgeting with and he takes a step toward me. But it is Beast’s reaction that cuts me to the quick. He lifts his great head and looks at me with wounded eyes, as if I have betrayed him as well as Duval.

“It is not by my hand,” I snap. When they say nothing, I grow agitated. “Think! Would I have fetched the two of you if I wanted him to die?”

That seems to convince them somewhat, although de Lornay keeps casting dark, sullen glances toward me as I carry the empty tray back to the table by the fire. Behind me, Duval starts to put together a plan. “Beast, de Lornay, when you leave here tonight, go to Dunois. Tell him you want to be in that party that leaves for Nantes. Do not let him refuse you. Ismae!” he calls out.

I stop what I am doing and turn to face the bed.

“I want you to go as well. Attach yourself to the duchess as if you were her shield, for in truth, you may be. Do not leave her side.”

My hands grip my skirt and I hurry back to him. “My lord, that is not what my convent has ordered.” I do not let myself think on what my convent actually wants me to do. The herbwitch’s words rise up in mind and I cannot tell if they are meant to taunt or comfort: *It is a dark god you serve, daughter, but remember, He is not without mercy.* Is this His mercy, then? That I will not have to slay Duval with my own hand because he is already dying from poison? A dark god indeed.

“Perhaps not,” he says, “but surely it is what they would want you to do if they knew of her plans.” When I do not speak, he turns to Beast. “Make her go with you. No matter how sick I am or what Crunard or Dunois say, make sure she rides out with you. Carry her if you have to. Swear it.”

“I swear it.” Beast’s deep voice rumbles through the room.

Duval turns to me, his voice more gentle now. "This is what I have worked for my entire life, Ismae, the duchess's safety. I cannot finish this task, so I ask that you do it for me."

And of course I cannot say no. Not to his dying wish. "Very well," I whisper.

A faint tremor shudders through Duval's body, as if it is only his determination to make these last arrangements for his sister that has kept him going. Our eyes meet. "Thank you."

When Beast and de Lornay take their leave, Duval leans back against the pillows, his face taking on a grayish pallor. I have spent the day longing to share my news of Crunard's signet ring with him, but he is so ill, I do not have the heart to add to his cares. "You really must sleep, my lord. You can give us more instructions when you wake up."

He says something I cannot make out. "What?" I ask, coming closer to the bed.

"If," he says. "*If* I wake up."

I reach down to caress his cheek, his week-old whiskers rough and scratchy against my palm. He is burning as if with fever.

"Do not cry," he says.

I scrub at my face with my free hand. "I am not crying, my lord."

"Lie with me," he says, and I do not know if he means to lie next to him on the bed or rather to lie with him as a woman lies with a man. "They say it is the most glorious way to die, lying with Death's handmaiden."

There is a hint of the old Duval in his smile and it fair breaks my heart all over again. I want to tell him he is not dying, but my throat is so tight with grief I cannot force the words out. Even if I could, he would surely know it as a lie. I kneel beside the bed. "My lord," I whisper, "you are too ill."

He falls silent then, and regret pierces me so sharply it is all I can do not to cry out.

Too late, too late. Everything is too late. I want to raise my voice and shout and rant at all the gods and saints in the heavens. Instead, I step out of my gown and let it puddle on the floor. I remove the sheaths at my wrists, then the one at my ankle. When I am left in nothing but my shift, I lift the bedcovers and climb into bed beside him.

His arms are waiting, and as I slip into them, the rest of the world falls away. The skin and muscle in his arms twitch and spasm, damaged as they are by the poison, but he pulls me close until my head is on his shoulder and our chests are touching through the thin linen of my shift.

His heart beats impossibly fast, as if he has just run some great race. Wishing I could slow his heart by my touch, I place my hand on his chest, the ridges and

bumps of his scars rough beneath my fingers. He smiles and captures my hand. He tries to bring it to his lips, but his grip is too weak and he drops it. I snuggle up against him, my arms draped around his neck and shoulders, determined to stay as close to him as humanly possible.

It is all that we have left to us. And while it is more than I ever dared dream, it is nowhere near enough.

Chapter Forty-Eight

I DO NOT SLEEP AT all that night, afraid to lose one single moment I have left with Duval. Just before dawn I peel myself away from him, one small inch at a time, so that he does not wake. I hold my breath as I put my full weight onto the mattress, afraid the shifting movement will disturb him, but it does not. Indeed, he is sleeping deeply, his breathing shallow. His pulse beats in his throat, thin and thready. Truly, this is a small mercy that my god has granted me. I do not have to even raise my hand and Duval will be dead by nightfall.

Perhaps Mortain knew I could not kill him even if he bore the marque. I cannot kill the only man I have found it in my heart to love.

And no matter how much I long to stay by his side, I have promised all my choices away; to the convent, to the duchess, to Duval himself. I am caught in a web of my own making, my crisscrossing promises ensnaring me as neatly as any trap. Only duty, which once held such joy for me, is left. It is as sharp and bitter in my mouth as bile.

I am dressed and ready before Beast comes to collect me. I have no wish to be dragged from the bedside and have no doubt that Beast will do exactly as he promised. Leaving Duval is as painful as cutting out my own heart and giving it to the crows to feed on. I do not look at Beast when he arrives. I do not dare meet his eye, for if I see one drop of sympathy there, I fear I will splinter into a thousand pieces like shattering crystal.

While Duval has not been seen around the palace for the last few days, it is only the duchess and the Privy Council who know he has gone into hiding. With the rest of us en route to Nantes, he should be safe enough in my chamber. My eyes are dry as bone, my face as still as the cold marble floor beneath my feet as I move through the palace in a daze. Beast sends me a number of worried glances, small flickers of concern that prick against my skin. I barely register their existence.

How much has Duval told Beast? I wonder. Will he believe me if I confide my suspicions of Crunard to him? In the end, I decide it is worth the risk. If something happens to me, no one will know where the true danger lies. "We cannot trust Crunard," I say without looking at him.

His head does not move, but I feel his eyes swivel in my direction. "In what way, demoiselle?"

"I believe it is he who is poisoning Duval, and that he is behind much of the

misfortune that has befallen the duchess. I fear he is in league with the French regent.”

He is quiet a long moment, then asks the same question Duval did. “To what purpose?”

“I do not understand the why of it, I know only that his actions point to his guilt, and I want someone other than myself to have this information. Mayhap you can help keep a close eye on him on the trip to Nantes.”

Beast turns and looks at me fully then. “He is not going with us.”

I stop walking. “What?” Apprehension makes my voice sharp.

“Isabeau is too ill to travel, and the duchess was reluctant to leave her side. Crunard offered to stay with her.”

“Duval!” I turn to head back to him, but Beast grabs my arm.

“There is little more Crunard can do to Duval,” he says gently, and I remember his promise to carry me if need be.

After a long moment of weighing my options, I nod, and he releases my arm. We continue walking. “Do you think Isabeau will be safe?” I ask.

Beast scowls. “I cannot believe he would harm a poor, sick child.”

I can only hope he is right. Trying to see to Isabeau’s safety is yet one more thing that is at odds with my promise to Duval.

In the courtyard, a score of men-at-arms are mounted. Four horses wait beside them. Crunard is there but dressed in his robes of office rather than for travel. “The duchess was not comfortable leaving Isabeau on her own, and my age will only slow down your progress,” he explains, which is in itself suspicious, for he owes me no explanations. I cannot help but wonder what he gains by staying. No matter how I poke and prod the question, I can find no answer.

“We will miss your wisdom and counsel on the road, Chancellor Crunard,” I say sweetly. “I’m sure Isabeau will be glad of your company.”

“It will be poor comfort while her sister is gone. But it is some small way I can assist.”

Beast helps me mount my horse, then climbs into his own saddle. The duchess will ride perched in front of Captain Dunois, his thick, sturdy arms keeping her safe as he guides the horse.

As we ride out of the courtyard, I keep my face forward, afraid to look back at Crunard lest something in my expression gives me away. When I hear the gates of the city clang closed behind us, I finally dare to look over my shoulder. Crunard has climbed up on the ramparts to watch us depart. Across the distance, our eyes meet.

“Demoiselle? Are you all right?” I turn to find that Captain Dunois and the duchess have pulled up alongside my horse. The duchess’s eyes are upon me,

such a deep liquid brown and so very young. I wonder how I can tell her that she and I have just left the two people we care most about with yet another traitor. Coward that I am, I cannot. I have no proof with which to convince them. And even if Dunois believed me, what action could he take? Since I do not know Crunard's purpose, I cannot be sure he wouldn't slaughter us while we stood arguing the issue. Besides, I am hemmed in by my promise to Duval: to get the duchess to safety. If I tell her of my suspicions, she will surely not leave Isabeau. "I am fine, Your Grace. Merely pondering what awaits us at the end of this journey."

She wrinkles her brow. "Nothing pleasant, that is certain."

"As you say, Your Grace."

She looks inclined to linger and I feel something stir in my chest, some small bird of panic that threatens to take flight. I cannot keep up this masquerade all morning if she chooses to ride beside me.

Captain Dunois sends me a sympathetic glance and makes some excuse to ride ahead. As they draw away, Beast moves to my side and hovers there, as if he is afraid I might even now turn and gallop back to the palace. "Leave," I tell him sharply. "I will not forget my promise."

This seems to satisfy him. He turns and gallops to his place at the back of the party, and I am left alone.

Chapter Forty-Nine

WE ARE TWO DAYS ON the road, a somber, cheerless troop, each of us lost in misery—except perhaps for Beast, who wears a faint maniacal grin the entire time. When I ask him why, he says he is imagining what he will do when he gets his hands on those who have betrayed the duchess. For the first time, I glimpse the brutal, savage part of him that earned him the name Beast, and it is fearsome.

Every time I consider telling Captain Dunois of my suspicions regarding Crunard's treachery, he is busy giving orders, seeing to the duchess's safety, or consulting with his scouts. There is no moment in which he is not rushed and pressed for time, no moment for him to quietly hear my arguments and give me a chance to convince him, so I keep silent.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, we reach the village of Paquelaie. These winter days are short, and we make it to the village just as darkness overtakes us. Dunois leads us to a stone hunting lodge that had belonged to the late duke, stopping only long enough to dispatch a spare soldier to fetch a village woman to cook for us.

Even though we are a small party, it takes a fair while to get all the soldiers quartered and the duchess comfortable in her rooms. As I am the only other woman in the party, I find myself attending upon her.

She is tired and pale, not being used to riding for so hard or so long, but her face has a determined set to it. There are no servants, so Dunois assigns the soldiers to bring hot water up to her room.

We do not speak much as I assist her in her evening toilette, for I am afraid if I open my mouth all the secrets I am holding will spill out. After she has washed away the two days' travel, a simple meal is sent up. I keep her company while she picks at her food, then I help her into her bed, and she dismisses me for the night. But my time with her has brought all my secrets swarming to the surface. I must now do my best to convince Captain Dunois of my suspicions.

I find him in the great hall with Beast and de Lornay finishing off the remnants of a meal. The men look up from the demolished duck and capon. "We assumed you would dine with the duchess," Captain Dunois says sheepishly.

I nod. Let him think I ate upstairs with her. It matters not, for I have no appetite and am not sure I could choke down a single bite. "I must talk with you."

Dunois glances at Beast and de Lornay. "Alone?"

“No, they know some of it already.” I slip my hand into my pocket and close it around the heavy gold signet ring. “I believe Chancellor Crunard has betrayed us all.”

“Crunard?” His eyes widen with astonishment and disbelief, but I am relieved he does not dismiss me out of hand.

“Yes, my lord. It is a long and complicated story, one that Duval did not think you would accept without proof.”

“You have this proof?”

“Of a sort.” I have had two days on the road to arrange my thoughts into some semblance of order, so I am sorely frustrated to find myself groping for words. “I first grew uneasy about him when you told us of the chancellor not better defending Duval on the night the council discussed his arrest, for the chancellor was behind much of Duval’s actions. I grew even more suspicious when I received word from my convent that Crunard had told them Duval was involved in his mother’s plots, as that was blatantly false.”

Dunois’s thick brows draw down in a scowl. “The chancellor told them that?”

“Yes, but there is more.” I spend the next hour laying out all my evidence against Chancellor Crunard: the footpad attack on us, the signet ring, the death of Nemours, and the outright lies he told the convent.

When I am done, Dunois sits silent and brooding for a long time. At last he shakes his head. “While I can see how your reasoning has led you to believe this, I cannot help but feel there is some other explanation we are missing.”

“But what of the signet ring? Surely that is proof.”

Dunois rises to his feet. “It is strange, I’ll grant you that, but proof of treason? And on such a grand scale?” He shakes his head again. “I cannot bring myself to believe that of the chancellor. What does Duval think?”

“Duval’s mind was too consumed by the poison Crunard has given him to use reason.”

His head snaps up at this. “Poison? Duval is being poisoned?”

“Yes, my lord. Yet another betrayal to lay at the chancellor’s feet.”

His face turns to chalk. “I thought he had merely gone into hiding.”

“It is quite advanced,” I tell him gently. “He cannot move his legs. The paralysis will move to his lungs next, then his heart. Perhaps it already has.”

The silence is filled with the crackle and hiss of the fire.

“Sweet Jesu!” Dunois says, scrubbing his face with his hands. “If what you are saying is true, we cannot return to Guérande should this gambit fail. And Isabeau . . .” He looks up at me, his face haunted.

“You make certain this gambit does not fail,” I tell him. “I will think of something to free Isabeau once we have finished here.”

Chapter Fifty

THE NEXT DAY IS SUNDAY, and the duchess spends the morning in prayer, but I am far too restless for such pursuits. I cross to the window and stare out at the rich woodland that surrounds the hunting lodge, wondering if my letter has reached the convent and, if it has, if the abbess believes me. I wish bitterly that Annith had written to me before I left. Even if she has learned the answers I seek, Vanth will never find me here.

Like a tongue poking at a painful tooth, my mind goes back to Duval. At our parting—should I have done something different? And what of Crunard? He has always been suspicious of Duval’s disappearance. Will he come looking for him once I am gone?

Or perhaps Duval will die of the poison before Crunard finds him.

That thought is like pouring salt into a fresh wound and prods me to grab my cloak and go outside. Le Palais is on a ridge that overlooks the Loire River and the valley below. The chill wind whips at my hair and tugs at my cloak as I stare down at the city ramparts. What are those traitors plotting? I do not trust them, and I do not like Anne being this close to whatever they have planned.

I hear a step behind me, and I turn to find the duchess bundled up in her ermine-lined cloak, picking her way along the path. “Shouldn’t you be resting, Your Grace?”

“I cannot. My mind will not hold still.” She comes to stand next to me and together we stare down into the valley, to the imposing high walls of Nantes and the blue and yellow banners flying from the ramparts.

“I was born there, you know,” the duchess says. “The night I came into this world, my father carried me to those very ramparts and held me aloft so I could behold my kingdom and so his subjects could behold their next ruler.” She sounds bemused, as if she cannot quite understand how she came to be here while her enemies are there.

“That gate,” she says. “See? That far one? That is the very gate through which Duval carried Isabeau and me to safety nearly eight years ago.” Her voice catches in her throat. “I wish he were here,” she whispers fiercely. “If ever I had need of his counsel, it is now.” She sends me a stricken look. “I had thought he would ride out and meet us on the road. Dunois will not honor the call for his arrest; surely he knows this. Why did he not come, Ismae?”

As I stare into her unflinching brown eyes, I find I am unable to keep secrets

from her any longer. It is exactly what her other advisors do, and I do not wish to repeat their mistakes. “He is ill, Your Grace. Gravely ill.”

Her hand flies to her mouth. “The plague?”

I shake my head. “He is being poisoned.”

Her eyes grow round with horror and she takes a step back. “Poison?” she says faintly.

“Yes, but not at my hand,” I rush to assure her.

“Why did no one tell me of this sooner?” she demands.

“Because he did not wish for you to know, and I was hoping to find an antidote or cure before having to give you such dire news.”

“But I take it you have found no cure.”

“I have not.”

She is silent as she stares down at the city below us, gathering her courage to ask the next question. “Is he dead?”

“Very likely he is by now, as he was at death’s door when we left Guérande.” Remembering how I left him fills me with a nearly overwhelming urge to grab the nearest horse and ride back to Guérande to protect his unconscious body from Crunard’s further machinations.

She turns on me then, her voice harsh with anger. “Who would do such a thing?”

I take a deep breath. “Chancellor Crunard, Your Grace.” And then I tell her all the ways her most trusted guardian has betrayed her.

The next day, Anne sends an officer to Nantes to request that she be allowed to enter her own city so that she may talk with Marshal Rieux. She chooses de Lornay to carry her message into the city. He is well liked for his beauty and smooth manner, and she hopes he will turn the people of Nantes to her cause.

We ride out with de Lornay as far as a small ridge that overlooks Nantes. From this vantage point we watch him ride down to the city gates. “You don’t think they will slay him unheard, do you?” I ask Beast.

His brows fly up in mock surprise. “Do not tell me you’ve developed a soft spot for our Lord Dandy.”

“Not at all,” I say coolly. “I merely want to be certain the duchess’s message has a chance of being heard.”

“Ah,” Beast says, but he is not fooled. “Since Rieux and d’Albret hope to use Nantes as leverage to force the duchess to accept their terms, I think they will be more than willing to speak with de Lornay.”

Just as Beast predicted, one of the city gates opens and a small party rides out to meet de Lornay and the two archers that have accompanied him. It is a

distressingly short meeting.

When de Lornay returns there is thunder in his eyes, and my heart sinks. “Marshal Rieux will not discuss terms with me. He insists on meeting the duchess face to face and will speak only with her. He suggests noon tomorrow. We are to meet him on the field below. We may escort her as far as the field, but only the duchess and ten archers will be allowed into the city. Neither Captain Dunois nor the Baron de Waroch nor myself are to accompany her. Neither is the assassin.”

It takes a moment to realize he means me.

“I do not like it,” Captain Dunois says at once. “It stinks too much of a trap.”

“Then we will just have to make sure he does not catch us unawares,” the duchess says. “Tell Marshal Rieux I will meet with him then.”

The next morning dawns crisp and clear. Captain Dunois was afraid that the mists would move in and obscure our view of the city, thus hiding any treachery Rieux or d’Albret have planned, for he is sure that they are planning something. But the gods have smiled on us in their choice of weather for today.

The duchess has her heart set on speaking to Marshal Rieux. She has even decided to apologize to him for appearing to dismiss his counsel. It is a big step for her, but she wants him to see that she is willing to bend on some things.

Our entire party rides with her into the valley. We stop a short way from the city walls and wait. At noon exactly, the city gates open, and Marshal Rieux rides out with an escort of four men-at-arms. We all draw around the duchess, waiting to be certain it is not a trap. When no more riders appear at the gate, we give way so that Anne and the marshal may talk.

Marshal Rieux reins his horse in a few feet from the duchess.

“Your Grace.”

“Marshal Rieux.”

“If you will leave all but ten unarmed archers behind, I will be happy to escort you into the city.”

Dunois has made her promise she will not enter the city without her full guard in attendance. “But it is my city, Marshal, my men, my home. I will be received in the manner befitting a duchess, not snuck in like some thief in the night.”

“Then we are at an impasse, Your Grace.” He starts to turn away, but her clear young voice stops him.

“Did you know the French have crossed our borders?”

He cocks his head to the side. “Hopefully, that will spur you to come to your senses and reconcile with Count d’Albret.”

Captain Dunois gives a snort of disgust, but the duchess holds out a hand to silence him. “Did you know they have taken Ancenis?”

Marshal Rieux slowly wheels his horse around. “Ancenis?”

The duchess nods. “At this very minute, they occupy your own holding.”

Her announcement has the desired effect. Shock registers on Marshal Rieux’s face, then disbelief. “You lie.”

“Marshal Rieux! Remember who you are speaking to,” Captain Dunois reminds him.

“Why should I believe this claim?” the marshal asks.

“Why would we lie?” the duchess says. “It is easy enough for you to confirm. Send a rider, if you like.”

Rieux hesitates a moment, then nods at two of his men. They peel away from the party and turn their horses toward the road for Ancenis. “It will still gain you nothing,” he says, but his voice rings less certain.

Captain Dunois spurs his horse forward. “Jean!” he says. “Surely you do not mean to let the French benefit from this rift between you and the duchess.”

The marshal says something I cannot hear, for the two men have drawn closer now and speak in low, urgent voices. I cannot say what compels me to look away from these fierce negotiations, but something does, some small flicker of premonition, or perhaps it is Saint Mortain Himself whispering in my ear, saying, *There. Look there.* However it happens, my gaze is drawn to the ramparts of the keep and I see a slender shadow detach itself from the stone wall. The slim figure walks to the very edge of the ramparts, so close that I fear she will throw herself off the crenelation to her death.

But no. She stays just inside the edge of the stone and looks out across the river and the fields and the fighting men. At me.

Even from so far, I feel when our gazes meet, and in that moment I know that it is Sybella. The furtiveness of her movements tells me she has put herself in serious danger by being there. When she is sure she has my attention, she draws her arm across her body, then flings it out, as if she were throwing something. Scattering seed to the wind, perhaps? Or casting crumbs on the water of the moat? I glance down at the moat to see if there is some clue there. That is when I see the postern gate open and two columns of troops pour out. Troops clad in blue and yellow tabards. D’Albret’s colors.

I look back up at Sybella and she makes the gesture again.

She is not throwing something. She is telling us to flee.

Chapter Fifty-One

A DOZEN MEN, TWO DOZEN men. I stop counting as I near fifty. “Captain Dunois!” I cry out.

At my warning, Marshal Rieux looks up. His eyes register the reinforcements, and then he and the rest of his party wheel around and gallop back for the city. Their job is done; they have distracted us long enough for d’Albret to spring his trap. Dunois’s normally ruddy complexion pales when he sees the troops pouring from the gate. “Your Grace, we must get you to safety.” He begins barking orders. “Waroch! De Lornay! You take the men to meet the approaching line. You three”—he points to the two largest of his guardsmen and myself—“come with me. We will guard the duchess’s retreat.”

As we turn our horses around, the south postern gate opens and a second column of mounted soldiers streams out. They mean to box us in.

And then Beast’s horse is next to mine. A wild gleam lurks in his eyes and I wonder if he is already drunk on the prospect of battle.

“A kiss for luck, demoiselle?”

I look into his dear, ugly face. He is not coming back. Neither is de Lornay. They will buy the duchess some time, and that is all they can do against the two hundred soldiers riding toward us. If he wants a kiss from me before he goes, I will give it willingly. I nod, and he slips his great tree trunk of an arm around me, pulls me close, and plants his lips on mine. The force of the kiss bends me back over the saddle, his thick arm nearly pulling me from my horse.

It is a magnificent, lusty kiss and I feel nothing but deep regret that it may be his last.

Just before he pulls away, he whispers in my ear. “Duval said to give you that should I get the chance. It is from him.”

He puts his spurs to his horse and rides to the small group of men he must lead to their deaths. De Lornay draws near then. He says nothing but unties one of the two crossbows that hang from his saddle and hands it to me. “This will strike from greater distance than the peashooter you carry.” He winks, then turns and gallops to Beast’s side.

Captain Dunois is already riding away, leaning low in the saddle and protecting the duchess’s body with his own. The two rear guards have taken up position behind him. Even as I fall in with them, I cast one last look over my shoulder.

Battle fever burns bright within Beast now. He shouts an order that divides his men into two parties so they can delay both vanguards of the oncoming forces. "On my signal," he says, but before he can give it, a long blast from a trumpet stops him. My head turns toward the sound.

Soldiers on horseback are riding hell-bent toward us. De Lornay is the first to recognize their colors. "The garrison from Rennes!"

He and Beast exchange an elated grin, then Beast gives the order to charge. Beast looks back and sees me hesitating. "Go!" he roars.

And of course, I must. I cannot waste this chance he has given us. I spur my horse and gallop after the others.

When I gain the copse of trees, I allow myself one backwards glance, just in time to see Beast rise up in his stirrups, battle-ax in one hand, sword in the other. Then d'Albret's forces are upon him. The sound when they meet is deafening, the clash of weapons, the scream of metal, the terrified whinny of the horses.

I urge my mount forward and continue on, the sounds of their terrible fighting echoing in my ears.

Not half a league later we reach the main bulk of the forces from Rennes. Dunois barely has time to rein in his horse to avoid plowing into them. Reinforcements flow around us like a river of safety, encircling the fleeing duchess and her meager guard. Even if d'Albret's soldiers were to reach her, they could never fight through the superior number of troops from Rennes. I rub my eyes for a moment, surprised to find that my cheeks are wet. As I quickly dry them on my sleeve, I am shocked to see a familiar figure riding toward us.

"François!" The duchess's voice is full of joy at the sight of her brother. My own heart lifts too. François has done far more than simply swear fealty to her; he has provided for her in what is surely one of her greatest hours of need.

"It was you who brought these men to our rescue?" she says.

He bows from the saddle. "Only in part. It was Gavriel's idea to send for them. I was simply the one he dispatched."

I am not sure I have heard him correctly. "Duval?" I repeat stupidly as the duchess looks at me hopefully.

He bows again. "Duval, my lady."

"But he was so ill when I . . . when we left. He could not even move from the bed!"

François shrugs. "He was indeed ill-looking, but I can vouch that he was able to move. The night that your party left, he came to my room and gave me urgent instructions to ride for Rennes as if my sister's life depended on it, for surely it did."

I can still scarcely credit what he is saying, but the commander from Rennes is already regrouping so that they may ride back to the city and get her behind its walls. Everyone agrees that the first priority is to get the duchess to safety.

Before they ride away, the duchess directs Dunois to steer their horses to me. “Go,” she tells me in a fierce, urgent whisper. “Find de Lornay and Waroch. If they are wounded, have them brought back as soon as can be arranged.”

I know full well they are all dead by now, bleeding from a hundred different cuts, but I say, “I will do as you command, Your Grace, with all my heart.”

I lean in low over the saddle and urge my horse to go faster. Every moment that those I love must suffer, languishing above their wounded, broken bodies, is a sacrilege to me. For I have realized that I love not only Duval, but also Beast and de Lornay, each of them in a different way. I do not think on how I will reach them or how I will dodge any enemy that still lingers on the field. I know only that I will do so with my last breath if necessary.

When I break free of the trees beyond the ridge, I am surprised by the silence. There is no sound of battle, no clashing swords, no screaming horses. It is completely, eerily quiet. I pull back on the reins so the horse will not take the ridge in one bone-jarring leap, and he stumbles to a halt.

D’Albret’s fighting force has already withdrawn back behind the city gates. Once they saw their trap was ruined, they retreated. Only bodies remain on the field. I climb off my horse and tie him to a tree. My hand moves to the misericorde at my waist as I go the rest of the way on foot, gripping Mortain’s own dagger firmly.

I wade among a sea of shattered limbs and bleeding wounds. I try not to let my gaze linger too long, for it hurts. Even though half of them have betrayed their country, in death they are naught but dying men, their lives leaching out of them to water the grass. I am surprised to learn that I have not left all of my heart back in Guérande, and I am not strong enough to steel the small remaining piece of it to their plight.

Or their cries. Soft, pitiable cries float over the sea of the fallen. I wrap my cloak around myself, wishing for wax to stop up my ears so I won’t have to hear the quiet, broken noises they make. I scan their faces, bruised and bloodied, grimacing with the rictus of death. As I draw closer to the walls of Nantes, there are a few men that I recognize as our own, and none of those still alive. Until there, finally, a familiar face.

I lift my skirts and run to de Lornay. He lies on the ground, his body scored with cuts. Two arrows stick out from his ribs. I fear he is already dead, until I draw close enough to hear his labored breathing.

I fall to my knees in the blood-soaked mud. “De Lornay?”

At the sound of my voice, his eyes flutter open. A look of awe fills them when he sees it is me. “Ismae?” he croaks.

I grab his hand. “I am here.”

“Did she get away?”

“Yes, my lord. She is safe with Captain Dunois and two hundred men from Rennes.”

He closes his eyes and I can feel the shudder of relief that goes through him.

“Have you seen Beast?” I ask.

He starts to shake his head, but stops as a fit of coughing overtakes him. Blood oozes up between his lips. “He was taken. Set a dozen men on him.” He stops to catch his breath. When he speaks again, it is fainter. “Cut him down and dragged him back to the city.”

Bile rises in my throat to think of the Beast of Waroch dragged through the dirt to be strung up on the city walls like a common traitor.

“I am sorry,” he whispers. “I am sorry I treated you so ill. I thought only to protect Duval.”

“It was not I who was poisoning him,” I say.

“No, but you had stolen his heart and I was afraid you would rip it from his chest when you left.”

Every ill feeling I have ever felt for this man flees, and I am filled with sorrow. Sorrow that I am only now learning his true nature. Sorrow that we did not bridge this gap earlier. Sorrow that we did not let ourselves become friends.

“I would ask your forgiveness, Ismae, so I will have one less sin to linger over.”

“You have it, my lord.” And he does. I hope his heart is lighter for it.

“Good.” His mouth twitches in an attempt to smile. “Then I would also ask a favor of you.”

“Ask and it is yours.”

“Kill me.”

The stark request drives the air from my lungs. “Please,” he begs. “I would rather not linger here for a day while the crows pick at my guts.”

I look down and see that his other hand—the one I am not holding—is clutching his stomach together.

“It does not need to be a coup de grâce. Any killing blow will do.”

“No, my lord,” I say.

Hope leaves his face. “It was too much to ask.”

I lift my finger to his lips and hold them still. “That is not what I meant. A hero such as yourself deserves the misericorde, and all our thanks besides. I

know the duchess would wish it as well.”

He smiles weakly and squeezes my hand, but it is a feeble grip.

Unwilling to watch him suffer any longer, I take the misericorde from my waist. I bend over and press my lips to his bruised and bloodied cheek, a kiss as gentle as a mother gives her child, then put the tip of the misericorde to his neck.

His soul bursts from his body, a joyous exultation as it rushes past me and I feel as if I am awash in holy light. The body on the ground is nothing more than a shell, a husk, and I am filled with a sense of peace. Yes, I think. Yes. This is what I want to be. An instrument of mercy, not vengeance.

I stand and survey all the fallen around me. I know what I must do.

I move to the closest fallen soldier next to de Lornay’s now empty body. I bend over and put the tip of the misericorde to his shoulder. In a rush of grace and gratitude, his spirit leaves his body. Once again I feel the touch of that holy light. “Peace,” I whisper as his soul departs.

I go on to the next, and then the next. As I move through the fallen, I notice something: they each bear a marque. And Death has found them even without my aid.

It is not until I have released the last soul from the battlefield that I see a tall, dark figure standing under the nearby trees. I try to get a better look, but the light is failing now and I cannot be sure if I truly see something or if it is just one of the lengthening shadows. But no. Something—someone—is there, and he has been watching me move from one body to the next.

He is tall and cloaked all in black. And still. He holds so very, very still. My hand does not move to my knife, for I now recognize His presence, a light, lingering chill and the faint scent of freshly turned earth. With my heart thudding painfully in my chest, I rise to my feet, my gaze never wavering as I walk toward Death.

“Daughter.” His voice is like the rustle of autumn leaves as they fall from dying trees.

“Father?” I whisper, then fall on my knees and bow my head, every particle of my being trembling. I am afraid to look upon His face, fearing His wrath, His retribution for all the wrongs I have committed, from loving Duval to disobeying the convent to releasing these fallen men’s souls.

And yet, in this copse of trees, with the shadow of Death so close, I feel neither wrath nor retribution. I feel grace. Warm and flowing like a river, it pours over me. I am awash in grace and cannot help but raise my face to it as I would to the sun. I want to laugh as it rains down on me, ripples through my limbs, cleanses them of fatigue and self-loathing. I am reborn in this grace, and suddenly, I can do anything.

I feel Him kiss my brow, a chill weight on my forehead. In this kiss is absolution, yes, but understanding as well. Understanding that it is He that I serve, not the convent. His divine spark lives within me, a presence that will never leave. And I am but one of many tools He has at His disposal. If I cannot act—if I refuse to act—that is a choice I am allowed to make. He has given me life, and all I must do to serve Him is *live*. Fully and with my whole heart. With this knowledge comes a true understanding of all the gifts He has given me.

And then I know. I know why Duval was able to rise from his deathbed long enough to send François to Rennes, and I know how to save him from the poison.

If it is not too late.

Chapter Fifty-Two

I GALLOP LIKE THE WIND. It is as if Mortain has blessed my horse and lent wings to his feet. I have no idea what I will find, what further mischief Chancellor Crunard will have wrought, but even if I am mistaken about Duval, I will have the opportunity to face Crunard, and that is worth much.

My mount may ride as if he is a winged messenger of Death, but in actuality, he is not, and I must stop for the night so that both of us may rest. I choose a clearing next to a stream within sight of a small stone cottage. I walk the horse to cool him, then let him drink from the brook.

I try to rest as he does, but I cannot. I can hardly accept this gift I've been given, although I dare not question it for fear my doubts will cause it to evaporate. Instead, I focus on the sense of unending possibilities I had when in the presence of Death and hold on to that.

In the morning, I am up with the birds and we are off again. I am a light load for my horse, accustomed as he is to long marches with heavily armed knights, so we reach Guérande in excellent time.

I rein in just outside the city. The gates are open, and people are coming in and out. No one seems to be subjected to any extra scrutiny. Even so, I cannot bring a warhorse through the gates; that would raise unwelcome questions. In the end, I leave him with one of the cottagers who live outside the city, giving him a handful of coins to keep the horse safe for me.

And promising him retribution if he does not.

As we make our transaction, his wife stands in the corner of the yard where she had been taking her laundry from the line. I throw in an extra two coins and my own fine gown in exchange for the homespun dress she has hanging there.

I slip out of my own clothes, eager to be free of the convent's finery. As I step into the rough brown garb, something inside me shifts. I am no longer a creature of the convent but my own true self, naught but a daughter of Mortain.

Leaving the trappings of the convent behind, I depart from the cottage on foot dressed as the peasant I am. I keep only the weapons.

The guards at the gate hardly glance at me as I pass into the city. These are not guards I have seen before, but as I have passed through the gates only a handful of times, that means nothing. They do seem to be paying closer attention to those who are leaving rather than to those who enter.

My heart races as I move through the city. I long to break into a run and hurry

to Duval's side, but that would draw far too much notice. Instead, I force myself to walk sedately and keep my head down, as a modest serving woman would. But it is hard. So hard.

I approach the palace from the back, where the kitchen deliveries are made. I pause long enough to grab a basket of cabbages from a wagon and then carry it inside. No one pays me any heed—truly all my actions seem god-touched—and I slip into the palace unobserved.

It is a long, tense walk from the west wing to the north tower, where my old chamber is, but that is the only entrance to the hidden tunnels that I know.

I keep my head down as I move through the hallway, but even so I can see much has changed. The pages stand at rigid attention, no longer cheerful and good-natured. The servants hurry on their business, all of them with glum countenances.

I am filled with relief when I finally reach Duval's apartments, especially when I see they are deserted. There are no servants, no Duval, nothing.

I let myself into the main chamber, then quickly cross to my own room. Once inside, I shut the heavy door and bolt it.

My bed is empty but messed, as if it has not been made since the day I left for Nantes. There are candles but no fire in the hearth from which to light them. I waste precious minutes setting flint to tinder so I can have some light in the dark corridors beyond. My hands are trembling so badly that it takes five tries before the tinder catches. When at last a small fire burns in the grate, I light a candle, then head for the wall near the fireplace.

I stare at it, wishing I had thought to ask Beast how he got it to work. I poke at the bricks one at a time until one gives way, just a little bit, but enough to release the spring that holds the stone door so tightly shut. I put my shoulder to the revealed door and push. It gives perhaps an inch. Grunting, I push again, bracing my feet on the floor and throwing my whole body into it until it finally moves enough for me to slip through.

I am not sure where to begin my search, for if Duval was up and walking, he could be anywhere. He could even, I realize, be gone from here. Although if Crunard had caught him, surely I would have seen his head on a pike at the city wall.

The thought has my heart plummeting like a stone, and I push away from the door and cast out my senses, searching for Death, afraid I will find it. When I do not, I allow myself to draw my first deep breath since reaching my chamber. Thus encouraged, I begin winding my way to the spot where de Lornay and Beast found Duval the first time we came here. A sharp lance of pain bites

through me as I think of those two, but I push it aside. Saving Duval is my goal now.

I get lost twice, then finally the feeble light from my candle shows a corner of a blanket. Afraid to hope, but unable to stop myself, I drop to my knees beside him. He still breathes, but it is a shallow, labored breathing. I feel the beat of his pulse. It is thin and going faster than a hummingbird's wings. "My lord," I whisper.

His head turns toward my voice and his eyelids flutter weakly.

Not too late, not too late beats in my breast and pounds through my veins. I do not know if it is a prayer or a plea or a demand.

I put my hands on the sides of his face, savoring the rough scratch of his whiskers. I lean down and place my lips on his and kiss him.

His lips are dry and cracked, but I do not care. I can taste the poison. I cover his mouth with my own, deepening the kiss, kissing him as Beast kissed me—thoroughly, wantonly, as if I am gulping the finest wine from a silver goblet. My heart soars when I feel him stir beneath me.

Then he opens his mouth and our tongues meet, a shocking sensation as I allow him in. My hands upon his cheeks grow numb, as do my lips. I kiss him and kiss him, wanting to draw every drop of poison from his body into mine. When his eyes finally open and he murmurs my name against my lips, I laugh, and the exhilaration I feel spills from my mouth into his. Needing to look at him, to see his face, I pull back—but not too far.

His eyes are clouded with desire and joy. His skin already seems less pale to me. He reaches up and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. "I did not expect to find you here," he says.

It takes me a full minute to realize that *here* does not mean Guérande but that he thinks he has traveled into the realm of Death. "You are alive, my lord." I cannot help it. I laugh with triumph as I say the words.

He frowns, then tries to sit up as he remembers. "The duchess is safe," I tell him. "She is safe and well guarded by half the garrison from Rennes. You did it, my lord. François reached us in time. You saved her."

He closes his eyes and draws a deep breath. "Then I may die in peace."

"You are not dying. You were, but no longer." At his puzzled look, I lean down once again. "I will save you," I whisper against his lips.

As I slip out of the rough, dark gown, I realize I have only the vaguest idea of how a woman lies with a man. Even so, I cast my shift aside and gently push Duval back down—it takes no effort at all. Slowly, I lower my body onto his so that every part of us is touching. My head rests on his chest and my feet lie atop his shins. He is warm, too warm, and everywhere his skin flinches and trembles.

My hand goes to the scars on his chest, the one just over his heart. I place my hand there, savoring the stronger, steadier beat.

I know he is growing stronger when he is able to pull me closer.

His hands roam over my back, tracing my scar. I start to pull away, then realize I do not care. As his arms gain strength, his fingers travel in delicious trails along my back. Everywhere my skin touches his, it flutters and tingles, but whether it is from the poison moving from his body to mine or simply my own response to Duval, I do not know.

Sometime later, I am the first to stir. I lay there, savoring the slow, steady beat of his heart as it thumps against my chest. When I open my eyes, I see his skin no longer has the gray pallor that heralds death. I feel damp, as if I have walked through a heavy mist. Small beads of the now harmless poison coat my skin like sweat. Just like a bezoar stone, I have neutralized its deadly effects.

As the fog of our lying passes, it clears the way for thoughts other than Duval. I sit up. “Isabeau!” Panic jolts through me, but Duval’s hand clamps on my waist and pulls me back.

“She is safe,” he murmurs.

I stare down at him. “How can you know? I believe Crunard—”

He lifts his fingers to my lips, quieting me. “She is gone from here.”

My heart lurches. “You mean she is dead?”

He laughs and gives a rueful shake of his head. “No, dear assassin. She was spirited out of the palace while Crunard slept.”

I push out of his arms and sit up. “How? How did you manage this?”

He folds his hands behind his head and looks up at me. “The morning you left, I woke feeling better. I knew Crunard must be planning a trap and that I had little time before he sprung it. I went to François and ordered him to fetch the garrison from Rennes and bring them to Anne at Nantes.”

“He did it, my lord. He reached us at the very hour of our need.”

Duval smiles. “Good,” he says. “It is good to have him as an ally again. The next greatest need was to get Isabeau to safety.” His face grows serious. “She is not well, not well at all.”

“You do not need to tell me.” Our eyes meet.

“Does Anne know?”

“Not the full severity of it, I do not think.”

He sighs and scrubs his face with his hand. “To get her to safety, I employed the talents of the loyal Louyse, who would lay down her life for one of the duke’s children, and my lady mother, who owed her life to your mercy and her newly sworn oath. It took a while to convince my mother that swearing fealty to

Anne also meant endangering her life for Isabeau, but once she saw how frail the girl was and learned how Crunard had set her up, she was only too willing to ruin his latest plans.”

“So you snuck them out through the tunnels?”

“Exactly.” His smile is smug, and rightfully so.

“And then what?” I ask, lightly punching his shoulder. “Did you secure the entire duchy while I thought you lay dying?”

“No,” he says, growing serious. “Crunard is still out there.”

“What is his aim, can you guess?”

“I do not know. But I plan to find out.” Our eyes meet again, and this time our own warm feelings give way before our desire to make Crunard pay. “But first, tell me of your news. What miracle have you wrought that you have saved me from this poison?”

“It is one of my gifts from Mortain.” I grimace. “One the convent either does not know about or chose not to tell me of.”

“And what of Beast and de Lornay?” he asks. The careful note in his voice indicates he expects the worst. I tell him of our battle before Rennes, of the falling of de Lornay and the taking of Beast. During the telling, his grief mounts and grows until it threatens to swallow us both. And then his mouth sets in a hard line. “I must get up.”

When he rises to his feet, I am pleased to see that he does not sway, but he is not as steady as he once was. His body will need time to fully heal. “You cannot mean to storm into Crunard’s chambers and challenge him to combat,” I say.

“I cannot?”

“You are only just able to keep on your feet.”

“Even so, I will face him, for I am sick of hiding in the dark while he destroys all that we have fought for.”

We are silent as we make our way back through the tunnels to my chamber, both of us consumed by our own thoughts, for Crunard has cost each of us much. Even though he is still weak, Duval leads the way, for he is more familiar with these tunnels than I. Once again, I marvel at how he has stood it all this time, for the close stone walls press down on me, stealing my breath and making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

At last I see a sliver of light ahead and I quicken my pace, nearly treading on Duval’s heels. He grunts, then stumbles forward. When he reaches the doorway, he freezes, then puts out his arm and shoves me back into the tunnel. “Crunard,” he says loudly, and every nerve in my body comes alert.

Chapter Fifty-Three

“AH, YOU ARE STILL ALIVE. I thought as much. It was the only explanation that made sense.”

Careful to stay well out of sight, I press my back against the stone wall, heart hammering in my chest as the chancellor’s cold, hard voice fills my ears.

“Come in, come in, don’t hover at the door.” At first I think he is talking to me, then I see Duval move away from the tunnel and step into the room. “Besides, you and I have a game of chess we must finish,” he says coyly, and that’s when I know.

I know precisely where Duval picked up Arduinna’s snare. I want to bang my head against the wall in frustration.

“Is that what we have been doing, Crunard? Playing a game of chess? If so, I will confess that I did not realize it was you I was playing against, not until Ismae voiced her suspicions.” Duval sounds strong and steady, and I do not know if this is because he has fully recovered or because he is simply determined not to show weakness in front of Crunard.

“The girl figured it out before you, did she? That must sting, but the convent is not known for raising fools.”

“She also did not have a lifetime of memories and family loyalties to cloud her vision. I defended you against her accusations.” Duval’s voice shakes now, but with the pain of Crunard’s duplicity rather than weakness. “I told her that one of our country’s greatest heroes and my father’s closest ally would never betray my sister in such a way.”

Crunard says nothing for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is so quiet I must inch closer in order to catch every word.

“Four sons, Gavriel. I have lost four sons to this never-ending war with the French. And for what? So they can turn around and invade our borders once again? In the end, do you really think it matters to the people who rules over them? Do you really think maintaining Brittany’s independence is more important to their lives and prosperity than ending the constant war?”

“How can you ignore everything we’ve fought for for the last twenty years? How can you dishonor your own sons’ memories this way?”

“You may not speak to me of my sons,” Crunard says, his voice tight with fury. “Not when you have lived and they have died.” He grows quiet, and when

he speaks again, he is calmer. “I do not expect you to understand how hard it is to watch your own sons die, struck down in battle for a cause that pales when it is set next to what you have lost. Even more, I do not expect you to understand what it is like to learn that one of those sons still lives—”

“Anton?” There is joy in Duval’s voice, and I remember that the chancellor’s youngest son and Duval were of an age. They were likely friends.

“Anton,” Crunard says. “I saw him struck down on the battlefield of Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier. So you cannot begin to imagine my joy when I received word that he still lived. All I had to do was deliver Anne into the hands of the French regent— something that was clearly inevitable—and my son would be returned to me.”

Suddenly everything is clear. Every move Crunard has made, every person he has betrayed—all of it was done in the hope of ransoming his son.

“So you thought to trade my sister’s life for your son’s?”

“It seemed a fair exchange, since if it weren’t for the blood of my sons spilled on the battlefield, none of this would be hers. Besides, I wasn’t trading her life, merely her duchy. They are quite different things.

“At first it was easy. I worked quietly behind the scenes, gently bending the tides of war to France’s favor without harming a soul, and then you stepped in. You and your damned strategies and tactics and pigheaded stubbornness. If you had been content to let things happen, none of this would have come to pass. But you were not. You were determined to single-handedly deliver an independent duchy to your sister along with the means to keep it. You can be certain I did not value *your* life above my son’s, so you gave me no choice but to remove you. Now, sit down so we may finish this game.”

“Do you always play chess with a loaded crossbow in your lap?” Duval asks, and at last I understand why he shoved me back into the tunnel.

“Only with particularly challenging opponents,” Crunard replies.

But that is easily enough fixed. I take my own crossbow from the chain at my waist. It may be smaller than Crunard’s, but it is just as deadly. I fit a bolt to it, and move silently toward the door.

“You shall move first, I think,” Crunard tells Duval.

“No!” I shout, stepping into the room and aiming the crossbow at Crunard’s forehead. “That is how he was poisoning you, by coating the chess pieces with Arduinna’s snare.”

“Demoiselle Rienne, I hardly recognized you in your new gown. Whatever can the convent have been thinking, sending you out in such garb? Or have you thrown away your future with them for Duval here?” Even though his voice is dry and mocking, his face pales and his eyes grow wary.

As I stare at him, my anger at all this man has stolen from me rises up, nearly choking me. His treachery has tainted the purity of the convent and dragged us into his worldly struggles. He has used me—and the abbess as well—as pawns in these games he plays. He has nearly killed Duval and has come close to preventing Anne from claiming her throne. And while I have sympathy for his son, that sympathy does not come at the cost of everything I hold dear.

But even as I stare at him with death in my heart, I falter. Now that I have come face to face with His mercy, I see it in everything. For while Crunard has wronged many, the seeds of his treachery lie in his love for his son.

Killing him now would bring one sort of justice, but it would also spring from the anger in my heart. And when I moved through the battlefield, I swore to myself that I would have nothing more to do with vengeance.

Filled with equal parts wonder and disgust, I realize I cannot kill this wily old fox, no matter how much he might deserve it.

I huff out a sigh of frustration, drop the arm holding the crossbow, then swing out and clout him alongside the head with it. His eyes have just enough time to register surprise before they roll up in his head and he slumps in his chair.

Duval turns to look at me, his eyes unreadable. “Did your god guide your hand in that?”

“No,” I say, looking down at Crunard’s inert body. “That was my own idea. Did you have a better one?”

“Other than wrapping my hands around his neck and squeezing the life out of him, no.”

There is a long moment during which I feel him watching me, so I am careful not to meet his eyes. “That option crossed my mind as well, but we need him alive so that we may clear your name with the rest of the council,” I say, but I do not think he is fooled by my excuses.

I would curse at him for seeing too much, except I am too pleased he is alive to see at all.

It is two days’ ride to Rennes, but due to Duval’s weakened state, it takes us three.

I do not begrudge the slower pace. In truth, it is the first time we have been alone with only ourselves and our own pleasure to consider. Once we are away from Guérande, the mists lift, and the days are cold yet bright. Mortain’s summer, we call it, and I feel certain it is a gift from the god Himself.

The cold fresh air chases the last vestiges of the poison from Duval’s lungs, and his health improves quickly. We talk and laugh as we ride. Indeed, I have

never laughed as much as this. Duval points out his father's holdings to me, and I stop and give thanks at every standing stone we pass.

The nights are our own. We sit in front of the fire Duval has built, our bodies touching from hip to shoulder, and share wine from a skin and roasted meat from a spit. We talk of small things, private things. It is a sweet, glorious time and I know it will be over far too soon.

On our last night on the road, Duval is more quiet than usual. He has pulled a ribbon from my hair and sits playing with it in his hand. "What is wrong?" I finally ask.

He looks at me, his dark eyes reflecting the flames of the fire. "We have decisions to make when we arrive in Rennes."

I look away, unhappy that the real world will intrude on this last night. "I know." I pick up a nearby stick and poke at the fire.

"Ismae, I would offer you marriage if you would have it."

My whole body stills, shocked at the honor he would do me, an honor I never dared to imagine.

He smiles. "I think that Saint Camulos and Saint Mortain could easily come to terms. They work hand in hand often enough in the mortal world."

I cannot help but smile, for it is such a practical Duval-like thing to say. "Perhaps, my lord. War and Death are known to be closely aligned. But I must speak with my abbess first." There are still so many unanswered questions about the convent and my service to it.

"Do you plan to remain with the convent then?"

"I do not know yet. All I know is that if I do, it will be different, especially now that I know can no longer trust the integrity of their orders."

Chapter Fifty-Four

WE CATCH UP TO THE duchess and the others just outside the walls of Rennes at the old abbey of Saint Brigantia. Isabeau is already there, spirited out by Madame Hivern and the faithful Louyse. When Anne and Isabeau see their brother, they give cries of joy and launch themselves at him. For one brief moment, they are not princess and duchess and bastard but a family reunited.

I am surprised to find myself enfolded in Louyse's sturdy arms as she hugs me to her bosom, relieved to see me unharmed. Not knowing quite what to do with such affection, I pat her awkwardly on the back.

The sisters of Brigantia give us a few moments to enjoy our reunion, then escort us to the rooms that they have prepared for us. They assume, rightly, that we need to rest and refresh ourselves after our journey. In truth, I am travel weary and already mourning the loss of the private time Duval and I shared on the road. A novice opens the door for me, then quietly withdraws. Alone at last, I close my eyes and sag against the thick wooden door.

A faint rustle of fabric startles my eyes open. The abbess of St. Mortain sits in a chair by the fireplace, dressed in her black ceremonial habit. Her pale face gives away nothing of her thoughts.

Fear and regret and remorse shoot through me, ugly, shameful feelings that have me falling to my knees. "Reverend Mother!" I say, my wits leaving me as my forehead touches the cold, hard floor.

"Daughter." Her voice is icy, and my mind grows blank with panic. I had thought there would be time to think upon all I must say to her. And that I would do it in a letter, which she would read while tucked behind the convent's sturdy walls, not sitting before me like retribution incarnate.

There is a rustle of parchment. I peer up beneath my lashes to see her spreading a message out on her lap. My message to her. "It seems we have much to talk about."

"Yes, Holy Mother. We do." I am pleased that my voice does not shake overmuch.

And then I remember my resolve and rise to my feet even though she has not invited me to. I take a moment to straighten my skirt and compose my features, then meet her gaze steadily. "Chancellor Crunard has betrayed us all."

Her face is still as marble. "Explain."

And so I do. I tell her of his stealth and cunning and how he hovered in the

background maneuvering people as if they were pawns and destroying lives. When I am done, I cannot tell if she believes me or not. At last she speaks. “If this is indeed true, Chancellor Crunard will have much to answer for.”

I nod, accepting that what I have told her must come as a great shock. “He is secure in the dungeons at Guérande, awaiting whatever justice the duchess and her council choose to mete out.” I grip my hands tightly in front of me. “There is something else, Reverend Mother. Something I must warn you of.” She raises her brows, but does not interrupt, so I continue. “I have come to believe that the marques Mortain uses to guide our hands are much more complex than we thought. I fear they are not always meant to direct our actions but are rather a reflection of what will happen—”

“Silence!” The abbess stands abruptly, cutting off my words with a swipe of her hand. “Do you think to educate your betters? You tell me nothing new. When you have served Mortain and studied His ways for a score of years or more, then you may presume to lecture me on His precepts. But not until then.” Her cold blue eyes full of anger, she crosses to the window and stares out into the convent’s barren garden. “And what of Duval? Do you love him?” The mocking tone of her voice suggests I wish to roll naked in the mud with pigs.

I close my eyes and reach inside for the spark of the presence I now carry, hoping to borrow its strength. “I do.”

When she turns back to me, her face is pinched with fury. “You would throw away all that we have given you for a man’s love?”

“Not a man’s love,” I say softly. “But Duval’s. And I would find a way to serve both my god and my heart. Surely He does not give us hearts so we may spend our lives ignoring them.”

Her head rears back, as if she has been struck. “So now you are an expert on the will of Mortain?”

I do not flinch. “I came face to face with Him on the battlefield before Nantes. He was not as I thought He would be.”

Her lip curls in disdain. “You saw Mortain? He came to you in a vision?”

“No, Reverend Mother. In the flesh, or such flesh as the saints will wear. He spoke to me and called me daughter, and I found peace with Him. I wish to serve in honor of His mercy rather than His wrath.”

I can tell she wishes to punish me. At first, I think it because I have defied her, and then I realize it is because I have seen Mortain and she has not. “You cannot expect to take your final vows now.”

“I do not want to take my final vows, Reverend Mother.” In truth, I am surprised at how much I do *not* want to. I think of Annith facing the rest of her life sealed away in the convent, never leaving its walls. I think of Sybella stuck

in some hellish assignment that is surely driving her mad. Is that truly what Mortain wishes for them?

Besides, now that I finally have some choices in my life, I have no desire to hand them all back to the convent. “The convent focuses on only one aspect of Mortain’s glory, Reverend Mother. I want to better understand these other parts of Him before committing to such a path.”

“Clearly I was wrong about your devotion to your duties and obligations.” The abbess looks at me as if I am some lowly worm, and it is all I can do to hold fast to my newfound strength.

“You misunderstand me. I am committed to serving Mortain. It is the convent I am uncertain of.”

Her nostrils flare and her lips grow white. She breathes hard for a moment, then, clenching her jaw, she lifts her skirts and storms from the room.

Exactly one fortnight after her thirteenth birthday, Anne of Brittany is carefully dressed in finery befitting a duchess. When she is done, Isabeau kisses her on both cheeks, then Anne turns and leaves the abbey of St. Brigantia. A small procession of attendants accompanies her: myself, Duval, Dunois, and François. The abbess of St. Brigantia also comes with us, as does the abbess of St. Mortain. Night has fallen, and torches light our path as we wind our way to the main entrance of the city, where the drawbridge is closed to us. When she reaches the moat, Anne steps away from our small group and stands alone before the city gates. She raises her young, clear voice and speaks the ancient words that all the rulers of Brittany have spoken and promises to guard the privileges and liberty of both the nobility and the common people of her country.

In answer, the crowd erupts in joyous cheers. They are eager to receive their new duchess, and heavy chains rattle and clank as the drawbridge is lowered. A great clang rings out when it reaches the ground, as triumphant as any bell. The city now open to her, Anne alone steps onto the drawbridge and enters.

Trumpets blare and children shout and throw small handfuls of seeds and dried flower petals as the crowd escorts her to the great cathedral. As demanded by custom, Anne will spend the night in prayer before her coronation in the morning. The six of us will stand over her and watch her, but from a distance. This is a vigil she must keep alone. Her burden is made lighter, however, by the coronation gift Duval has given her: six thousand English troops to fight at her command.

It is a long night, but that is just as well, for every one of us in that church has much to think upon. Many times throughout the dark hours, I feel the gaze of my

abbess settle on me, puzzled and brooding. I am surprised when I realize this bothers me not at all. Whatever hold she once had over me is gone.

Duval is another matter, however, and every time he glances at me I feel it just as surely as if he has reached out and run his finger along my soul. It is all I can do not to smile at the sheer wonder of it.

Although the brightly colored glass windows hide the sky outside, I can feel the moment night gives way to morning. As dawn breaks, Duval edges closer to me. When I look up at him, our eyes meet, and even in that solemn place and this most solemn of occasions, I cannot help but smile. His hand moves, and when I look down at it, I see that he is playing with the red ribbon he took from my own hair. He has tied nine knots in it, invoking the blessings of the nine saints. As he reaches for my hand, my heart begins to pound. Does he think to pledge ourselves now, before the duchess and God and all our saints? While I am certain of my love for him, I do not yet know if this is what I want.

He holds my hand gently in his and before I can snatch it back, he wraps the ribbon around not both our wrists, but mine alone. He leans in close, his whisper so quiet I can barely hear it. "Whenever you are ready, or if you never are, my heart is yours, until Death do us part. Whatever that may mean when consorting with one of Death's handmaidens."

A small bubble of joyous laughter rises up from my heart, and I lean over and seal his vow with a kiss, not caring that God and the saints and even the abbess of St. Mortain might be watching. For while I am Death's daughter and walk in His dark shadow, surely the darkness can give way to light sometimes.

Epilogue

AFTER THE CORONATION WE ALL gather in the private rooms set aside for the duchess. She is anxious to speak with Duval and François, and eager also to meet the abbess of St. Mortain. Plus, we must plan what to do about Chancellor Crunard. Captain Dunois's scouts have returned from Nantes, and we are all impatient to hear their report.

"Beast is alive," Dunois says. "Many saw him taken. He was gravely wounded, but he is alive."

"How can you be sure they have not killed him?" the duchess asks.

Dunois glances uneasily at Duval. "They would make it known, Your Grace."

Her face darkens with determination. "How?"

There is a pause, one full of just how much Captain Dunois wishes to spare her the harsh realities of war. "If they had, his body would be hanging on the wall as warning, or his head stuck on a spike. Our scouts report this is not so."

The duchess's face pales even as she sits up straighter, squaring her shoulders. "Of all the men they could have taken, why Beast? Why alive?" she asks, looking from Dunois to Duval. "What can he do that others cannot?"

Dunois pulls at his chin. "It is a question I have been asking myself, Your Grace. He is best known for the battle fever that comes over him and makes him nearly invincible. But how that helps them, I do not know."

Duval's eyes narrow, realization dawning. He turns to Dunois. "No, but that battle fever made him a hero. They wish to keep him from rallying the countryside to our cause."

When Anne frowns in question, he continues. "It was Beast who went through the countryside and rallied the peasants and farmers to our cause last time we had no money to pay soldiers. If not for him, we would never have driven the French from our soil. Marshal Rieux knows that. Indeed, he was most put out that Beast inspired our countrymen when he could not."

"So they took Beast to keep him from raising the peasantry once more?" The abbess speaks for the first time.

"Exactly so. Now more than ever we need every pair of able arms to help fend off the French. With Beast captured, no one else comes close to the popularity he holds with the people."

"Then why not just kill him?" the abbess asks.

"Because it risks angering and mobilizing the very people they wish to remain

uninvolved. They do not want Beast martyred to the duchess's cause, nor does Marshal Rieux want to be burned in effigy for killing such a well-loved hero."

The duchess makes a sound of despair. "And so our brave Baron de Waroch will rot in their prison when he should receive a hero's welcome. Is there nothing we can do?" She turns her distressed gaze to her brother.

Duval is loath to break her heart. "The city will be closely watched for any attempt to rescue him. Anyone we send will likely be walking into a death trap," he explains gently.

As he speaks, I shift my gaze to the reverend mother who sits, listening, watching, collecting information like a squirrel gathering nuts for the winter. Our eyes meet. When still she says nothing, I turn to the others. "Unless that someone was already in the city," I say.

Everyone in the room looks to me. I pause, giving the abbess a second chance to do the right thing, but she does not. So I do. "The convent has someone in Nantes who could help him, do we not, Reverend Mother?"

Her cold blue gaze meets mine, frost forming at the edges. She is supremely unhappy that I have offered this information, but she cannot say so in front of the duchess and her closest advisors, whom she is supposed to serve. "Yes," she says at last. "We do have someone inside Nantes. Someone we could use if the cause was great enough. What would you have Sybella do?"

The duchess clenches her fists and leans forward in her chair, her urgency etched upon her young face. "Rescue Beast for us, dear abbess. Save him from whatever dire fate they are planning. Then free him from his prison so the entire countryside can rally to his cause and help us drive the French from Brittany."

Additional Scenes

TODAY, FOUR MEN'S BODIES LIE ON worktables, like slabs of cold marble. I pull my attention away from their dead eyes and force myself to listen to what Sister Thomine is telling us.

“One of the lessons you must master before you are sent out into the world is the understanding of man's body. Where its strengths are and where its vulnerabilities lie. Where you can do the most damage in the least amount of time, with the tools you have at your disposal.”

I stare at the men before us and wonder at the fate that has brought them here to the tender teachings of Saint Mortain. Their dead white bodies give me no hint as to how they spent their lives. Were they volunteers? Criminals?

“The neck is one of the most vulnerable parts of a man,” Sister Thomine explains. “It is the pathway air must use to enter his body. If air cannot enter, he cannot breathe and will die. There are two ways to make that happen: you can crush it or cut it.”

Sister Arnette steps forward and uses the tip of her blade to direct us to a ligature in the man's throat. “This is the cord that allows the victim to speak. If that is sliced, he cannot call out or make any noise except a gurgle as his air passes into the blood. If silence is required, better to use a blade.

“But sometimes a knife will be too messy for your purposes. In those instances, this is the best spot to apply force to crush the throat instead. A garrote, a rope, your hands, any of those applied here”—she points with her knife again—“will block his air. He'll struggle mightily—all creatures do when deprived of the air they need to breathe—but with the maneuvers Sister Thomine has shown you, it is possible to hold on, even against greater strength. Now, each of you come forward and practice locating this spot. You need to be able to find it in the dark, should the need arise.”

We spend the entire day in that close room with the four dead bodies. The sisters demonstrate on one, and we practice on the others. When we have pressed and prodded and palpitated every soft spot, every space in which we could slip a knife, every vulnerability that can be probed—or crushed—Sister Arnette waves Sybella and Annith to step back. She motions to me. “Ismae. Now you try it. Cut his throat as if you must keep him quiet.”

I look from her down to the corpse in front of me. This morning's lessons have been unsettling enough, but this feels as if it goes too far. Is he some

farmer? A sailor? Or perhaps a soldier?

“Ismae.” There is steel in Sister Arnette’s voice as she prods me: a warning. I look from her to Sister Thomine. The hardness in their eyes tells me this is no mere lesson. It is a test. A test I must pass if I wish to serve the convent.

I grip my knife in my hand and bring it up to the man’s throat. *He feels nothing*, I tell myself. *He knows nothing of what is happening. Pretend it is but a rabbit for the stew pot. Or mayhap he beat his wife.* I bring my knife up and across the man’s throat. The skin parts in a dark gaping slash.

The nuns’ faces relax and so do I. I have passed. Next, it is Sybella’s turn. She grasps her knife handle in a grip that somehow manages to look graceful. Her face is impassive, her eyes focused far away. When she steps forward and slits the man’s throat, I have the distinct impression it is not him she is seeing.

Sybella and I manage well enough; we have our anger to drive our hand. But when it is Annith’s turn, she struggles. In the end, she cannot bring herself to make the cut.

“But this feels so wrong, Sister.” Her arms are folded tightly across her middle, her voice an anguished whisper.

Sister Thomine’s answer is gentle. “These men were all traitors in the Mad War. In exchange for their bodies, they were offered Mortain’s mercy and forgiveness of their sins. They are well served by their bargain.” Some of the distress leaves Annith’s face. Then Sister Thomine’s voice hardens. “If you wish to serve Mortain, you will do it, Annith. Until you have struck at a dead man, how can we be assured you will strike at a live one?”

“But he bears no marque. Surely that is our most inviolate precept?”

“His marque disappeared when he accepted Mortain’s mercy in trade for his body. Now strike. I don’t want to have to report to the reverend mother that you failed in this task, Annith, as you have never failed at anything set before you.” The concern in her voice feels genuine.

Pale as the corpse on the table before her, Annith grips the dagger Sister Arnette has given her. She sets her mouth, swallows once, then lifts her hand. It slashes down, swift and steady, and makes the cut. When she is done, she turns away from the body just in time to retch all over Sister Arnette’s shoes. Without a word, she flees the room.

Silence echoes loudly in our ears. Sister Arnette steps out of her shoes and away from the mess on the floor.

“Did she pass, Sister?” I ask. “She performed the tasks, and her blows were as true as ours.”

Sister Arnette turns back to look at the dead traitor. “Yes, she passed. And you two are dismissed.”

We find Annith on the stony beach. She has stripped out of her habit and stands in her shift, scrubbing herself over and over with handfuls of salt water and sand. I decide it is an excellent idea and join her, only too glad to wash the taint of the day from me.

None of us go to dinner that night. Instead, Sybella sneaks back into the convent. "For supplies," she says mysteriously. She also thinks to grab our cloaks, and I am heartily grateful, for a chill wind is blowing off the ocean.

When Sybella returns, Annith does not even look up. "I'm not hungry."

"Good, because I did not bring food."

"Then what did you bring?"

A sly, triumphant smile appears on Sybella's face as she pulls a jug from the sack. "Unwatered wine." Annith's eyes grow wide with surprise and begrudging admiration. Sybella hands the jug to Annith. "Drink."

Annith drinks. "It will not cheer me up," she says as she sullenly hands the jug back to Sybella.

Sybella pushes it back. "Drink again."

Annith sighs and does as she is told.

At last Sybella takes the jug from Annith, then passes it to me.

The jug is awkward and heavy, and it takes two hands to hold it up to my mouth. When I tip it back, I get a mouthful of the sweet, strong stuff, and another mouthful dribbles down my chin.

Sybella laughs and takes the jug from me as I wipe my chin. She raises it gracefully to her mouth, takes a swig without spilling a drop, then passes it back to Annith. Clearly she has had much practice at this.

"I know you are trying to make me feel better, but it will not work. It will not make me forget that my paltry experiences here in the convent will always pale when compared to your lives outside these walls."

Sybella considers Annith for a long moment. "How long have you been here?"

"I was brought over mere hours after my birth, by an herb witch."

My brows shoot up in surprise. I knew she had been here a long time, but since birth? "So you have never known anyplace but the convent?" I ask, trying to hide the envy that comes over me.

Sybella shoots me a cutting look. "You still do not understand that this place is a cage, do you?" she mutters.

Before I can answer, Annith shakes her head, "No, I have never known anyplace but here."

I do not understand the look of sadness on her face. “But that is a good thing! To never have known hardship or cruelty. To never have been hungry or taunted for what you are.”

She looks up at me then, her eyes filled with some deep pain, so that my mockery of her dies on my lips. “What is it, Annith?” How can she not see this small miracle she’s been given?

She shrugs and fiddles with the pile of flowers in front of her. For a moment it looks as if she will share some dire truth, but she shrugs, and whatever it was passes. “I have not lived, not truly.”

I gape at her and wonder if this is some secret of Mortain she is talking about. “What do you mean? You are as alive as we are.”

“She means”—Sybella cuts a sidelong look at Annith—“that our dark, mysterious pasts are more . . . interesting . . . than her bright shiny life.”

“You are mad,” I say, looking at her clear untroubled brow and untouched beauty. “There is no joy in what I’ve been through. Nor Sybella either, I imagine.”

“Of course not,” Annith says, “but even so, you two have worldly skills that will aid you in your service to the saint. Experience I lack.”

“From what I know of gods and saints, the more innocent and virginal the better,” Sybella mutters.

Annith shakes her head firmly. “Not Mortain. All that we suffer in this world, we suffer for Him so that we may better serve His needs.” It sounds like a lesson the nuns have drilled into her. “Don’t you see? As horrible as it was, it will also help you serve Mortain better. It is a test, one that you have passed. One that proves your worth to Him. Whereas I . . .” her voice drops and she looks down at her hands. “I have not proven any such right to serve Him.”

I think about her growing up here, all fresh and pure, while other girls come damaged and broken but more tempered by life. I think about how much it pained me to see Sybella in worse shape than I and think maybe I understand a tiny piece of what Annith means. “And yet you are here,” I point out. “Surely no one comes to this place except through His will.”

Annith is quiet a long moment. “That is true. But the sisters protect me overmuch. Sometimes I doubt they will ever send me out on a true assignment. And today I gave them the perfect excuse.”

“Sister Thomine said you’d passed,” I tell her. “After you left.”

Annith brightens. “She did?”

“She did,” Sybella confirms.

Annith looks out at the sea where the moonlight sparkles on the waves. “Still, neither of you have failed at anything.”

Sybella snorts, a surprisingly delicate sound. “Have you seen Ismae at her dancing lessons?”

“Be quiet.” I snatch the jug from her hands and take a deep draught of the wine, my cheeks flaming at the memory of my clumsy abundance of left feet during Sister Beatriz’s class.

“And I,” Sybella continues, “have failed at many of the lessons your nuns set before me. Obedience, humility, cooperation.”

Annith waves her hand, dismissing those particular sins. “Those are exciting failures—failures due to an excess of spirit, not lack of courage.”

Fortified by the wine and wanting to make Annith feel better, I confess, “I failed at marriage,” surprising myself as well as the others, then wish I could snatch the words back.

Annith pauses with the jug halfway to her mouth. “You were married? See? This is exactly the worldly experience I lack.”

“Not worldly, no.” My memories rush back to those few short hours with Guillo. “Sordid and foul. And humiliating.” I snatch the forgotten jug from Annith’s limp hands and drink deeply.

I brace myself for one of Sybella’s outbursts; instead, she tilts her head to the side and studies Annith, an amused look on her face. “What would you choose to know?”

“The ways of the world,” Annith says. “What goes on between a man and a woman, because I know Sister Beatriz leaves much out of her lessons. What happens when one lies with a man? How to kiss a man? Something. I am fair choking on my own innocence!”

A cunning look appears in Sybella’s eye, the one that always bespeaks trouble. “I can show you how to kiss a man.”

“You can?” Annith looks around the beach, as if she expects a man to appear out of the waves.

“But of course. You don’t need a man to learn that,” she scoffs. “Come here.” She pats the sandy patch next to her. Ever obedient, even in her rebellion, Annith scoots closer, her eyes rapt upon Sybella’s face as if expecting her to perform magic.

Sybella reaches out one slim hand, places it behind Annith’s head, and pulls her face closer. “This, then, is how you kiss.” She tips her head slightly and places her lips upon Annith’s. Annith’s eyes widen with shock, as do my own. After a moment, Annith closes her eyes and gets down to the business of learning to kiss. Their lips do not linger long, but it is long enough that I grow unsettled watching them. I want to look elsewhere, but the truth is, I am as hungry for this knowledge as Annith.

At last Sybella pulls away, smoothing Annith's hair as she does so. "Well and so," she says. "That is your first lesson."

Annith's cheeks flush and she giggles a bit.

"And now you have done something that Ismae has not," Sybella adds for good measure.

"Truly?" Annith says.

"What?" I scowl at being pulled into the middle of this.

"Kissed."

"But I was married!" I protest, damning Sybella's eyes for always seeing far more than they should.

"Being married does not mean you kissed."

And of course, she is right. I never kissed Guillo, nor any of the village boys. I shrug and grab for the wine. She snatches it from my hand and gives it to Annith. "Not until you've had your lesson."

Before I know what she plans, she reaches out to grasp my head, bringing my face closer to hers. "You know you are curious," she whispers, and then her lips are on mine, cool from the night air, yet warm, too, from the blood singing under her skin. She tastes faintly of wine and something sharp and spicy, and then she is pulling away and the cold salt air is upon my lips, not the warmth of Sybella's skin.

She thrusts the wine jug at me. "Now you have earned your drink."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALL OF THE MAJOR HISTORICAL EVENTS and people in *Grave Mercy* are based on true events, from a twelve-year-old inheriting the duchy of Brittany, to her having been betrothed to at least half a dozen suitors in return for aid in Duke Francis II's ongoing struggle with France. Just before his death, the duke was forced to sign the Treaty of Vergers, which gave France approval rights for any marriage Anne might make. Immediately upon the duke's demise, France sent emissaries to Anne's court claiming that the French Regent would act as guardian and oversee both her and her kingdom. That was in direct violation of the Treaty of Vergers.

And so Anne assumed the mantle of her father's long battle for independence from France.

The political intrigue and switching alliances in the book are also historically accurate, although in the interest of not swamping the story—or the reader—I left quite a few additional alliances and machinations out. Suffice it to say there were about twice as many schemes going on in real life as I used in the book, including additional suitors, competing claims for the throne, and more double crossing.

With the exception of one completely fictional character, all of Anne's councilors in the book are actual historical figures, all of whom betrayed her in real life just as they did in the book.

Anne had five "natural" siblings, which was a polite term for bastards. The mother of her natural siblings had indeed been the mistress of the former king of France before becoming mistress to Duke Francis and bearing him five children. Gavriel Duval was not among them, for he is a wholly fictional character. Francois, however, was one of Anne's knights and did indeed swear fealty to her before a council of barons. One of the fictional liberties I have taken is having Madame Hivern still alive at the time of our story. In real life, she died before Anne was born.

The book takes place on the very cusp of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Another writer working in this exact time period might very well call it the Renaissance. However, since my story focused on the spiritual preoccupations such as patron saints and relics, and they were such hallmarks of the medieval period, I refer to the story as taking place in the Middle Ages.

The castles, towns, and homes were all researched, although very few maps of

the time exist. Or if they do, I did not have access to them. Castles were moving away from the earlier design of one great hall and one giant room for all to sleep in. Privacy, at least for the noble family itself, was coming into vogue.

Over the centuries, as the Church struggled to convert an entire population to Christianity, as a matter of policy they adopted pagan deities as saints, painting over the original myths with their own Christianized narrative. They also built churches on pagan holy sites, and organized their own festivals and celebrations to coincide with earlier pagan celebrations to make them more palatable for the local populace. It has been said that Brittany in particular fought harder than other kingdoms against the loss of their own deities and form of worship.

Though the nine old gods in *Grave Mercy* did not exist in the exact form they were portrayed in the book, they were constructed from earlier Celtic gods and goddesses, about whom we know very little. I have added a few embellishments of my own.

Sadly, the convent of Saint Mortain does not exist except in my imagination, but the Ile de Sein was known to have been the home of the last nine druidesses who served the old gods and ways and bears a small, ancient chapel right next to a pagan standing stone.

Vengeance is divine.

DARK TRIUMPH

BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS

To my own patron saints:

Nancy Warner,
for patching me back together time and again
so I could leap once more into the fray;

Erin Murphy,
who sometimes saw this story more clearly than I did;

Kate O'Sullivan,
for her unwavering support and enthusiasm;

and Mary Hershey,
for creating a safe place
where we could have all the hard and scary conversations.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LADY SYBELLA, handmaiden to Death

ISMAE RIENNE, handmaiden to Death

ANNITH, a novitiate of Mortain

ABBESS OF SAINT MORTAIN

ALAIN D'ALBRET, a Breton noble with extensive holdings in France

PIERRE D'ALBRET, his son

JULIAN D'ALBRET, his son

CHARLOTTE D'ALBRET, his ten-year-old daughter

LOUISE D'ALBRET, his seven-year-old daughter

BERTRAND DE LUR, captain of d'Albret's guard

JAMETTE DE LUR, his daughter

TEPHANIE, lady in waiting to Lady Sybella

MADAME FRANÇOISE DINAN, the duchess's former governess

JEAN RIEUX, marshal of Brittany and the duchess's former tutor

TILDE, a maid

ODETTE, her younger sister

BARON JULLIERS, a Breton noble

BARON VIENNE, a Breton noble

BARON IVES MATHURIN, a Breton noble

BENEBIC DE WAROCH, the Beast of Waroch and a knight of the realm

YANNIC, the jailor

GUION, a Breton farmer

BETTE, his wife

JACQUES, their son

ANTON, their son

The Charbonnerie

ERWAN, their leader

GRAELON, a charbonnerie man

LAZARE, a charbonnerie man

WINNOG, a charbonnerie youth

MALINA, a charbonnerie woman

The Breton Court and Nobility

ANNE, Duchess of Brittany, Countess of Nantes, Montfort, and Richmond

ISABEAU, her sister

DUKE FRANCIS II (Anne's father, deceased)

GAVRIEL DUVAL, a Breton noble

JEAN DE CHALON, Prince of Orange

MICHAULT THABOR, commander of the Rennes city guard

CAPTAIN DUNOIS, captain of the Breton army

PHILLIPE MONTAUBAN, chancellor of Brittany

BISHOP OF RENNES

CHARLES VIII, king of France

ANNE DE BEAUJEU, regent of France

MAXIMILIAN OF AUSTRIA, the Holy Roman emperor, one of Anne's suitors

SIR DE BROUSSE, man-at-arms

SIR LORRIL, man-at-arms

SIR LANNION, man-at-arms

SIR GAULTIER, man-at-arms

ABBESS OF SAINT MER

SAMSON, a blacksmith's son

CLAUDE, a woodcutter's son

Chapter One

NANTES, BRITTANY, 1489

I DID NOT ARRIVE AT the convent of Saint Mortain some green stripling. By the time I was sent there, my death count numbered three, and I had had two lovers besides. Even so, there were some things they were able to teach me: Sister Serafina, the art of poison; Sister Thomine, how to wield a blade; and Sister Arnette, where best to strike with it, laying out all the vulnerable points on a man's body like an astronomer charting the stars.

If only they had taught me how to watch innocents die as well as they taught me how to kill, I would be far better prepared for this nightmare into which I've been thrust.

I pause at the foot of the winding steps to see if I am being watched. The scullery woman scrubbing the marble hall, the sleepy page dozing against the doorway—either one of them could be a spy. Even if neither has been assigned to watch me, someone is always willing to tattle in the hopes of earning a few crumbs of favor.

Caution prevails and I decide to use the south stairs, then double back through the lower hall to approach the north tower from that side. I am very careful to step precisely where the maid has just washed, and I hear her mutter a curse under her breath. Good. Now I can be certain she has seen me and will not forget if she is questioned.

In the lower hall, there are few servants about. Those who have not been driven out are busy with their duties or have gone to ground like wise, clever rats.

When at last I reach the north wing of the palace, it is empty. Quickening my pace, I hurry toward the north tower, but I am so busy looking behind me that I nearly stumble over a small figure sitting at the base of the stairs.

I bite back an oath of annoyance and glare down to see it is a child. A young girl. "What are you doing here?" I snap. My nerves are already tightly strung, and this new worry does them little good. "Where is your mother?"

The girl looks up at me with eyes like damp violets, and true fear clutches at my gut. Has no one thought to warn her how dangerous it is for a pretty child to

wander these halls alone? I want to reach down and shake her—shake her mother—and shout at her that she is not safe, not on these steps, not in this castle. I force myself to take a deep breath instead.

“Mama is dead.” The child’s voice is high and quivery.

I glance to the stairs, where my first duty lies, but I cannot leave this child here. “What is your name?”

“Odette,” she says, uncertain whether to be frightened of me or not.

“Well, Odette, this is no place to play. Have you no one to look after you?”

“My sister. But when she is working, I am to hide like a little mouse.”

At least her sister is no fool. “But this is not a good place to hide, is it? Look how easily I found you!”

For the first time, the girl gives me a shy smile, and in that moment, she reminds me so much of my youngest sister, Louise, that I cannot breathe. Thinking quickly, I take her hand and lead her back to the main hallway.

Hurry, hurry, hurry nips at my heels like a braying hound.

“See that door?” She nods, watching me uncertainly. “Go through that door, then down the stairs. The chapel is there, and it is a most excellent hiding place.” And since d’Albret and his men never visit the chapel, she will be safe enough.

“Who is your sister?”

“Tilde.”

“Very well. I will tell Tilde where you are so she may come and get you when her work is done.”

“Thank you,” Odette says, then skips off down the hall. I long to escort her there myself, but I already risk being too late for what I must do.

I turn back around and take the stairs two at a time. The thick wooden door on the landing has a new latch, stiff with disuse. I lift it slowly to be certain it will not creak out an alarm.

As I step into the cold winter sunshine, a bitter wind whips at my hair, tearing it from the net that holds it in place. All my caution has cost me precious time, and I pray that I have not been brought up here only to see those I love slaughtered.

I hurry to the crenellated wall and look down into the field below. A small party of mounted knights waits patiently while an even smaller party confers with that braying ass Marshal Rieux. I recognize the duchess immediately, her dainty figure poised on her gray palfrey. She looks impossibly small, far too small to carry the fate of our kingdom on her slender shoulders. That she has managed to hold off a French invasion for this long is impressive; that she has done so in spite of being betrayed by a full half of her councilors is close to a miracle.

Behind her and to the right is Ismae, sister of my heart and, possibly, my blood, if what the nuns at the convent told us is true. My pulse begins to race, but whether in joy that I am not too late or in panic at what I know is coming, I cannot tell.

Keeping my gaze fixed on Ismae, I gather up all my fear and dread and hurl them at her, like stones in a catapult.

She does not so much as glance in my direction.

From deep in the bowels of the castle, off toward the east, comes a faint rumble as the portcullis is raised. This time when I cast my warning, I fling my arms out as well, as if I am shoing away a flock of ducks. I hope—pray—that some bond still exists between us that will allow her to sense me.

But her eyes remain fixed on the duchess in front of her, and I nearly scream in frustration. *Flee*, my mind cries. *It is a trap*. Then, just as I fear I must throw myself from the battlements to gain her attention, Ismae looks up. *Flee*, I beg, then sweep my arms out once more.

It works. She looks away from me to the eastern gate, then turns to shout something to the soldier next to her, and I grow limp with relief.

The small party on the field springs to life, shouting orders and calling to one another. Ismae points again, this time to the west. Good. She has seen the second arm of the trap. Now I must only hope that my warning has not come too late.

Once Marshal Rieux and his men realize what is happening, they wheel their mounts around and gallop back to the city. The duchess and her party move to fall into a new formation but have not yet left the field.

Flee! The word beats frantically against my breast, but I dare not utter it, afraid that even though I stand on this isolated tower, someone from the castle might hear. I lean forward, gripping the cold, rough stone of the battlements so hard that it bites into my gloveless fingers.

The first line of d'Albret's troops rides into my sight, my half brother Pierre in the vanguard. Then, just when I am certain it is too late, the duchess's party splits in two, and a paltry dozen of the duchess's men turn their mounts to meet the coming onslaught. Twelve against two hundred. Hollow laughter at the futility of their actions escapes me but is snatched up by the wind before anyone can hear it.

As the duchess and two others gallop away, Ismae hesitates. I bite my lip to keep from shouting. She cannot think she can help the doomed knights? Their cause is hopeless, and not even our skills can help the twelve who so valiantly ride to their deaths.

"Flee." This time I do utter the word aloud, but just like my laughter, it is caught up by the cold, bitter wind and carried high above, where no one can hear

it. Not the one it is meant to warn, nor those who would punish me for the betrayal.

But perhaps something has carried my warning to Ismae all the same, for she finally wheels her mount around and gallops after the duchess. The iron band squeezing my lungs eases somewhat, for while it is hard enough to watch these men meet their deaths, I could not bear to watch Ismae die.

Or worse, be captured.

If that happened, I would kill her myself rather than leave her to d'Albret, for he will grant her no mercy. Not after she ruined his plans in Guérande and nearly gutted him like a fish. He has had many days to hone his vengeance to a razor-sharp edge.

It is folly for me to linger. I should leave now while there is no chance of being discovered, but I cannot turn away. Like the rushing water of a swollen river, d'Albret's forces swarm the duchess's guard. The resounding clash is like thunder as armor crashes into armor, pikes break through shields, and swords meet.

I am astounded at the ferocity of the duchess's men. They all fight as if they have all been possessed by the spirit of Saint Camulos himself, slashing through their attackers much as farmers scythe through stalks of grain. By some miracle, they hold the oncoming line, and their efforts delay d'Albret's forces long enough for the duchess's party to reach the safety of the trees. D'Albret's greater number of men will be less of an advantage if they all must duck and dodge branches and bracken.

From the east, a trumpet sounds. I frown and look that way, fearing d'Albret has thought to arrange for a third mounted force. But no, the black and white banner of the Rennes garrison stands in stark relief against the crisp blue sky as an additional dozen men ride into the melee. When the duchess and the others finally disappear over the horizon, I allow myself to draw my first full breath.

But even with the infusion of new troops, it is a crushing defeat. The duchess's guards have no chance, not against so many. My hand itches for a weapon, but the knives I carry will do no good from this distance. A crossbow would work, but they are nigh unto impossible to conceal, and so I watch helplessly.

D'Albret had only ever planned for a trap—a quick in-and-out, thrust and parry, and then return with the prize. Once he realizes the quarry has escaped and he no longer has the element of surprise, he gives the signal for his soldiers to fall back behind the castle walls. Better to cut his losses than waste any more men in this failed gambit.

The battle below is nearly over. Only one soldier continues to fight, a great big ox of a man who doesn't have the sense to die quickly like the others. His helm has been knocked from his head, and three arrows pierce his armor, which is dented in a dozen places. His chain mail is torn, and the cuts beneath it bleed profusely, but still he fights with a nearly inhuman strength, stumbling ever forward into the mass of his enemies. *It is all right, I long to tell him. Your young duchess is safe. You may die in peace, and then you will be safe as well.*

His head jerks up from the blow he has just taken, and across the distance our eyes meet. I wonder what color they are and how quickly they will film over once Death claims him.

Then one of d'Albret's men lunges forward and cuts the knight's horse out from under him. He gives a long, despairing bellow as he goes down, then like ants swarming a scrap of meat, his enemies are upon him. The man's death cry reaches all the way up to the tower and wraps itself around my heart, calling for me to join it.

A fierce wave of longing surges through me, and I am jealous of that knight and the oblivion that claims him. He is free now, just like the gathering vultures who circle overhead. How easily they come and go, how far above danger they fly. I am not sure I can return to my own cage, a cage built of lies and suspicions and fear. A cage so full of darkness and shadow it may as well be death.

I lean forward, pushing my body out past the battlements. The wind plucks at my cloak, buffets me, as if it would carry me off in flight, just like the birds or the knight's soul. *Let go, it cries. I will take you far, far away.* I want to laugh at the exhilarating feeling. *I will catch you, it whistles seductively.*

Would it hurt? I wonder, staring down at the jagged rocks below. Would I feel the moment of my landing? I close my eyes and imagine hurtling through space, rushing down, down, down, to my death.

Would it even work? At the convent, the sisters of Mortain were as stingy with their knowledge of our deathly skills and abilities as a miser is with his coin. I do not fully understand all the powers Death has bestowed upon me. Besides, Death has already rejected me twice. What if He did so a third time and I had to spend the rest of my life broken and helpless, forever at the mercy of those around me? That thought has me shuddering violently, and I take a step away from the wall.

"Sybella?"

Fresh panic flares in my breast, and my hand reaches for the cross nestled among the folds of my skirt, for it is no ordinary crucifix but a cunningly disguised knife designed for me by the convent. Even as I turn around, I widen my eyes as if excited and curve the corners of my mouth up in a brazen smile.

Julian stands in the doorway. “What are you doing out here?” he asks.

I let my eyes sparkle with pleasure—as if I’m glad to see him rather than dismayed—then turn back around to the battlement to compose myself. I shove all my true thoughts and feelings deep inside, for while Julian is the kindest of them all, he is no fool. And he has always been skilled at reading me. “Watching the rout.” I am careful to make my voice purr with excitement. At least he did not find me until *after* I warned Ismae.

He joins me at the wall, so close that our elbows touch, and casts me a look of wry admiration. “You wanted to watch?”

I roll my eyes in disdain. “It matters not. The bird slipped the net.”

Julian tears his gaze away from me and looks out onto the field for the first time. “The duchess got away?”

“I’m afraid so.”

He glances quickly back at me, but I keep the look of contempt plastered to my face like a shield. “He will not be happy,” Julian says.

“No, he will not. And the rest of us will pay the price.” I look at him as if just now noticing he is not dressed for battle. “Why are you not on the field with the others?”

“I was ordered to stay behind.”

A brief spasm of fear clutches my heart. Is d’Albret having me watched so very closely, then?

Julian offers me his arm. “We need to get back to the hall before he returns.”

I dimple at him and cozy up to his arm, letting it almost but not quite brush against my breast. It is the one power I have over him—doling out favors just often enough that he does not need to grab for them.

As we reach the tower door, Julian glances back over his shoulder at the battlement then turns his unreadable gaze on me. “I will not tell anyone that you were up here,” he says.

I shrug, as if it is of no difference to me. Even so, I fear he will make me pay for this kindness of his.

Already I regret not jumping while I had the chance.

Chapter Two

I HURRY ALONGSIDE JULIAN, REFUSING to let my mind pick and fret at possibilities. I hold my head high, my scorn of those around me plain on my face. In truth, it is no act, for I loathe nearly everyone here, from d'Albret's courtiers and attendants to the spineless Breton lordlings who showed no resistance when he seized their duchess's castle for his own. Craven, lickspittle lackeys, the lot of them.

Julian pauses just outside the great hall, waits for a small cluster of retainers to pass, then slips in behind them, minimizing the chances that our entrance will be noted. And while I am glad he is committed to keeping my secret, I can only wonder what payment he will demand for doing so.

Inside the hall, quiet servants hurry to and fro, carrying flagons of wine, stoking the fire, trying to anticipate every need before they can be scolded or punished for not seeing to it quickly enough. Small knots of people are scattered throughout the hall, talking furtively among themselves. Clearly, word has reached them that d'Albret's gambit has failed and he will not be returning in triumph.

The only person in the hall who does not have the good sense to cloak himself in caution is the idiot Marshal Rieux. He paces before the fireplace, railing at Madame Dinan that d'Albret has destroyed his honor by springing a trap while under Rieux's flag of truce. He is a fine one to talk about honor as he was the duchess's own tutor and guardian—up until the day he betrayed her and joined forces with d'Albret, certain their combined might would convince the young duchess she had no choice but to do what they wished.

But she surprised them all.

There is a deafening clatter of hooves out in the courtyard as the men return, followed by the sound of soldierly chaos—the rattle of discarded weapons, the creak of leather, the clang of mail and armor. Usually, there are shouts of victory and coarse laughter, but not today. Today the men are eerily silent.

There is a thud as a door is flung open. Quick, heavy footsteps stride down the hall accompanied by the jingle of spurs. The entire room—even Rieux—falls quiet as we await the approaching storm. Servants make themselves scarce, and a few of the more cowardly retainers find excuses to leave the hall.

The desire to be elsewhere is overwhelming. It is all I can do to keep my feet anchored to the floor and not turn on my heel and run back up the stairs to the

safety of the upper chambers. But my very guilt requires that I stay and show d'Albret that I have nothing to hide. Instead of fleeing as I wish, I lean toward Julian's ear. "Do you think Madame Dinan and Marshal Rieux are lovers?"

Even though Julian smiles in amusement, he also gives my arm a reassuring squeeze. I frown in annoyance and shrug my arm away from him. He knows me too well. Far, far too well.

And then the force of d'Albret's presence is upon us, swirling into the room with all the heat and destruction of a firestorm. With him comes the stench of blood and mud and sweat. His face is white with fury, making his beard look all the more unnaturally black. Close on his heels is his main henchman, Bertrand de Lur, captain of the guard, followed by a dozen lords and retainers. Two of them, Barons Julliers and Vienne, were the duchess's own vassals, but they were so eager to prove their loyalty to d'Albret that they agreed to ride with him to set this trap, even though they knew full well what he had in mind for their liege.

It therefore brings me a great joy to see that Mortain has marked them both for death—each has a dark shadowy smear across his brow. Between that and the duchess getting away, this day has not turned out half bad.

"Why are you smiling?" Julian asks.

I pull my gaze away from the two men. "Because this should prove most entertaining," I murmur, just before d'Albret's voice cracks through the hall like a whip. "Get men up in all the towers. See if anyone is there who shouldn't be. If a warning was sent, it most likely came from the north tower."

I press my back against the wall and wish the nuns had taught us a cantrip to call down invisibility.

"Bring Pierre to me!" d'Albret continues. "His charge from the west gate should have come sooner. His laziness may well have cost me my prize." He thrusts his hands out, and his squire darts forward and removes his right gauntlet. Before the boy can take off the left, d'Albret turns to shout another order. The squire leaps back out of reach and waits warily, afraid to draw closer but even more afraid of not being there when needed. "I also want a detail of men to ride after the duchess and report on her movements and the forces protecting her. If a chance presents itself to snatch her, do it. Any man who brings her to me will find himself richly rewarded."

As de Lur repeats these orders to his men, a second squire hovers nearby, ready to place a goblet of wine in d'Albret's hand before he has to ask. Without looking, d'Albret reaches for it, then we all wait in pinprick anticipation while he slakes his thirst. Madame Dinan steps forward as if to calm him, then thinks better of it.

When the count has drained the goblet, he stares at it a long moment, then hurls it into the fireplace. The violent shatter of crystal echoes in the quiet hall. Slowly, he turns back to the room, wielding the silence with as much skill and cunning as he does his sword, letting it grow until it is stretched tighter than a drum skin. “How did the soldiers from Rennes manage to arrive just then, hmm?” His voice is deceptively soft and far more terrifying than his shouting. “How is that possible? Do we have a traitor in our midst?”

The room is silent, each of us knowing better than to risk answering that question. We know we have many traitors in our midst, but it is easy enough to betray a young girl. Whether any of them dared to betray d’Albret is another matter.

Marshal Rieux clenches his fists and takes a step toward d’Albret. Dinan reaches out to stop him, but he is too quick. *Mon Dieu*, he is either the bravest man I have ever met or the greatest fool.

“How can you have a traitor when no one knew of your plans?” Rieux asks.

D’Albret’s gaze flicks lazily at Rieux’s clenched fists. “It was a last-minute decision.”

“Even so, I should have been told. I gave my word that the duchess would be granted safe parley.” *Merde*. Does the idiot not feel the sands of his life slipping through the hourglass as he taunts d’Albret?

D’Albret turns his full attention to Rieux. Beside me, Julian tenses. “That is precisely why you were not told. You had given your word and would have clucked and scolded like an old woman.”

Rieux says nothing. Whether because he is stunned by d’Albret’s answer or because he is finally wise to his danger, I do not know.

“Besides”—d’Albret’s voice takes on a mocking note—“look at how well your arguments won her over. It would be a poor commander who had only one tactic for winning a war.” Then, faster than quicksilver, the look on d’Albret’s face shifts and is no longer merely disdainful, but terrible. “You did not learn of this plan and warn her, did you? To protect your honor?”

Rieux recoils. Whatever he sees in d’Albret’s eyes has finally given him pause. “No,” he says shortly.

D’Albret holds his gaze for a long moment before turning back to the room. “How did the garrison from Rennes come to ride to her rescue? Why now? Why today, at this hour?” The count’s eyes glitter dangerously. “The only explanation is that we have a traitor in our midst.”

At least the arrival of the Rennes troops has distracted him from the north tower. For the moment.

“The duchess and Dunois brought news of the French.” Rieux changes the subject abruptly.

D’Albret cocks his head, waiting.

“They say the French have crossed the border into Brittany and have taken three Breton towns, Ancenis among them.”

Ancenis is Marshal Rieux’s own holding. D’Albret purses his mouth, studying the marshal. “No doubt Dunois wished to divert your attention.” D’Albret calls out to Bertrand de Lur. “Send a scouting party to confirm this report.”

De Lur nods, but before he can give the order, d’Albret calls out additional instructions. “When that is done, question the men. See if any have departed for Rennes in the last week. If so, be sure to bring them to me for questioning when they return.”

The men-at-arms grow silent—a few grow pale—for the methods d’Albret uses for questioning are the well-known stuff of nightmares. De Lur nods curtly, then goes to carry out his lord’s orders. On his way out of the hall, he glances at me and winks. I pretend I do not see and instead focus on my brother Pierre as he strides past the departing captain. His helmet is under his arm, his chin is raised, and he has an ugly expression on his face. The white scar through his left eyebrow stands out like a brand. “What happened?” he calls as he strips out of his gloves. “How did she get away?”

D’Albret’s head snaps up. “You were late with your men.”

The accusation stops Pierre cold, and the rush of conflicting emotions that flutter across his face would be humorous if his situation were not so dire. “We were delayed by citizens who tried to jam the gates to prevent our joining you on the field.”

D’Albret studies him a long moment, trying to see if he is lying. “You should have killed them.”

“I did,” Pierre says, his full, ripe mouth sullen.

“You should have killed them faster,” d’Albret mutters, and a bitter laugh nearly escapes my throat. My brother does not murder quickly enough for him. In the end, however, d’Albret gives a brusque nod, which is as close as he ever comes to praise.

A commotion disrupts the tense moment as the returning soldiers herd a half a dozen men into the hall, naught but the dregs of the servants, by the looks of them.

D’Albret taps a finger to his lips. “They were found in the tower?”

De Lur kicks one of the men, who is not groveling enough to suit him. “No, but they were not on duty and have no witnesses to say where they were during the attack.”

D'Albret cocks his head like a curious vulture. Slowly, he approaches the small group of the duchess's servants. "Are you such very loyal men, then?" he asks, his voice as soft and gentle as the finest velvet.

When no one answers, he smiles. It sends chills down my back. "You can tell me, for I am a great admirer of loyalty."

The oldest of them does his best to stand tall, but it is clear that he has been beaten and his leg will not work properly. "Aye, my lord," he says proudly. "We have served our duchess from the moment she was born and do not intend to stop now."

"The French were not able to buy you off with their gold?"

I close my eyes and pray briefly that the old fool will watch his tongue and look to his own safety, but he is too wrapped up in his honor. "Not us, sire."

D'Albret takes a step closer, his great bulk towering over the man, his gaze sweeping over the group. "Which of you learned of our little surprise greeting and crept out to warn the duchess?"

"None of us knew," the old man says, and I start to breathe a sigh of relief. But the fool is still riding high on his great loyalty and adds, "But we'd have told her if we did."

Annoyed, d'Albret looks over at Pierre. "How did we miss this one?"

My brother shrugs. "Even the best traps don't catch all the rats the first time, my lord."

Without word or warning, d'Albret hauls back his steel-gauntleted hand and strikes the old man across the face. The servant's neck snaps back with an audible crack. Julian squeezes my hand—hard—warning me to stay silent and still. And even though I want to fly at d'Albret, I do not move. Just as that last valiant knight held his position, so must I hold mine. As Death's handmaiden, I must be in place so I may strike when the time comes. Especially now, when d'Albret's bold treachery has assuredly earned him the very marque I have been waiting to see for six long months.

Besides, the old man is dead; my anger will do him no good. I utter a prayer for his departing soul. It is the least I can do, although it is not nearly enough.

Marshal Rieux steps forward with a look of outrage on his face, but before he can speak, d'Albret roars out, "I spared your miserable lives." His voice reverberates through the room like thunder, and the other servants finally have the sense to cower in fright. "And this is how you repay me?" There is a ring of steel as he draws his sword. My stomach shrivels into a tight little knot and tries to crawl up my throat, but before I can so much as call out a warning, the sword cuts through the huddled men. Blood splatters over the floor, then a second blow dispatches the rest.

I do not even realize I have taken a step forward until I feel Julian's arm snake around my waist to hold me in place. "Careful," he murmurs.

I close my eyes and wait for the roiling in my gut to pass. Julian nudges me, and my eyes snap open, a carefully neutral expression on my face. D'Albret's shrewd gaze is on us and I curl my lip, as if faintly amused by the carnage he has just wrought. "Fools," I mutter. It is a good thing that I no longer have a heart, because if I did, it would surely break.

"Julian!" d'Albret calls out, and I feel Julian flinch. He steps away from my side. "Yes, my lord father?"

"See to the cleanup here. And you, daughter." D'Albret's flat black eyes zero in on me and I force myself to meet his gaze with naught but amusement on my face. "See to Madame Dinan. I fear she has fainted."

As I step away from the safety of the stone wall to do as my father bids, I wish again—so very much—that Julian had not found me up on that tower. If our father finds out what I did, he will kill me as easily as he killed those men.

Although perhaps not as quickly.

Chapter Three

I FOLLOW THE FOOTMEN CARRYING Madame Dinan to her room, my thoughts and movements sluggish, as if I am wading through mud. It takes every last crumb of discipline I possess to keep myself together. I do not dare stumble about half-witted now.

When we reach the chamber, I have the footmen put her on the bed, then order them from the room. I stare down at the older woman. We are not allies, Madame Dinan and I; we merely share each other's secrets, which is an entirely different thing.

She came into our lives only occasionally, when she would escape her duties as governess to the duchess, the very duchess she has so thoroughly betrayed. D'Albret relied on her to oversee his daughters' upbringing. Much of that oversight was conducted across distances, with letters and go-betweens, except when some tragedy struck—then she would make an effort to come in person and smooth things over.

She looks older in repose, her face missing the false gaiety she wears like a mask. I unlace her bodice to ease her breathing, then remove the heavy, cumbersome headdress she wears. Not because it has contributed to her fainting, but because I know it eats at her vanity that she has white hair like an old woman's. It is a small enough punishment, but it is one I can afford.

I reach down and slap her cheek—perhaps harder than necessary—to rouse her. Her breath catches in her throat as she startles awake. She blinks twice, orienting herself, then begins to sit up. I push her back down. “Easy now, madame.”

Her eyes widen when she sees who attends her. Her gaze flutters around the room and notes that we are alone. That gaze lands once more on me, then skitters away like a nervous lark. “What happened?” she asks.

Her voice is low and throaty, and I wonder if that is part of what draws d'Albret to her. Some say their union began when she was in the flower of her youth, a full two years younger than I am now. “You fainted.”

Her long skinny fingers pluck at her bodice. “It grew warm in there.”

Her quick and easy lie pricks my temper. I lean down close and put my face next to hers, forcing my voice to be as light and sweet as if we were talking about the latest fashion. “It was not warmth that caused you to faint, but the slaughter of innocents. Do you not remember?”

She closes her eyes again, and her face drains of what little color is left in it. Good. She does remember. “They were simply punished for their disloyalty.”

“Disloyalty? What of your disloyalty? Besides, you knew those people!” I hiss. “They were servants who’d waited on you for years.”

Her eyes snap open. “What do you think I should have done? It’s not as if I could have stopped him.”

“But you did not even try!” Our angry gazes hold for a long moment.

“Neither did you.”

Her words are like a kick to my gut. Afraid I will slap her, I shove to my feet, cross over to her wooden chest, and begin fumbling through her pots of powder, jars of cream, and crystal vials. “But *I* am not his favorite, the one voice he listens to. That role has belonged only to you for as long as I can remember.” At last I find a linen cloth. I dampen it with water from the ewer, then return to her side and practically fling it onto her forehead.

She flinches, then glares at me. “Your tender ministrations may well kill me.”

I sit down and busy myself with my skirt, afraid she will see just how close to the truth she has come. Our secrets sit heavy in the room, not only the ones that we share, but those that we keep from each other. Neither she nor Rieux is *marqued*, and I am plagued by this nearly as much as I am by d’Albret’s lack of a *marque*.

When I speak again, I am able to keep my voice calm. “And what of the duchess? You have cared for her since she was in swaddling clothes. How could you let d’Albret spring such a trap on her?”

She closes her eyes to the truth and dismisses my words with a quick shake of her head. “He was only claiming what was promised him.”

Her steadfast denial is like flint to tinder, and my temper flares again. “He was going to kidnap her, rape her, declare the marriage consummated, then perform the marriage service after the fact.” Not for the first time, I wonder if he is as rough with Madame Dinan as he is with others, or if there is some softer emotion between them.

She lifts her small, pointed chin. “She betrayed him! Lied to him! She had been promised to him by her father. He was only doing what any man would when such promises are broken.”

“I’ve always wondered what you tell yourself so you may sleep at night.” Afraid that I will say something to break our precarious truce, I rise to my feet and head for the door.

“It is the truth!” The normally elegant and refined Dinan screeches at me like a fishwife. While getting under her skin is no small accomplishment, it does little to wash the bitterness of the day from my tongue.

It is no easy or pleasant thing to examine d'Albret for a *marque*. Ismae claims it is a way for the god to keep us humble, *marquing* men where we cannot easily see. I say it is the god's own perverted sense of humor, and if I ever come face to face with Him, I shall complain.

But after today's spectacular bit of treachery, d'Albret must be *marqued* for death at last. It is the one reason I allowed myself to be sent back, because the abbess promised he would be *marqued* and that I could be the one to kill him.

For once, luck is with me: the chambermaid is none other than Tilde, Odette's sister. Which means I have something with which to bargain. I find her in the kitchen, filling up jugs with hot water for his bath. When I tell her what I need, she looks at me with the frightened eyes of a cornered doe. "But if the count sees you . . ." she protests.

"He won't see me," I assure her. "Not unless you give me away by looking at my hiding place. Do not be so stupid as to do that, and we will both be fine."

She begins chewing her lip, which is already ragged from her constant worry. "And you will get Odette away from here? As soon as possible?"

"Yes. I will get her away tomorrow morning when the first delivery comes to the kitchens. She will be hidden in the cart as it leaves." I will smuggle the girl out even if Tilde and I do not reach an agreement. The child reminds me far too much of my own sisters, who, if not for my desperate machinations, would be here in this vipers' nest with me now.

It was the biggest argument I had with my father since the convent forced me to return to his household six months ago. Last autumn when he made ready to travel to Guérande to put his case before the meeting of the barons, he was planning on bringing all his children. He wanted them nearby, where he could use them for his own ends and needs. I argued long and hard that little Louise was too young—and ill—to make the trip. And that Charlotte was too close to young womanhood to be near so many soldiers. He ignored me and had their nurse administer them each a sound beating—simply to punish me—then ordered their things packed.

But I would do anything to keep my sisters from d'Albret's dark influences. Including poison them.

Not too much. While I am not immune to poisons as Ismae is, I did pay careful attention to Sister Serafina's poison lessons and used only enough to make both my sisters and their nurse too ill to travel.

I blamed it on the eel pie.

Little Odette is in every bit as much danger as my sisters but has none of the protection afforded them by virtue of their noble blood. So I will get her to

safety regardless, although I do not tell Tilde that.

“Very well,” Tilde says at last, her eyes taking in my borrowed servant’s gown and headscarf. “You have certainly dressed the part.”

I give her an encouraging smile when what I want to do is wring her skinny neck so she will quit talking and get on with it. That would not, however, reassure her.

She thrusts a copper jug at me. It is full of steaming water and so heavy I nearly drop it before I can settle my grip to the handles. Together we begin our climb up the back stairs to d’Albret’s bedchamber. We meet no other servants on the way. Indeed, since d’Albret has taken over the palace, most of them stay out of sight as much as possible. They are nearly invisible, like enchanted servants in a hearth tale.

Once inside the room, I set my jug down next to the tub in front of the fire and look for a hiding place.

Two of the walls are covered in carved wooden paneling and two are covered in fine crimson and gold wall hangings. I make for the wall hangings, a spot just behind an ornately carved chest, which should hide my feet from view should they show beneath the curtains. “Remember, do not look over here, no matter what happens.”

Tilde glances up, a new flare of alarm in her eyes. “What would happen, demoiselle? You said nothing would happen, that you just wanted—”

“I merely meant that no matter how nervous you get or what the baron does, do not look over here. It could mean both our deaths.”

Her eyes widen and for a moment I think she will lose her nerve altogether. “For your sister’s sake,” I remind her, hoping to strengthen her resolve.

It works. She gives a firm nod and turns to the task of filling the tub. I slip into my hiding place behind the silk wall hangings and pray they will not also serve as my shroud.

The stone wall is cold against my back, and the curtains part just the slightest bit. If I bend my knee a little, I do not even need to touch the silk to be able to see into the room.

I have not been in place longer than a handful of moments before there is a noise at the door. Tilde freezes, then resumes pouring water from the ewer into the tub.

The chamber door bursts open and Count d’Albret strides in, followed by a handful of retainers, my half brothers Pierre and Julian among them. Although they share the same parents, they look nothing alike. Pierre takes after our father, with a thick build and coarse manner, while Julian favors their mother, with more refined looks and manner. D’Albret unbuckles his sword, and Bertrand de

Lur steps forward to take it from him. “I want another score of men riding for Rennes tonight,” d’Albret tells his captain. “I want them in the city as soon as possible, hiding among the citizens. I’ll need reliable eyes and ears there if we are to retaliate against her treachery.”

My pulse quickens.

“As you wish, my lord.” De Lur takes the sword and lays it on one of the chests.

D’Albret shrugs his massive, bull-like shoulders, and my brother Pierre jumps forward to take his mantle before it can fall to the ground. “I want them to report on the city’s mood, the garrison, the provisions. I want to know if the city can withstand a siege, and for how long. They are to find out who is loyal to the duchess, who is loyal to the French, and whose loyalty is still for sale.”

“Consider it done, my lord,” de Lur says.

Pierre leans forward, his hooded eyes bright. “And what of your message to the duchess? When shall we send it?”

Like a striking snake, d’Albret reaches out and clouts him across the mouth. “Did I give you leave to speak of the matter, whelp?”

“No, my lord.” Pierre dabs the blood from his split lip, looking resentful and sullen. I could almost feel sorry for him, but he has worked so hard to become just like d’Albret that I feel nothing but contempt.

The room grows quiet and I angle my eye to better see d’Albret. He is studying Tilde, who is concentrating very carefully on the steaming ewer of water she is pouring into the tub. “Leave me to my bath,” d’Albret tells the others.

With a knowing glance or two in Tilde’s direction, they quickly disperse.

I can see Tilde’s neat linen veil tremble as she shakes with fear. D’Albret takes two strides toward her and comes fully into my view for the first time. He grabs her chin between his fingers and pulls her head up so he can look into her face. “You know better than to speak of what you hear in my chamber, do you not?”

She keeps her gaze averted. “I am sorry, my lord. You will have to speak up. My father boxed my ears so often I am fair hard of hearing.”

Oh, clever girl! My estimation of Tilde grows, but this ruse will not be enough to save her.

D’Albret studies her for a long moment. “Just as well,” he says, and Tilde cocks her head to the side as if straining to hear him. He studies her another few seconds before letting go of her chin.

D’Albret holds his arms out to his sides, a silent order to remove his shirt. When Tilde steps forward to lift it over his head, d’Albret’s eyes roam up and

down her slender body, and I see the exact moment his desire awakens. The rutting pig will bed her before he orders her death.

Now I will need to find a way to smuggle Tilde out of the palace as well as her little sister. Unless I have an opportunity to kill d'Albret before then.

Tilde removes his shirt and steps away.

D'Albret's chest is shaped like an enormous wine cask, his flesh the pallid whiteness of a fish, but instead of being covered in scales, it is covered with coarse black hair. I ignore my disgust and force myself to search his body. Mortain *must* have marked him for death.

But nowhere among all that hair is the marque I seek. No smudge, no shadow, nothing that will allow me to kill this monster with Mortain's blessing. My hands grip the silken wall hangings, and I crush them in my fists. It would be too dangerous to attack him head-on. Perhaps Mortain intends for me to stab him in the back or pierce the base of his skull with a thin, needle-like blade.

D'Albret unlaces his breeches and steps out of them and into the tub. I stretch my neck to try to get a glimpse of his back, but I cannot see it from this angle.

As Tilde starts to move away, he reaches out and grabs her hand. She grows still, afraid to move. Slowly, with his eyes on her face, he pulls her hand down into the tub, into the water, his lips growing slack with anticipated pleasure.

Please, Mortain, no! I cannot watch this, else I will have to kill him, marque or no.

Like an unsettled flock of pigeons, every one of the nuns' warnings rushes through my head: killing without a marque is killing outside Mortain's grace and I will imperil my immortal soul. It will be sundered from me forever and forced to wander lost for all eternity.

But I cannot stand here and watch him rape her. Still uncertain of what I intend to do, I begin inching from my hiding place and reaching for my knives. A sharp knock at the door halts my step.

"Who is it?" d'Albret growls.

"Madame Dinan, my lord."

D'Albret drops Tilde's hand—is that her sigh of relief or my own?—then nods his head toward the door. The maid rushes to open it and let Madame Dinan in.

Her glance flicks in annoyance toward the younger, prettier serving girl. "Leave," she orders the girl. "I will attend the count."

Tilde does not wait for d'Albret to agree but slips silently from the room, proving once again that she has her wits about her.

When the two are alone, d'Albret rises from the tub, and I have a clear view of his back. The water sluices over the coarse black hair like a stream running over

rocks, but there is no marque. Not even a smudge or shadow I can pretend is one.

Disappointment strikes me like a fist, and I feel sick. Not merely a sourness in my stomach, but a sickness of the heart. True despair. If this man is not marked, then how can Mortain exist?

On the heels of that thought comes a more welcome realization. If Mortain does not exist, then how can there be any danger in stepping outside His grace?

But am I certain that He does not exist? Certain enough to stake my eternal soul on it?

Before I can decide, the chamber door bursts open and d'Albret's head snaps up. "Who's there?"

Marshal Rieux's voice holds a note of faint distaste. "I apologize for the inconvenience. But the scouts have returned from Ancenis."

"And it could not wait until morning?" d'Albret asks.

I am certain d'Albret will strike Rieux down where he stands for his gross insolence in interrupting, but he does not. Either Rieux was born under a lucky star or d'Albret has some need for the man and does not wish to destroy him just yet.

"No, it could not. What Captain Dunois told us is true. The French have taken Ancenis. We must send a show of force immediately to help defend it."

"Must we?" d'Albret asks, and there is another pause that sends a shard of ice deep into my gut.

"But of course!"

Through my sliver of curtain, I see a frown on Madame Dinan's face as she smooths her skirt over and over again, even though there is not a wrinkle in sight. D'Albret cocks his head. "Very well." He allows Dinan to help him into his chamber robe, then turns to Rieux.

"Your sword." D'Albret puts his hand out, and my heart starts to race. Now the fool has done it. He's annoyed d'Albret once too often.

Marshal Rieux hesitates. D'Albret puts a finger to his lips, as if sharing a secret. I cannot bear to watch, for while I do not care for Rieux, the man has at least tried to cling to the standards of honor. I avert my eyes, shifting my gaze to the left, away from the gap in the curtains through which I've been watching them all.

I remember the blood . . .

I want to put my hands over my ears like a child, but I am unwilling to let go of my knives.

There is a ring of steel as Rieux draws his sword, followed by a soft meaty thud as d'Albret takes it in his hand. A moment of silence, then a faint whistling

as the blade arcs through the air. It is followed by a ripping sound as the silk curtain to my right is sliced in two. Surprised silence fills the room as the bottom half slowly puddles to the floor.

I stay as still as possible, huddled far to the left and praying I cannot be seen behind the remaining piece of curtain. My heart threatens to gallop out of my chest. So close. So very, very close.

“What is wrong, my lord?”

“I thought I heard something. Besides, I detest those hangings. See that they are removed by the time I return. Now, come, let us hear what these scouts have to say.”

Then, so suddenly it nearly leaves me breathless, they all quit the room and I am left cowering behind the remaining drape staring at a tub full of cooling water. I close my eyes and shudder at how close I came to death.

At least it would have been quick.

I am still shaking as I make my way to the servants’ quarters and begin searching among all the sleeping bodies on the floor. The room smells of cold nervous sweat and stale breath from so many people crowded together, although their sheer numbers help keep them warm. I pick my way through them, looking for Tilde, but there are so many young women wrapped in blankets and headscarves—and anything else they can find to keep warm—that it is an impossible task. Odette, then. But there are only a handful of children in here, and all of them are young boys—the pages the palace uses for fetching and carrying and sending messages. Which means Odette is not here.

Perhaps she is still in the chapel. *Please do not let me be too late*, I pray as I slip silently from the servants’ quarters and hurry along the quiet stone passageways to look for them there.

The moment I step inside the chapel, I know I am not alone. Two pulses beat somewhere nearby. But that is not my only company. There is also an ice-cold pall that lies over the room. A restless fluttering reminiscent of moths moves silently across my skin. Ghosts. Drawn to the warmth of life like bees are drawn to nectar. Indeed, I do not even need to search for Odette and Tilde; the ghosts hover hungrily above their hiding place.

I hurry over and swat the ghosts away with my hand. Tilde is holding the sleeping Odette, and slowly, she looks up. Her face, pinched and white, goes slack with relief when she sees it is me. “I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” she whispers.

That she did not believe I would do as I’d promised stings, and I scowl at her. “I said I would, didn’t I? I went to the servants’ quarters first. Here. I will hold

the girl while you get dressed.”

Tilde frowns in puzzlement. “Why?”

I lay the bundle of men’s clothing—purloined from the slaughtered servants, although I do not share that with her—on the pew and take the sleeping Odette from her arms. “You would not survive the night,” I tell her, careful to keep my voice matter-of-fact. “Not now that you have heard d’Albret’s plans. I must get you both out immediately.”

Her face softens and her mouth wobbles and I fear she will break down in tears. “Hurry!” I hiss. “And you may well curse me before the night is through.”

She slips out of her gown and pulls on the clothing I have brought. When she is done, we wake the sleeping Odette and coax her into the unfamiliar garments. They are far too big, and when I pull my knife to trim the breeches, both she and Tilde shrink back in fear.

“*Débile!*” I growl. “I have not come this far nor risked this much just to kill you. Stay still.” Fear holding her in place, Odette stands while I saw at her pants until they are short enough that she will not trip on them.

“Be very still now,” I warn her. Before she or Tilde can protest, I reach up, place the edge of my knife against her rich, curly locks, and slice them off.

“My hair!” she cries, one of her hands flying to her cropped head.

“Do not be silly,” I scold her. “It is just hair and will grow back, but it will only get in your way tonight. You must make people think you are a boy. Which of the pages do you like the most?”

She wrinkles her nose. “None.”

Good girl, I think. “Then which do you find the most annoying?”

“Patou,” she says, without hesitation.

“Perfect. Pretend you are Patou. Do all the annoying things he does, walk as he does, spit as he does. All those things you must do tonight.”

She looks at me warily. I lean forward. “It is a game. A trick you must play on the entire palace. To prove that a girl is better than a boy. Can you do that?”

She looks to Tilde, who nods, then turns back to me, and I am relieved to see that some of the fear has left her face. “Yes,” she whispers, so soft and quiet no one could ever mistake her voice for a boy’s.

I turn to Tilde. “Try to see that she does not speak. Her voice will give her away.” Then I lift my knife. “I must do yours as well.”

The serving girl does not falter but steps closer for me to reach. “I cannot ever repay you,” she whispers.

“You have only to get free,” I say as I cut her hair. “That is payment enough.”

An hour later, they are safely tucked up on the seat of the night-soil cart. Odette protests loudly at first. “Bud id stinks!” she says, holding her nose.

I glance slyly at Tilde. “I warned you you might not thank me, but it is the only cart that leaves during the night and can get you into the city without question.”

“It is fine,” Tilde says through the scarf she has brought up to her face to cut the smell. We stare into each other’s eyes for a beat, and the gratitude I see there warms me, makes me think there is some small sliver of good left inside me. I reach out and grab her hand. Squeeze it. “Be strong. Once inside the city, take yourself to the convent of Saint Brigantia. Tell them—tell them the abbess of Saint Mortain has asked that they grant you sanctuary.”

Tilde’s eyes widen at that, but before she can say anything, the night-soil man calls out, “You gonna gab all night or can I be about my business?”

“Hush—you got your payment,” I remind him.

He spits off to the side. “Won’t be worth nothing if I don’t get out of here.” True enough.

As I watch them leave, I am filled with a nearly overpowering need to follow them. Follow them out of the stable yard, past the guard tower, and into the streets of the city, where I can lose myself among the crowds of people. I take one step, and another, then stop. If I go with them, d’Albret will send a full contingent after us. Tilde and Odette’s chances of escape are much better without me.

Besides, I was sent here to do a job, and like that last knight who held off d’Albret’s men this afternoon, I will not leave the field until it is done.

I have not been in bed but half a turn of a glass when the scratching at my door begins. It is soft at first, no more than the whispering of leaves in the wind or the creaking of branches against the wall. I hold still in my bed, listening more closely. There it is again. This time more distinct. My heart begins to pound, and I lift my head from the pillow.

Scratch, scratch, pause, scratch, scratch, scratch.

It is Julian, using the secret code we devised when we were children, a dozen lifetimes ago. But it is not a child’s game he wants to play tonight. I burrow farther into the mattress and pull the covers up over my ears, then hear the muffled rattle as he lifts the latch. I hold very still and keep my breathing even, praying that he will close the door and move on, relieved when he does.

Even so, the scratching follows me into my dreams and turns them into nightmares.

Chapter Four

I AM AWAKENED IN THE morning when my two ladies in waiting come bursting into the room. Jamette de Lur leads the way, pausing barely long enough to keep the door open for Tephania Blaine, who struggles with a tray.

“Did you hear?” Jamette asks.

She is a vain, silly girl given to drama and putting on airs and takes far too much pleasure in my fall from d’Albret’s favor. “Good morning to you too,” I drawl.

Reminded of her place, she flushes slightly, then dips a begrudging curtsy. “Good morning, my lady.”

“What is this news you are screeching about?”

She is torn between denying that she was screeching and launching into her drama. The drama wins. “They rooted out a nest of traitors and rebels yesterday! If not for their quick action, we could all have been slaughtered in our beds.”

So that is the story d’Albret and the others are putting out. There is a faint rattle as Tephania sets the tray down on a table. “Also, a servant girl went missing during the night.”

I throw off the covers and get to my feet. “My, the castle was busy while I slept! Surely this servant just snuck off to visit her lover?”

Tephania looks at me with stricken eyes and I see that she is genuinely frightened. “They searched the castle high and low and found no signs of her.”

Jamette tosses her head and hands me my chamber robe. “Some say she was in league with the traitors.”

Débile! I should have seen that coming. I was so concerned with getting them away as soon as possible I didn’t stop to consider the timing.

“I heard she was killed for seeing something she shouldn’t have,” Tephania says as she gives me a cup of heated wine.

My head snaps up to study her more closely, but she does not appear to be insinuating anything. “Where did you hear that?”

She shrugs. “The servants were talking when I fetched your tray.”

I say nothing and sip the wine, taking a moment to compose myself.

Jamette’s eyes go wide. “Mayhap the ghosts got her.”

I bite back a sigh. Must I give up sleeping altogether in order to stay abreast of what goes on in this castle? “What ghosts?” I ask.

“The ones in the old tower. It is well and truly haunted. Many have heard the

ghosts moaning and wailing and making a terrible noise.”

Tephanie crosses herself, then turns to me. “Here is your clean chemise, my lady.”

I set down my wine and shrug out of my robe. Tephanie’s cheeks pinken with embarrassment as she helps me into my shift. “My lady is growing thin,” she murmurs. “You must try to eat more.”

While I cannot help but wish she were less observant, I am inexplicably touched that she has noticed.

“It does not help your looks any that you insist on wearing all these dark colors,” Jamette says, holding out a gown of patterned black brocade. “It makes you appear unnaturally pale.” What she chafes at is that my complexion is fairer than hers.

“I’m afraid my time at the convent of Saint Brigantia has lessened my love of material luxuries,” I tell her. Since rejoining d’Albret’s household, I have worn nothing but somber colors—not because of some newfound piousness, but out of respect for all those d’Albret has murdered.

Tephanie hands me the silver chain from which my special crucifix hangs and helps to fasten it about my waist. The chain also holds nine glass rosary beads, one for each of the old saints and every one of them filled with poison. “If we hurry,” she says, “we can attend mass this morning.”

I glance up at her. “Do you *want* to attend mass?”

She shrugs. “It seems like a good day for it.”

“Tephanie, my little mouse, what forgiveness must you pray for?” Her sins can only be those of a small child—the wanting of a sweet or a new gown. But she blushes in embarrassment, and I am pricked with guilt for having teased her. “Go,” I tell her. “Attend your mass.”

Her face falls. “You mean, alone?”

“I do not wish to pray for forgiveness.”

“Although, Heavenly Father knows, you need it more than most,” Jamette mutters. I pretend I do not hear her but add it to her long list of transgressions.

“Wait,” I tell Tephanie. “You are right. With rebels and ghosts lurking in every corner, it is not safe to wander this castle’s halls.” They do not catch my irony, but the truth is, we have more to fear from those who claim to protect us than from any rebel or spirit.

I tug my skirt into place and then hurry to one of my trunks. I retrieve two of my smaller knives and turn back to the others.

Tephanie’s eyes widen. “Where did you get those?” she asks.

“From my brothers, goose, where do you think? Here.” I thrust one at her. “Carry it from the chain at your waist. You, too.” I hand the second one to

Jamette. “Now, hurry along or you will miss your mass,” I tell Tephanie.

“But—”

“When you are done, come find us in the solar.” Realizing she will never leave unless I order her to, I add, “You are dismissed.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she bobs a curtsy and then, still clutching her knife, hurries from the room.

When she is gone, I sit down so Jamette can dress my hair. In truth, I can do a better job myself, but it irks her to have to serve me, so I relish giving the task to her. It is almost not worth it, for she is intentionally ungentle and there are some days, like today, when I fear she will tug all the hair from my head. It makes me long for Annith and Ismae, their gentle hands and soothing ways. Not to mention their razor-sharp wits. My heart twists with longing, hot and bitter.

As I glance resentfully at Jamette’s reflection in the mirror, I see she sports a new ring on her finger, fashioned of pearls and a ruby. A prize, no doubt, for carrying reports of my movements and actions back to my father. I cannot help but hate her for it; I already feel trapped and suffocated. Knowing that she relays my every move to him makes it nearly impossible to breathe.

After I have dressed and broken my fast, there is nothing for it but to join the other ladies in the solar. I dare not attempt any spying today, as my father and his men will no doubt be extra alert in the days to come. I must be content with what I accomplished yesterday, for I *did* accomplish much, I remind myself. I saved the duchess from d’Albret’s trap and got Tilde and Odette to safety. There are many weeks when I am not granted any such victories.

With a resigned sigh, I grab my embroidery basket. At least I will have something entertaining to occupy my mind: plotting how best to kill the two marked barons. Smiling, I open my chamber door and nearly bump into —“Julian!” I say, all the joy I have been feeling crumbling to dust. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I come to wish you a good morning, fair sister.” He glances over at Jamette, who is making calf eyes at him. “We must speak privately for a moment, if you please.”

Looking disappointed, she curtsies, and before I can think of an excuse to keep her near, she is gone. “What is it?” I ask, my face a picture of concern.

Julian’s face is carefully blank. “Where were you last night?”

My heart thuds painfully against my ribs. “I was here in my room—where were you?”

He ignores my question. “Then why did you not answer when I knocked?”

“I took a sleeping draft for the vile headache I had.”

Julian's face softens and he lifts his hand to tuck a strand of my hair in place. "I could have soothed away your headache, had I but known."

With all my secrets that he keeps hanging in the balance, I smile up at him and tap him playfully on the chest. "Then next time, knock louder."

When he smiles back, I know that he believes me. As he lifts my hand and places a lingering kiss upon it, I wonder—for the hundredth time—how on earth I let the convent talk me into returning to my family.

Chapter Five

AFTER A WEEK OF RAIN and being trapped inside the castle with d'Albret and his raging suspicions, we are all at our wits' ends. I even more so than the others, for I have two kills I am eager to make, which is nearly impossible with so many underfoot.

Since I have had nothing but time on my hands, I have considered my options carefully. Sister Arnette believed that arming me was her greatest challenge, since so few of Death's handmaidens have ever had to maintain such a deceptive role for so long. She gave me nearly a dozen knives, most of them long and thin and easily concealed. I have lost four of them along the way, having to leave them with their victims. I also have a thick gold bracelet that holds a garrote wire, but I have no crossbow or throwing rondelles, since they are too difficult to hide or explain away.

Since these barons are allies of my father, I must be subtle. If I leave a trail of murdered men behind me, d'Albret will turn his household upside down in search of the one responsible. A stabbing might be blamed on some soldierly quarrel or a thief in the night, but a garroting would never be. And two such incidents would make d'Albret suspicious and wary.

Although poison is my least favorite weapon, it is often the best choice when subtlety is required. Besides, with the plague having so recently come through Nantes, it will be easy enough to make it appear as if these men simply fell ill and died.

Getting the poison to them is more difficult than it should be. I cannot just slip it into their food, for they eat with the rest of the household, and as much as I dislike everyone here, I am not willing to poison them all. At least not yet.

I could place a candle filled with night whispers in each of their chambers, but there is a good chance some poor servant would light it for them and breathe its deadly fumes, and I have no wish to see more innocents die.

It might be possible to visit one of them bearing a flask of poisoned wine and promising seduction, but that would not work for them both. It would also be difficult to arrange, as Jamette sticks to me like a thorn in soft flesh. Julian, too, is watching me more closely than normal, ever since he found me up on the north tower.

Saint Arduinna's snare then, but I will have to be careful in choosing which of their personal items to poison—I must be sure that only the intended victims will

touch them.

In the end, it is Julliers who provides an answer to my problem. He is fastidious about his hands and has more gloves than I have gowns. I find it easy enough to leave the great hall early one night, slip into both barons' rooms while they and their squires are at their dinners, and apply the poison to the insides of their hunting gloves. Still, it is a close thing, as I run into Jamette on my way back to the hall.

"Where have you been?" she asks.

"I went to the privy," I tell her shortly. "Shall I invite you to come with me next time?"

She wrinkles her nose and falls into step beside me. The small jar of poison is a heavy weight in my pocket, one I would rather have taken back to my room as soon as possible. Instead, with Jamette's discovering me, I have no choice but to return to the hall with the evidence of my crime still upon me.

Two days later, the rain finally lifts, and we are all eager to be out of the palace, which has begun to feel far too much like a prison. Julian, Pierre, and some of the barons, Julliers and Vienne among them, have arranged for a hunt, and it was not overly difficult to get myself and my ladies in waiting invited along. Of course, I do not need to be on the hunt in order for the poison to work, but I prefer to see a job through to its end.

Besides, I fear I shall go mad again if I do not get out of the castle, even for just a few hours.

The huntsman rides ahead, followed by the handlers and their dogs, who are churning and woofing and barking in their eagerness to be off the leash. I make certain to position myself near Julliers and Vienne but carefully avoid paying any attention to them lest someone should note my doing so.

Pierre had been hoping for a deer, but the huntsman was unable to find a trail. Which was perhaps good, since the ground is thick and muddy after more than a week of rain, and the horses could easily founder and risk breaking a leg if we were to chase deer. Instead, we will be hunting for small game, and so have brought our falcons.

My own sits on my wrist, her small leather hood with its bright red and blue feathers covering her eyes and keeping her calm amid the commotion. Julian gave her to me for my twelfth birthday. When I ran away to the convent, he watched over her for the full three years I was gone, as if knowing I'd be back. When I returned, she'd grown so used to him that at first she would go only to his wrist, not mine.

Just outside the city wall, my falcon grows agitated, turning her head from side to side and causing the tiny silver bells on her jesses to tinkle. We have reached the very place where the duchess's men met their deaths but a handful of days ago, and I wonder if the sensitive creature can feel the lingering presence of death. The heartbreaking bellow of the last knight as he went down echoes in my ears, unnerving me.

"Is everything all right?"

I look up to find Julian has nudged his mount closer to mine.

I shoot him a glance, careful to hide my agitation and fill my expression with annoyance. "Other than half our party being fools? Yes, except for that, everything is fine."

He smiles. "I am glad you decided to come. I should have expired of boredom otherwise. I might even have had to shoot one of the barons, just for entertainment. They would all be grateful if they knew that your presence has spared them such a fate."

His words strike a chord of unease. Is he fishing? Does he suspect that I am behind the scattered deaths in our party over the last few months? I twist my mouth in a cruel smile. "Do not feel you must resist shooting them on my account. I could do with some entertainment as well."

Julian laughs, a rich easy sound that does much to alleviate my concerns. "Watching Pierre seduce Baron Vienne's wife out from under his nose should be amusing enough."

I turn my gaze to Pierre. He is flirting outrageously with a buxom lady in vermilion velvet. I cannot help but wonder what she sees in him. He is thickly muscled and barrel-chested like our father, and he wears his black hair long and straight. His mouth is full and red, like a girl's.

There is no love lost between Pierre and me. When he was twelve years old, he wanted to prove that he was no mere boy but a man full grown, and did so by forcing my first kiss on me when I was but nine years of age.

I was so startled by the kiss, so taken aback and affronted at this violation of my person, that I retaliated in the only way I knew how: I kissed him back. I didn't simply return the kiss while his lips were already planted on my own. Instead, I waited until he was busy polishing our lord father's armor, sauntered up to him as I had seen Marie the upstairs maid do to one of the men-at-arms, grabbed his smooth cheeks in my hands, and smacked him soundly on his lips.

The scar that adorns his left eyebrow is from where I whacked him with our father's scabbard when he tried to force a second kiss.

But while I rarely have occasion to feel grateful to Pierre, today I do. If Pierre is courting Vienne's wife, any suspicion over her husband's death will fall on

their shoulders rather than mine.

I turn to Julian with a sly smile. “How long will it take Baron Vienne to realize that Pierre is cuckolding him?”

Julian smiles back. “Not long, for Pierre will not truly enjoy himself until he can rub the baron’s nose in it.”

Since we are speaking of the baron, I allow my gaze to drift over to him and Julliers. I can feel the rapid beating of their hearts—as if two horses are galloping far in the distance, just beyond true hearing. Beads of sweat have begun to form on Julliers’s brow, but Vienne shows no signs of distress. He is heavier than Julliers and so will no doubt need to absorb more poison before his symptoms begin in earnest.

Before either Julian or I can say anything further, the huntsman sounds his horn. It is time to hunt.

I remove my falcon’s hood, and she fluffs her wings in readiness, her sharp, keen eye scanning the field. I launch her from my arm, painfully jealous of her freedom as she rises high in the sky, wheeling around once, twice, watching for her prey.

But I have prey of my own. Both the barons have grown ashen, and Julliers’s left arm hangs useless at his side. If he is experiencing numbness in his limbs, it will not be long now.

Then the huntsman sounds his horn again, and the hounds are off the leash, the teeming swarm of them racing toward the underbrush to flush out the game. A frantic thudding of wings follows as the startled partridge take flight.

Like heavy stones thrown from a trebuchet, the falcons drop from the sky and plummet toward their prey. A series of soft thumps follow.

But one falcon—mine—is still moving; a lone rabbit has also been flushed from the brush. The poor creature’s death squeal is harsh in the quiet of the forest, and every nerve in my body flares, for the noise made by a dying rabbit is shockingly similar to that produced by a dying man. As the falcon returns, I thrust out my arm and hold my breath, waiting to see whose wrist she will return to. When she lands on mine, I decide to take it as a fortuitous omen.

I glance once more at the two barons and wonder yet again why Mortain has marked them for death but not d’Albret. Their sins and betrayals are small when weighed against his.

It would have me questioning Mortain’s very existence if I did not so desperately need to believe in Him, for if He is not my father, then d’Albret is, and that I could not bear.

Flushed with the pleasure of our morning's hunt, we head back to the castle. Julliers has given his hawk to his groom to carry, and Vienne slumps drunkenly in his saddle. While I am glad that the poison is working, I feel a tinge of regret at not being able to use my knives. They offer a much quicker and cleaner end, and I have no appetite for the lingering deaths of soft, pampered barons.

Everyone is happy with the morning, except Jamette, whose little goshawk caught nothing but a vole. "It is a good thing we do not have to eat only what we catch," I tease her.

She glares at me, which makes me laugh out loud.

We are nearly to the city walls when I feel something watching me. It is not Julian, for Jamette is busy trying to draw him into conversation. Nor is it Pierre, who has taken full advantage of Vienne's poor health and is practically making love to his wife in plain sight of us all. I glance over my shoulder, but there is no one there.

I turn back in my saddle. Are the French troops close enough that they could have scouts nearby? Or did some of the Rennes garrison stay behind to keep an eye on d'Albret's movements?

Or perhaps it is no living thing I sense but the soul of one of those men who died so violently on the battlefield.

I glance over my shoulder once more. When I do, a crow flutters from a far tree to a closer one. His left wing is crooked, as if it had once been broken.

Merde.

I whip back around in my saddle. It is my very own crow. The one Sister Widona had rescued and kept in a cage when I first arrived. She used the frightened, wounded creature to draw me out of the morass my own mind had fallen into. Without that crow, I might be there still.

The convent has sent me a message. It has been four long months since I last heard from them, and I had nearly given up hope that I ever would again. But now. Now there is a message. My spirits soar just like the falcons did moments ago. Perhaps old Sister Vereda has Seen what I could not—d'Albret's death.

"You seem restless." Julian's voice yanks my mind from its daydreaming. The crow's timing could not be worse.

"Not at all," I say.

Ever jealous of the attention Julian pays me, Jamette sticks her long nose in. "Why is that crow following you?" she asks.

"You are deluded," I scoff. "He is not following me. I think he is after the vole you caught."

"No, no," she says, and my hand itches to slap her silly face. "It is following you. Look!"

The crow flutters another tree closer.

“*Tsk*. Does not the lowly crow realize he is far beneath my sister’s notice? Here.” Julian moves his hand toward his falcon’s jesses. “I will dispatch the uncouth creature for you.”

“No!” I say, too sharply.

He cocks an eyebrow at me, and I give him a cool smile. “What am I to do with a crow? Put it in a pie with Jamette’s vole? Besides,” I add in a bored voice, “it is wounded, or deranged. No healthy crow would hover this close to falcons. And see how it holds its wing? Leave it be. Or,” I say, smiling in open challenge, “better yet, do try to catch it. That way I can beat you back to the castle.”

With that challenge thrown down, I put my heels to my horse and fly forward. A split second later, the others follow.

I even let Julian win.

When we reach the castle, I hand my falcon to the waiting groom, then dismount. My gaze scans the horizon for the crow, half fearing he will land on my shoulder in front of everyone. I must think of a way to get the message without half the castle seeing.

Jamette lingers near the stable, still trying to flirt with Julian, and Tephania is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps I can steal a few moments in my room alone and coax the wretched creature to the window long enough to remove the message he carries. Leaving the others to their own amusements, I quit the courtyard and enter the palace, then head for the stairs.

No one follows. My luck holds, and when I reach my chamber, it is empty. I head straight for the window and open the casement—but there is no sign of the crow. I wait a few more moments, willing him to find me, then huff out a sigh of frustration. Just as I am about to close the window, I hear a caw and see a flap of black wings. But too late. I can hear Jamette and Tephania at the chamber door. I slam the window shut and close the thick velvet curtains.

“What are you doing?” Jamette asks as she comes into the room. “Now it is too dark in here.”

I put my hand to my temple. “I have a headache,” I say crossly.

A look of genuine concern appears on Tephania’s round face as she hurries over to my side. “Shall I fetch a tisane? Or lavender water?”

I *could* send them to fetch a tisane or hot wine, but that requires only one of them. Besides, Jamette will just linger in the hallway with her large ear stuck to the wall.

“You were fine but moments ago,” she points out.

I spear Jamette with a vicious look. “Was I really, Jamette? Were you paying close enough attention to know that?”

She flushes at this reminder of just how poorly she has attended me. Then I make a decision. “I am going outside.”

Jamette gapes at me. “But you have a headache!”

“Indeed I do. I believe it is your screeching voice and the vile perfume you favor, which is why I need fresh air.”

Her mouth closes with a snap, and I feel the smallest tweak of conscience, for her scent is fine. And then I remember that she reports every move of mine to my father, and my regret evaporates.

Outside, the day has grown blustery, the wind proving that February is indeed the whirling month. Just like the leaves and twigs that dance in eddies across the courtyard, hope dances deep inside me. Perhaps d’Albret is marked in such a way that I cannot see it but Sister Vereda with her seeress skills *can*. The thought of finally being able to move against him fills me with a dark joy. If I am at last able to kill him, the duchess and kingdom will be safe from his grasping ambition and brutal ways. Perhaps I can even arrange for my sisters to come finish their schooling at the convent. Not to train them in the killing arts, but because most of what the nuns teach us is much like the education that any noblewoman receives. Then my sisters would be safe even from Pierre and Julian. Although I do not think Julian would ever hurt them. At least not intentionally.

The gardens are deserted, since no one else is fool enough to venture out to this raw, barren spot. I take a slow breath and revel in the solitude. I am forever attended by someone—my ladies in waiting, my brothers, the various hangers-on of my father’s court—and I crave solitude. That and freedom. I glance overhead and try to recapture that soaring feeling I had when my falcon launched from my wrist, but I cannot.

Instead, an irritable caw brings me back to earth as Monsieur Crow lands on a branch before me, then cocks his head, as if wondering why I have taken so long.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” I scold him, but he knows I do not mean it and hops close. As I move toward the branch, I see that the note is wrapped tightly around his ankle and covered with black wax so that someone would have to be very close in order to see he bore a message.

I slip my knife from its sheath, and the bird gives a caw of objection. “I have no other way to get it off, you silly creature.” A quick snip and a slice, then wax crumbles and I am able to unwind the note from his leg. As I shove it into the knife sheath at my wrist, the crow looks to me for a reward. “I have nothing for

you today—I am sorry. Now go. Quickly! Before you get us both killed.” I flap my hands at him and he hops but one bush away. “Hsst!” I say, and with a caw of reproach, he launches into the sky and disappears over the castle wall.

“Talking to the crows, my lady?”

Bertrand de Lur’s deep voice nearly causes me to jump. Instead, I use the startled movement to swing gracefully around and face him.

“That will earn you a reputation of witchcraft,” he says.

I tilt my head and smile mockingly at him. “Do they not say that already?”

He inclines his head, conceding the point. “Even so, it is not safe for you to be out here alone, my lady.” While his voice is rich and cultivated, there is something about the way he says *my lady* that makes the words feel like a slur. Or perhaps it just seems that way because his lust is so thick it reaches out and enfolds me like a mantle. How long has he felt this way?

“Where are your attendants?” he asks, his voice hard.

Even though I do not care for Jamette, I cannot surrender her to the threat I see lurking in his eyes. “I ordered them from my side. I have a headache and wanted fresh air.”

He glances around at the secluded section of garden, his eyes missing nothing. “I would think my lady’s beauty would attract a nightingale or a linnet, not a bedraggled crow.” He steps closer then, and for the first time I grow wary. Does he think me such damaged goods that he can take liberties without fear of reprisal from my father?

“It is not safe to be alone out here, not with all the men-at-arms we have posted. Any one of them might come upon you and be moved to take advantage of your unattended solitude.” He takes another step toward me.

Because I want to back away from him, I force myself to move forward until there is but a handbreadth between us. I gaze steadily into eyes. “Do you really think any of the men would be so foolish as to risk my father’s wrath in such a way? Surely they would not wish to see their guts strung up from the castle walls?”

There is a long moment of silence, then finally he nods. “Your point is well taken, my lady. Come, I am to escort you to your lord father.”

A cold trickle of fear slides into my belly. “Did my lord father say what he wished of me?” I hate myself for asking, for it shows my weakness, but I cannot help it. It is never wise to wander into d’Albret’s lair unprepared.

“He did not share his purpose with me, no.”

But he knows. I can see that knowledge in his eyes, and he looks for all the world as if he is gloating. I remember the convent’s order concealed in my

sheath and permit myself a small secret smile as he takes my arm and we begin walking back to the palace.

The trip to d'Albret's chambers lasts forever and puts me in mind of how a man approaching the gallows must feel. How long was de Lur watching me before he made his presence known? Did it appear to him as if I was just shooing away a crow, or feeding it, mayhap? Or did he see me take the message from the creature's leg?

And what of d'Albret? Has he found some reason to tie me to the duchess's escape? I was so careful. So very, very careful. I must continue to do everything in my power to assure him that I am committed to his cause so that he does not have his guard up when I am at last able to act. To force my mind away from its ceaseless worry, I anticipate all the ways I could kill d'Albret. It would be so satisfying to choke the life from him with a garrote around his fat neck. Or fillet his big white belly like a fish. But there is danger in those methods, for they require I get close to him, and he has uncanny strength and could possibly overpower me. Poison or a crossbow would be safest.

Too soon, we reach our destination, and Captain de Lur announces my arrival. Holding my head high and willing my heart to stop its wild, erratic beating, I step into the room.

Chapter Six

SUCH IS THE FORCE OF d'Albret's presence that he's managed to taint even the rich opulence of Duke Francis's elegant palace. Everything, from the frescoes on the walls to the carved stag heads bursting from the overmantels, looks morbid and faintly threatening.

I sink into a deep curtsy. "My lord father, how may I serve you?" Because showing too much humility and blind obedience would ring false, I raise my eyes and allow them to fill with just a hint of mockery as they meet his cold, flat gaze.

"My prodigal daughter has deigned to pay me a visit. Where was she?" d'Albret asks the captain, his eyes never leaving mine.

"In the garden, talking to a crow."

D'Albret arches one heavy black eyebrow, and I shrug as if mildly embarrassed. "My time at the convent of Saint Brigantia has given me an appreciation for wild things, my lord." For that is the lie the abbess and I concocted to explain my long absence from d'Albret's household: that I had retreated to the sisters of Brigantia for healing and training.

D'Albret snorts in disgust. "They have made you soft." He turns to one of the guards at the door. "Go see if you can find this crow and catch it. Perhaps I will feed it to her for her supper." A faint flutter of dismay moves in my breast, but hopefully the foolish bird will be long gone by now. If I am forced to eat my crow, of a surety I will spew it back up, and I will be certain to do so on d'Albret's fine cordwain boots. The thought of that gives me some small measure of courage, and I am able to meet his gaze with true amusement in my own.

The guard bows once, then departs. "Search her," d'Albret orders de Lur.

The captain glances uncertainly at d'Albret. At the count's nod, de Lur slowly smiles, then moves to stand in front of me. The smirking pig puts his hands on my shoulders and then draws them down my arms, feeling every inch of my skin beneath the fabric of my sleeves.

I refuse to give him the satisfaction of shuddering at his touch. Instead, I amuse myself by wondering if de Lur will try to stop me from fulfilling the convent's order to kill d'Albret. If he does, I may have to kill him as well.

When his hand connects with the sheath strapped to my left wrist, his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "What is this?"

“’Tis but my knife, my lord. You would not expect a d’Albret to wander about unarmed?”

He starts to peel back my sleeve. “Careful,” I warn him. “The edge is most sharp.”

That gives him a moment’s pause. While he is still trying to decide if I have threatened him, I reach for my knife. As my fingers close around the handle, I carefully slip the tiny, rolled note against my palm before unsheathing the blade.

He glances warily at the sharp edge, then stuffs two fingers into the leather sheath at my wrist and begins poking around. I cast an annoyed look at d’Albret. “Is it seemly for him to enjoy it this much?”

“I told you to search her, not make love to her,” d’Albret says. “How would you like it if I did such to your daughter, eh?” The threat is unmistakable, and de Lur’s movements become much more circumspect.

However, when he reaches my buttocks, he cannot resist giving my cheeks a faint pinch. That is when I realize I am still holding my knife, and it is all I can do not to plunge it into his gut. Instead, I move my hand as if to return the knife to its sheath, but I do not pull the blade back quite far enough. The point of it rakes across his cheek.

He swears and shoves me away as he puts his hand to his face.

“I *did* warn you that it was sharp.”

His nostrils flare in fury, and he glances at d’Albret. “She carries nothing,” he says, “but a small dagger and an even smaller heart.”

I smile as if his words have pleased me greatly. D’Albret waves for him to step back. “You will be happy to know I have found a use for you at last, daughter.”

My heart gives one slow beat of dread, for I know d’Albret believes women have but two purposes: to bear him sons and to slake his lust. With his own daughters, he begrudgingly allows a third: to be used as a bargaining piece in marriages that will increase his wealth and power.

It is the note from the convent that gives me the courage to lift my chin and smile sweetly at him. “I can think of nothing that would bring me greater pleasure, my lord, than to be of service to you.”

“I have yet to discover who betrayed our plans to the duchess and gave her warning. I wish to watch the Nantes barons more closely. Perhaps one of them pretends loyalty to me and then reports all my plans to her. With this suspicion in mind, you will become intimately acquainted with Baron Mathurin.”

I keep my face perfectly still. This is a new low, even for him—whoring his own daughter out for political gain. “The fat one with the double chins? I am not

certain that we must become *intimate* in order for me to coax his secrets from him,” I say lightly.

D’Albret leans forward, his black beard bristling. “You are refusing?”

“Of course not.” My heart beats faster now, for I am well aware of what happens to those who refuse him.

D’Albret cocks his head to the side. “Do not tell me you have maidenly qualms, for we all know what a lie that is.”

His words are like a slap to my face and send me reeling down a long, painful corridor of memories. Memories so terrifying that my vision darkens before my mind scrambles away from them. “I am merely pointing out that there are many methods available to extract the information you wish to have.”

Satisfied with my answer, he leans back in his chair. “You will sit next to him at dinner.”

Before he can give me further instructions, his steward arrives, escorting a road-weary and travel-stained courier. D’Albret waves his hand at the captain and me. “Leave us,” he orders, and Captain de Lur escorts me from the room.

Despair and frustration threaten to rise up inside me, but I tamp them down. Even though d’Albret is all but announcing to his men and vassals that I am so sullied that I do not warrant his protection, I need not panic just yet. I place my hand over my wrist sheath, drawing comfort from what hides there, and hurry to my rooms.

I arrive at my chamber, where Tephanie and Jamette fuss and cluck and are horribly relieved to see me. Irrationally, I blame them for what has befallen me this afternoon. “Draw a bath, at once,” I order curtly.

As they begin that task, I slip into the garderobe and remove the note from its hiding place. My hand trembles as I unroll the message, careful to hold it over the privy hole so that no traces of black wax can be found and used as evidence against me. I hope that these are the instructions I have longed for. Of course the note is in cipher. Holding back my impatience, I quickly count out the necessary sequence, but I have no ink or parchment, so it takes me far too long to decipher the message.

“My lady? Your bath is ready. Are you ill?”

“I am fine,” I snap at Tephanie’s worried question. “Except I cannot find privacy.”

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” she says meekly, and I turn back to the note.

Dearest daughter,

We believe that Lord d'Albret has taken Baron de Waroch prisoner. The duchess has great need of the Beast of Waroch if she is to have any hope of raising an army against d'Albret or the French. We thereby order you to determine if he is indeed alive and, if so, to find a way to secure his release and see that he is brought to Rennes immediately.

Abbess Etienne de Froissard

Disbelief roils inside me, and my entire body turns hot, then cold, then hot again. I turn the note over, hoping I have missed something, then rework the code one more time. The message is the same. And it is not an order to kill d'Albret.

Anger rises up, so great it sears the breath from my lungs. She *promised* that I would be an instrument of divine vengeance—that d'Albret's retribution would be delivered at the hand of his own daughter.

That very promise kept me from laughing in the abbess's face when she told me of her intentions to send me back to his household. That promise had me redoubling my efforts to learn as many death skills as I could in my last weeks of training before I left the convent.

But more than that, her promise had given meaning to all that I have suffered and endured. Without that divine purpose to shape my life, I am nothing but a hapless victim. The anger inside surges through me once more, so dark and overwhelming I fear I will suffocate under its weight.

I will quit the convent. She cannot force me to stay here. Tucked far away on her little island, she will not even know I have left.

But d'Albret will.

And no place is safe from him, for his arm is long and he could snatch me up from anywhere in Brittany or France. No place is safe, except perhaps behind the walls of Rennes, and not even there if d'Albret decides to move on the city.

And so I must sit like a brainless coney. My future stretches out before me, grim and endless. I have been fooled by the convent and am now to be whored out by d'Albret as he weaves his malevolent snares for his enemies.

No. I clench my fists, crumpling the note and then casting it into the privy.
No.

When I emerge from the garderobe, I ignore my attendants' worried glances and yank off my clothes before they can assist me. I spend the next hour scrubbing my father's and the abbess's filthy schemes from my skin.

I do not know how I will make it through dinner. I cannot help but wonder how many know of the role d'Albret has given me. Nor can I help but wonder whom he will assign me to next. That fool Marshal Rieux? The quiet and serious Rogier Blaine?

As soon as I step into the dining hall, d'Albret's gaze is upon me—as cold and dead as the meat on his plate. I keep my head held high and chatter inanely with Tephania as I approach the dais, then curtsy. My smile is as brittle as glass—and as fragile. But lost in his own dark mood, he waves me toward Baron Mathurin.

As I make my way to the table, I wonder: How does one kill a monster such as d'Albret, someone with nearly inhuman strength and cunning? Can it even be done if the god of Death Himself does not will it?

How could I get near him? Get him to lower his guard? Especially when I cannot—*will* not—use seduction, one of my most effective weapons.

As I take my seat beside the baron, his eyes light up. “Fortune smiles upon me, demoiselle. To what do I owe the honor of your fair company?”

I want to shake him and warn him that it is not an honor but a deathwatch. Instead, I smile coyly at him. “It is I who am fortunate, my lord,” I tell him, then lift my wine goblet and drain half of it. Hopefully his attention will remain so focused on my breasts that he will not notice I must drink myself under the table to endure his company.

“Have you recovered from today's hunt?” he asks.

The question nearly causes me to sputter. “Recovered, my lord?” It takes all my willpower to keep the scorn from my voice. “A hunt is not so very taxing as all that.”

He shrugs. “It was for Barons Vienne and Julliers. They have excused themselves from dinner tonight and taken to their beds.”

“Well, I am not as soft as they.”

“Nor I,” he says. “Indeed, the afternoon has got my blood stirred,” he adds, and there is no mistaking his meaning. Well and good—I will not even have to try very hard to snare this dumb goose.

A trill of laughter pulls my attention to the other side of the table, where Jamette hangs on Julian like a flea on a hound. Feeling my gaze on him, Julian looks up, and our eyes meet. He gives me a mocking smile and lifts his goblet to me. Does he know? I wonder. Does he know what our father has asked me to do? He must suspect something, for he knows I have no love for puffed-up buffoons or jackanapes such as Mathurin.

Jamette notices he is no longer paying attention to her and follows his gaze. Her eyes narrow and it is then that I see she is wearing a new brooch, a gold

sunburst with a ruby in its center, and I wonder which secret of mine she has shared to earn it.

Chapter Seven

I HAVE DECIDED I WILL keep my rendezvous with Mathurin. I will even play the part I have been given—up to a point. Then, when I've learned all that I can, I will put a stop to it. If he protests overmuch or thinks to force me to continue, so much the better, for then I can kill him in self-defense. I am in desperate need of killing *something*.

When I reach the appointed chamber, I stop long enough to tug the bodice of my gown lower and loosen my hair. The overly eager Baron Mathurin is already inside, his pulse beating so heavily with lust I can scarce hear myself think. "Did anyone see you?" he asks when I step inside the room.

"No," I assure him, then move closer, shaking my loose hair over my shoulder. He reaches out to capture one of the curls. "Like ebony-colored silk," he murmurs, rubbing it between his fingers.

His desire is a heady perfume, for I know precisely what to do with desire. I run a finger lightly along the front of his doublet, and his mouth parts, his breath hitching in his throat. Then I wrap my arms around him and begin playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. "I bet you say that to all your conquests."

He blinks in surprise, as if no one has ever accused him of having a string of conquests before. I lean up and begin nuzzling his great white jowl. "Do you know what put my lord father in such a foul mood tonight?" I ask. "He was in high spirits when I saw him this afternoon."

And even though the baron and I are alone, his eyes dart around the room before he answers. He is not quite as dumb as he appears. "He received word that the duchess was crowned today in Rennes."

Although this is good news for the duchess, I fear the crown will not save her from d'Albret's aggression. The only thing that will do that is a strong husband with an army of thousands to defend his claim. I wonder if the courier who brought this report yet lives, for my lord father does not believe in sparing the messenger. "Do you trust d'Albret to rule Brittany?" I ask, then shudder. "For he frightens me well enough with the power he has. I cannot imagine him in charge of the entire duchy."

As I utter these words, I can feel Mathurin's desire begin to shrivel, so I quickly change the subject to distract him. "We do not have much time before my attendants come looking for me."

This spurs him to action, and he unlaces his doublet, then his fine linen shirt

below. When I see a dark shadow covering his chest, my heart soars. He is marked! That makes everything so much simpler. I smile then, the first true smile that has touched my lips all day, and step closer, backing him up to the wall so I will not have to take the full weight of his body when I kill him.

But before I can do more than remove the knife hidden in my sleeve, he gasps, a puzzled, almost hurt look crossing his face.

“What? What is wrong?” I murmur, not wishing to break the mood.

He does not answer; instead, he reaches up to his chest as if it pains him, then blood appears on his lips. Sweet Mortain! Is he having a fit of some sort?

Like a hanged man cut down from a gibbet, he collapses, all his weight slumping onto me so that I nearly topple backwards. A great, dark flapping thing rises from him.

It is the part I hate most about killing, having to endure the forced intimacy of the victim’s soul touching mine as it leaves their body. It is just as shocking and unwanted as my first kiss. I steel myself and allow the rush of images to wash over me: D’Albret’s thick arm around the baron’s shoulders, lulling him into a misplaced sense of security. A feeling of smugness, that I had chosen him rather than Julliers or Vienne. And hidden deepest of all, a twinge of conscience at having betrayed the young duchess, well buried under false assurances that d’Albret would make her a good husband.

Suddenly, the baron’s lifeless body is thrust aside, and I come face to face with a tall, dark figure holding a sword that still drips with blood.

“Julian!” I whisper, shocked to my core.

He steps forward, his mouth set in hard lines, his face cast in shadow. “Have you forgotten, sister? You are *mine*.”

His words chill me to the bone, and I fold my arms across my middle and grip my elbows to keep my hands from shaking.

“Only mine,” he says softly, as if whispering a lover’s endearment. “No one shall put his slobbering mouth or groping hands upon you.” He looks down at the body and nudges it with his boot. “And certainly not this craven creature.”

Now I understand the look he sent me at dinner. It was a promise of reprisal.

I step quickly and easily into the role I must play. Indeed, I am as skilled as any alchemist, but instead of turning lead into gold, I turn my fear into daring, and assuredly that is a far greater trick. The smile I give him is brittle with annoyance, and I toss my hair for full effect. “Is that what you thought was happening, Julian? Can you truly know me as well as you claim?”

The banked fury inside him cools somewhat. “Then why are you here?”

Has he not heard? I tilt my head. “Our father assigned me to use my feminine wiles to ascertain if Mathurin planned to betray him to the French.”

A muscle in his jaw clenches. “And would you have gone through with it?”
In answer, I raise the knife that I hold in my hand.

His eyes burn intently into mine, as if he can scorch the truth from their depths. “Truly?”

I laugh. I cannot help it. “You think I *wished* to dally with that soft, thick goose? Julian, have a little faith. In my taste if not in me.”

He drops his sword on the floor, steps over the body, and grabs my shoulders. My heart slams against my ribs as he spins me around and backs me against the wall. He leans in close. “Do you swear it?”

My heart beats too fast—he must not smell that fear. I take that fear and use it to stoke the fires of my anger. I push him—hard. “You are acting the fool. I swear it on God and all nine of His saints. Now let go, you’re hurting me.”

Like quicksilver, his mood shifts. He snatches my free hand and brings it to his mouth. “I should not have doubted you.” His breath warm against my skin, he turns my hand over and presses his mouth to my wrist.

“No, you should not have.” I tug at my hand, relieved when he lets it go. To be certain he does not grab it again, I begin re-coiling my hair into place. “How will I explain this to Father?”

Julian shifts his gaze to the dead Mathurin. “We shall say he was guilty, just as Father suspected, and you caught him in the act. You had no choice but to kill him before he got another message to the duchess.”

“*Another* message?”

Julian’s eyes are unreadable. “Of course—for you learned that it was he who warned the duchess of our failed trap.”

Reluctantly, I admire how nimbly Julian has used this to our advantage. To *my* advantage, for once again, he has found a way to protect me from d’Albret’s wrath. But this presents a new danger as well, for I must now assume Julian suspects it was I who issued that warning.

“I will take care of the body,” he adds.

I arch a brow at him and sniff. “It is the least you owe me for your lack of faith in me.”

He grabs my hands. “A kiss,” he begs, “to prove that you are not angry with me.”

I consider refusing, but I am a coward and dare not, not when he may know so many of my most dangerous secrets. Dread hammers through my veins as he leans down and places his mouth on mine. I allow my mind to drift away from my body, much like Mathurin’s soul left his. It is the only way I can bear Julian’s touch.

He is not my brother, he is not my brother.

That is another reason I cling so fiercely to my tattered belief in Mortain. If He is indeed my father, then Julian and I do not share so much as a drop of blood.

Julian sends me back to my room while he stays to clean up his mess. I move stiffly, like a puppet on a string, feeling as hollow and gutted as the fish we had for supper.

When I finally reach my chamber, it is empty except for a scullery maid, who is building up the fire for the night. She sees me and scurries away, afraid one glance from me will turn her into a toad, or that I will strike her for daring to breathe the same air as I.

Servants of my father have been punished for less.

I go immediately to the comfort of the bright yellow flames and stand as close to their warmth as I dare. My hands are trembling, my very bones shivering, and every fiber of my being is screaming for me to flee.

I think of the rush of Mathurin's soul as it left his body. I want—crave—that release for myself with a longing so deep, and sharp, it cuts like a blade. I remember standing atop the battlements and feeling a heady sense of freedom as the wind promised to carry me far, far away. Is that what souls feel when they are released from their earthly bodies?

Tephanie comes in just then, her big awkward feet shuffling along the floor. She curtsies hurriedly, then rushes to my side. "My lady! I am so sorry to have left you alone. I thought you were . . ." She waves her hand inelegantly.

I am too weary and heartsick to even pretend to snap at her. "See that it does not happen again," I say tiredly.

Her brow creases with worry. "Yes, my lady," she says. "Are you ill?"

"No, just tired."

"But you are shivering! Here, let me fetch you something hot to drink."

I allow her to fuss over me, and once she has handed me a goblet, she goes to turn down the coverlet on the bed and warm the sheets.

As she shuffles quietly about the room, I stand near the fireplace and gulp my wine, waiting for the trembling to pass. I wish, desperately, to take a bath, but it is far too late and would call too much attention to myself. Even so, between Mathurin's blood and Julian's kiss, I feel tainted beyond bearing.

"My lady?"

When I look up, Tephanie is holding out my chamber robe. "Shall I help you undress?"

"If you please."

Her hands are gentle as she helps me out of my clothes. Unlike Jamette, she knows how to keep silent, and I find the quiet of her company soothing. As she puts away my gown, I take the cup of wine over to my small jeweled casket and open it. After setting the goblet down, I remove a small crystal vial from the box. It is a sleeping draft Sister Serafina gave me as a parting gift when I left the convent. She did not say so, but I could see she was unhappy with the abbess for sending me out so soon and knew I would need help if I were to sleep at all.

For a brief moment, I consider dumping the entire contents into my wine. If I drink all of it, I will never wake up. The thought of going to sleep and never having to deal with d'Albret or the abbess or Julian again is as seductive as a siren's song.

But what if Death rejects me once more? Then I will be forced to lie, weak and vulnerable, at the mercy of others while I recover. A most terrifying thought.

Besides, what if the knight truly is alive—what will become of him if I am dead? I slip two drops into my wine, return the vial to the box, and lock it.

Even more important, if I am dead, who will kill d'Albret? For he must die, *marque* or no.

Tephanie has finished warming the bed and comes to unpin my hair. She begins combing it out with a surprisingly light touch, given how clumsy and awkward she is. I close my eyes and let the gentle strokes calm some of the fear from me. Her ministrations remind me of how Ismae and Annith and I used to take turns combing and dressing one another's hair at the convent. Sweet Mortain, how I miss them.

Abruptly, I turn around. "You will sleep in here tonight," I tell her.

She stops what she is doing and looks at me in surprise. "My lady?"

I cannot tell her that I need her, that I wish her company, so instead I say, "I am not feeling well and may require someone to attend me during the night."

She looks stunned, but pleased. The ninny thinks this is some great honor, not the desperate act of a coward, and I do not disabuse her of that notion.

That night, when Julian comes scratching at my door, Tephanie gets up to see who it is. I do not hear what she says, as my head is groggy from Sister Serafina's potion, but her presence is enough to drive him away. She returns to the bed and crawls back under the covers. "Your brother wished to see how you were doing. He said you had a headache at dinner and he wanted to be sure it was gone."

"It is," I say, and scoot over so she may have the warmest spot. She deserves that much, at least, for chasing off the monsters.

Chapter Eight

WHEN I COME AWAKE IN the morning, my first thought is of the knight the abbess wishes me to free. His anguished bellow of defeat as he was struck down haunted my dreams.

Even at the convent, we had heard of the mighty Beast of Waroch and of how his ability to rally his countrymen—noblemen and peasant alike—to the duke's cause allowed us to win our past three battles.

As I listen to Tephanie's gentle snoring, I wonder why the fallen knight has so captured my imagination. Was it because he fought so valiantly against such overwhelming odds? Because of his dedication to his young duchess? Or simply because I looked into his eyes just before he died?

For he *is* dead. I saw him struck down with my own . . . ah, but Julian arrived just then. I never saw the knight's lifeless body. And it is said that men in the throes of battle lust can suffer much damage, yet live.

When I went to bed last night, I vowed to ignore the abbess's message. But now, now all I can think of is that noble knight rotting—or worse—in d'Albret's dungeon.

I place one of my cold feet on Tephanie and she stirs at last—the great slug. She blinks twice to clear the confusion from her eyes, then remembers where she is and with whom. “My lady! I beg your forgiveness. I have overslept.”

“Did you know that you snore?” I say, amused at the bright spots of red that stain her cheeks.

She looks away. “I am sorry—you should have shoved me from the bed or awakened me in some fashion.”

“I did not say it disturbed me, only that you did it.”

She does not know what to say to this, so she leaps out of bed, curtsies, then hurries to fetch my chamber robe.

Just as she is about to help me into it, Jamette enters the room babbling like a brook. “Barons Vienne and Julliers were found dead in their chambers this morning—” Her mouth snaps shut when she finds us standing together in nothing but our shifts.

She blinks, her mouth opening then closing as she searches for something to say. Because she annoys me so very much, I reach out, place a finger under Tephanie's chin, and turn her head gently toward me. “Thank you, Tephanie,” I

say. "For everything." Tephanie's cheeks turn a dull red, and I almost laugh and spoil the effect I have so carefully created.

Poor Jamette cannot decide if she is shocked or jealous. "So, who are these barons whose chambers you visited last night?" I ask languorously.

"Not me," she snaps. "It was the servants who reported they died of the plague in their sleep."

"Could you bring the water? I'd like to wash now," I say with a sleepy yawn.

"Do you think we will catch it?" Tephanie asks. "The plague, I mean?"

The look Jamette sends Tephanie is so full of venom I am surprised the other girl does not wilt on the spot. She does look acutely embarrassed, however, and hurries away to finish dressing in the privacy of the garderobe.

Jamette's temper makes her careless, and she splashes water everywhere. "Watch what you are doing," I warn her. "Else I will have you clean it up with that sharp tongue of yours."

Our eyes meet, and I can see all the insults and accusations she wishes to hurl at me. Instead of saying them, she mutters to herself, "At least now I know why she ignores the few men who cast their attention her way."

I run my finger along Jamette's arm. "Do not tell me you are jealous, little one?" I have found an entirely new way to get under Jamette's skin and anticipate hours of fine sport.

She pulls her arm away. "Of course not!" She turns and moves across the room to the clothespress. "Which gown do you want today?"

"The dark gray satin with the black underskirt."

She helps me dress, but her movements are stiff, and she touches me as little as possible. When she laces up my bodice, she pulls so hard she nearly cracks my ribs.

I jerk away and grab her hand. "Careful. Your duties are to attend me, not cause me bodily damage."

She glares at me, and I can feel her temper humming in her veins. Tephanie chooses that moment to come stumbling back into the room, slipping her belt into place and affixing to it the small knife I gave her.

"Enough of this," I say. "I have in mind something more entertaining for us this morning." D'Albret and most of the garrison plan to go to Ancenis today to take back Marshal Rieux's holding from the French. Which means it is a perfect day for ferreting out secrets. "Where did you say the sounds of ghosts were coming from? I would like to hear them for myself."

For while ghosts do not make noise, prisoners do.

It turns out that the ghosts are rumored to haunt the old tower, the very place from which I watched the battle. It is also the most logical place to keep a prisoner, since it is well away from the living quarters and the high-traffic areas of the castle.

Neither of my attendants wishes to come face to face with ghosts and they both decide to wait for me in the chapel right next to the tower and pray for the newly dead barons. That suits my purposes perfectly, as I would much rather do my snooping away from their prying eyes.

The old tower was built nearly two hundred years ago. The stones are roughened with age, and the tower roof is in need of repair. I try the heavy wooden door and find it locked.

My heart quickens in excitement, for it was not locked when I was last here.

There is no guard posted so I peer through one of the arrow slits cut into the thick walls. The tower *is* haunted; I can feel the ghosts' chill presence seeping out from the window—but ghosts do not clank, or make any sound at all.

I glance over my shoulder at the courtyard. There are just enough servants and men-at-arms about that I do not dare pick the lock.

Ignoring the ghostly chill, I search for some sense of a heartbeat within, but try as hard as I might, my power to detect such things cannot penetrate twelve feet of thick stone. I climb the winding, external staircase to the catwalk, then stand on tiptoe to peer in through another arrow slit.

The small shaft of light barely touches the gloom. I do not see anyone. No guard, no prisoner, no signs of life.

But wait. Some faint hint of sound wafts up—as if from the bowels of the earth itself—followed by a groan. Or a whisper. Or mayhap it is the wind. But since it is all I have to go on, I call it moaning. And even though it is so very little, it heartens me. I will have to find a way to pick the lock or steal the key when my actions can be hidden by darkness. The task is still impossible—but if I must sit here and do nothing while waiting for orders that are not coming, I shall no doubt go mad. Again.

Besides, I would like to think I am capable of doing something other than killing and acting the whore.

When I return to the chapel to collect the others, I find Tephania alone, kneeling before the nave. Under the crucifix at the front of the church are nine small niches, each holding an image of one of the nine old saints: Saint Mortain; Dea Matrona and her daughters, Amourna and Arduinna; Saint Mer; Saint Camulos; Saint Cissonius; and, one of my personal favorites, Saint Salonius, the patron saint of mistakes.

I briefly wonder if I should leave an offering for Mortain. Does He suspect that my belief is a shallow thing? A small, flimsy protection against the more terrifying idea that He does not exist at all? What would I ask of Him, anyway?

Deliverance. That is what I would pray for.

Dear Mortain, please deliver me from this dark nightmare from which I can find no escape.

And then I snort, startling poor Tephane. I have uttered that very prayer for nearly six long months, and look what it has gotten me. No, the truth is, Mortain has forsaken me. Either that or He does not exist.

But if that is the case, then d'Albret is my father. It is more comforting to think that Mortain has forsaken me.

Chapter Nine

WITH ALL THE MEN OFF harrying the French at Ancenis, the ladies of d'Albret's household take dinner in the winter parlor instead of the great hall. It is a smaller room, and more intimate. And considerably warmer.

Madame Dinan takes great pride in her role as chatelaine, standing at the head of the table and waiting for everyone to arrive. That I am nearly late earns me a scowl of disapproval, but I pay no attention to that. Instead, my gaze falls on the thick ring of keys she wears at her waist.

D'Albret's keys.

I tear my eyes away before she can notice my interest and spend the rest of dinner gossiping with the other ladies. But throughout the entire meal, my thoughts keep returning to those keys and how very much easier it would be to conduct my search of the tower before d'Albret's return.

I wait a full hour for everyone to be abed. While I wait, I open my jeweled casket where I keep the few items I brought with me from the convent. Sister Serafina saw to it that I had a decent supply of poison, all of it artfully disguised. There is a crystal vial that contains what looks like the same belladonna that all the women use to make their eyes lustrous, but mine is far more potent. I have a small gold box filled with arsenic powder, and a jar of Saint Arduinna's snare disguised as a salve for burns. There is also a hairnet spun of gold and decorated with dozens of white pearls, each one filled with a poison called vengeance.

I remove a paper twist filled with the fine white powder Sister Serafina calls night whispers. A full packet is enough to kill a large man. Half of that will put a woman down. Only a pinch is required to assure that Madame Dinan sleeps through the night.

I tuck the small packet into the knife sheath I wear at my wrist, then hunt for the boots that the convent had made especially for me. They are of the softest leather and allow me to move as silently as a shadow. I leave the safety of my room and head for Madame Dinan's chamber.

Once, when I was ten years old, d'Albret became so enraged at his favorite hunting hound for not bringing down a twelve-point stag that he shot the creature with his hunting bow. After a brief yelp of pain, the loyal beast began dragging himself toward d'Albret, the arrow embedded in his hindquarters,

whining softly in his throat and begging forgiveness. D'Albret finally relented and delivered a second shot that put him out of his misery.

With disgust, I realize that I am precisely like that hound: even when the convent has wounded me deeply, I still doggedly do the sisters' bidding.

No, I remind myself. I am doing this not for the convent, but for the knight. The man's loyalty and determination in the face of such overwhelming odds is the most noble thing I have ever seen. If he lives, he deserves a much better fate than the one he will find in d'Albret's dungeon.

When I reach Dinan's room, I pause and put my ear to the door, relieved to hear only one pulse beating inside.

The hinges are well oiled and make no noise as I open the door. Once inside, I creep across the floor to the bed and carefully ease the thick velvet curtains apart. When Madame Dinan does not so much as stir, I take the twist of paper from its hiding place, remove a pinch of the night whispers, and silently blow it at her face. Moving quickly so I do not breathe any of the deadly powder, I yank the bed curtains shut.

The next few moments drag by, as there is nothing to do but stand there and wait for the poison to take effect. Eventually her breathing grows deeper. When she begins to snore faintly, I know the powder has done its work.

Next I go to the windows and part the thick drapes to let in just enough moonlight to illuminate my search. Luckily, d'Albret's keys are not hidden but sit in plain sight on a small carved table near the bed. It would be quickest to take the entire ring, but I do not know what I shall find or how long I will be. Smarter to take only the key I need in case she wakes before I return.

Keeping the keys pressed against my palm so they do not rattle or clank, I search for the most likely one. Nearly all of the keys are shiny and new, like the palace itself, but there is one that is old and made of iron. It is larger than the others and coated in rust that looks like dark blood in the moonlight. Certain it is the key I seek, I remove it, then set the others back on the table. I return to the window, close the curtains so the room is once more in full darkness, and quit the chamber.

I move lightly, almost holding my breath, as I creep down the hallway and descend the stairs to the main floor. I do not allow myself a sigh of relief until I have reached the door that leads to the courtyard. Even then, I force myself to wait long, precious minutes so I can be certain no guards are patrolling at regular intervals. Only then do I step outside.

Silence fills the courtyard like a thick wine fills a cup, and the white stone of the palace walls glow eerily in the moonlight. I dart forward, skirting the large staircase and cursing all that whiteness that casts my dark figure in harsh relief.

My blood thrums through my veins and every muscle in my body is taut with nerves. The urgent need for caution tingles on the back of my tongue, as if I have drunk some brew of bubbling silver.

But in the end, there is nothing to fear. Nearly all the soldiers have gone with d'Albret to Ancenis, and all the servants have been so thoroughly terrorized that there is little need for guards or sentries.

When I reach the tower door, there is a cold, dark fluttering sensation, as if I have disturbed a nest of unseen bats, but the flutterings are too big—and too cold—for something as alive as bats, and too silent for owls. Their cold seeps into me and the chill of them causes my hand to shake so much that it takes me three tries before I am able to fit the key into the lock.

The door hinges, which should creak with age and rust, are as silent as moth wings. I slip inside and shut the door behind me.

In the faint moonlight shining in through the arrow slit, the dark shadows flutter and float gently through the air. Those that are not huddling next to me are drifting downward. Down it is, then, for ghosts are ever attracted to the warmth and comfort of life.

The stairs descend in a tight circle, and I put my hands on the wall to guide me. It would not do to fall and break my neck. The stone is rougher here and wet with dampness from the nearby river, the steps crumbled slightly with age.

At the foot of the stairs is another locked door. *Merde!* I should have brought all of the keys with me! But no, this key fits the second door as well. My teeth threaten to chatter and I pretend it is the chill and not my fear as I turn the key and slowly open the door.

It is the smell that reaches me first. A rank mixture of mold and mildew, old blood and human filth. I brace myself for the worst, but I find only an antechamber. On the far side is yet another door, this one with a high window covered in narrow iron bars. Faint light flickers from within. Quiet as one of the ghosts who trail after me, I cross the small space.

When I reach the third door, I press myself against the wall so I cannot be seen through the bars. I wait for a dozen heartbeats, but no one comes.

Slowly, with my heart hammering against my ribs, I inch to the grille and peer inside.

A lone torch casts a faint light into the dark chamber, and shadows bounce and flicker against the stone wall. Someone is moving about and making strange formless noises to himself. In truth, it looks like a small gnome or dwarf from a hearth tale, but then I see it is simply a man who is gnarled and bent over. At first I think he is chortling and dancing, and then I realize that he is lame in one leg and that is merely how he shuffles across the chamber. And the chortling is

chewing—he is gnawing on a stale crust of bread. Disgusted, I tear my eyes from him and survey the rest of the room. An ale pot, a chamber pot, a wooden ledge for sleeping and sitting. And another be-damned door sits in the far wall.

I pull away, back against the wall once more. Is that all that is keeping this knight imprisoned? Four locked doors—at least two of which have the same key—and a decrepit old man? *Is the prisoner even still alive?* I wonder, and then I scoff at the stupidity of my own question. Of course he is still alive, for they would not set a guard—not even one such as the little gargoyle in there—to watch over a corpse.

Unless they wanted to be certain no one found out he was dead.

Holding my breath, I let my senses explore the locked room. I feel the twisted little man's heart beating strong and steady. Coming from beyond the door, fainter and slower, is the beat of a second pulse. The knight is alive, at least for now.

Almost as if he feels my mind searching out his, the prisoner groans.

The little guard shuffles over to the prisoner's door and makes some guttural noise through the grille. The prisoner groans louder, and the sound is followed by the rattle of heavy chains. He is manacled, then, and his chains are the origin of the rumors of ghosts.

I stay and watch for a while longer, trying to get a feel for the guard's rhythm: when he sleeps, and how deeply, and if he ever leaves. But he does not. He pisses in a pot in the far corner. There is a small pile of stores against the east wall, a keg of ale. He pauses to grunt at the prisoner now and then, but whether it is an encouragement or a taunt, I cannot tell. When I have tarried as long as I dare, I inch away from the door. It would not do to grow careless now and kick a stone or shuffle my feet. As I begin making my way up the stairs, I decide it has been a decent enough night's work. I know where the knight is, that he is alive, and how he is guarded.

What I do not know is how I will get him out of there without getting us both killed in the process.

Chapter Ten

WHEN I RETURN TO MY chamber, instead of crawling into bed, I go to the table and take two fat white candles from their holders. I shove one on the end of the poker near the fireplace, then hold the poker next to the flames. It is tricky, as I do not want the candle to drip away, only to soften enough that I can mold and shape it. When I judge it ready, I pull it from the heat. Working quickly before it cools, I shove the tower key into the soft wax, pushing so that it makes a deep impression. I soften the second candle in the same way, then press it down on top of the first.

Once that is done, I use a knife to whittle away all the extra wax so that my mold is as small as possible. I toss the shavings into the fire and hide the wax casting in one of my velvet jewelry pouches.

It is a long, tense walk back to Madame Dinan's chamber, but as I go, a plan begins to form, as fragile and tenuous as a spider's web.

I have followed the convent and Mortain's wishes so far, and it has brought nothing but tragedy. Even worse, d'Albret is still alive and spewing his evil across the land. It is long past time for me to fulfill the role the abbess had planned for me, with or without her orders. I will kill him, *marque* or no.

But I will attempt to free the prisoner first. If, as I suspect, he is too wounded and broken to make the trip to Rennes, I will grant him a small mercy and put him out of his misery, for certainly that is what I would wish for if it were me.

I will not even make him beg.

In the morning, I convince Tephanie and Jamette that we must go into town. I cannot march up to a blacksmith and demand he make me a key without raising a host of questions. So instead, I tell my attendants that I must find a silversmith to repair one of my favorite belts. Jamette wants to know why, if it is one of my favorites, she has never seen it before. Tephanie comes to my rescue. "Because it is broken, you ninny!" She is as excited as a young child at the thought of an outing and begins chattering about the monkey one of the soldiers saw in town.

Even though impatience makes me want to hurry, because of Jamette and our escort of guards, I force myself to browse the stalls. I stop to rub some bright red satin between my fingers and admire the thick rich nap in a piece of green velvet. Smelling money, the shopkeepers cluster around us like flies on a drop of

honey. I flirt and pretend I am seriously considering a bolt of blue damask. All the while, Jamette watches me far too closely, as if memorizing every move I make, every word that comes from my lips. I half expect her to pull a scrap of parchment from her sleeve and begin making notes, and I have no doubt she would, if she could write.

At last we come to the street of silversmiths, the faint sound of the rapid tapping of their hammers as distinct as a hailstorm. I pretend to shop for a silver bauble, but I am actually searching for a smith who looks stouthearted and trustworthy and not inclined to run tattling to the castle in the hopes of currying favor with the new lord. I find just such a man—or so I hope—at the third shop we visit.

The silversmith puts down his hammer as we approach and comes forward with a bow. He is of middle years with a stolid face and strong hands that are roughened with a lifetime of scars from the hot metals he works with and silver dust is worked into the creases of his skin. A woman who has been sweeping the workroom—his wife, no doubt—hurries to join him.

As the smith draws closer, he glances at the men behind us. His look of pleasant greeting turns into one of guarded suspicion as he recognizes the standard and colors of the house of d'Albret emblazoned on our escorts' tabards. His wife nudges him with her elbow and keeps her pleasant smile firmly in place.

"How may we serve you, my lady?" The smith's cold, distant voice is at odds with his words.

"I have a belt that has broken a link, but it is of gold. Do you work in gold?"

"I do," he says slowly, as if reluctant to admit such a thing if it will cause me to tarry at his shop.

The woman is less reluctant. "Gold is too valuable to put on display, my lady, but my husband's skill is equal to any smith's in the city." The sure, quiet pride with which she says this moves me in some way I cannot explain.

The smith, however, sends her an aggrieved look, and that is when I know he wishes we would go elsewhere. Which makes him imminently suitable for the job I have in mind. "May I see the work, then?" I ask.

"Certainly, my lady. Let me fetch a tray."

I hold up a hand. "Wait. I wish to see the work area before I decide. I will not leave my valuables in a pigsty."

The good wife bristles at this, but opens the half door to the workroom and curtsies.

"I will be right back," I tell the others.

The smith and I move to the farthest workbench, and the wife excuses herself to fetch a tray of her husband's best work. I hand the man my belt. As his practiced eye and sure hands move over the piece, probing it for weak links or breaks, I maneuver myself so that I am standing with my body blocking what we are doing. The smith frowns up at me. "There is nothing wrong with—"

"Shhh," I say quietly. I step closer to him, as if I am looking at something he is showing me. "That is not my true commission for you. I have a key that needs copying." I slip the velvet pouch out of the larger purse at my belt and hand the small blocks of wax to him. Keeping one eye on me, he opens the pouch to see the impressions of the key. "My lady, I am no blacksmith—"

I smile and say sharply, "Do you not think I can read the sign above your shop? This key is a gift for someone. Someone *special*." I smile coyly so that his mind goes precisely where I want it to. He frowns in disapproval and opens his mouth to refuse, but I pull a second, smaller pouch from my purse. "I will make the job—and your silence—worth your while."

Just then, his wife comes back with a tray of finely worked gold belts, circlets, intricately carved cups, and paternosters. When she sees the bag, her face lights up. I hand her the pouch before the smith can refuse the job, knowing that once she closes her hand around those coins, she, like any good housewife, will not let them go.

"Oh, and one other thing," I say, as if just remembering.

The smith looks at me, clearly vexed and wishing I would take myself far away from him and his shop. "I will be back in three hours for the . . . belt."

"My lady!" he protests. "That is not nearly enough time."

"Ah, but you will make the time, will you not?" Our gazes meet.

"But of course, my lady. I will make the time."

We spend the rest of the day wandering around the shops of Nantes. Jamette buys a rose-colored ribbon and a gold-braided cord for her hair, a cord I cannot help but daydream of strangling her with. Tephania looks at everything with hungry eyes, like a starved child, and I end up buying her a pretty comb for her hair. I assure myself it is only to make Jamette jealous.

Three hours later, the bells of Nantes cathedral call everyone to afternoon prayers. Even Jamette has worn out her penchant for shopping, and the guards' eyes are rolling back in their heads from boredom, so we return to the silversmith's.

He and his wife are waiting for us, and the look she gives me now is full of censure and reserve. The smith says nothing, no doubt counting the minutes until

he can be rid of me. Once again, I am careful to stand with my body blocking the view of his workbench. “Is my belt ready?” I ask in a bright voice.

“Just as you asked, my lady.” He gives me the small velvet pouch at the same time he gives me the belt. The pouch is still warm from the hot metal of the newly made key. As I take them from his hand, my fingers grasp his. I pause. “If you speak of this to anyone, my life—and yours—will not be worth the ashes in your hearth.”

His eyes meet mine and then turn away. “And well I know it,” he mutters. “For that is no bedroom key.” He starts to pull his hand back, but I grip it tighter.

I do not know why, but I am filled with an urgent need to have this simple, honest man know that I am capable of decency. “Not everyone in the palace supports the baron.” I let all my artifice fall away so he may see the truth behind my words.

He studies me carefully a moment, then nods once in understanding.

“Thank you.” I give him a genuine smile this time and squeeze his hand. He blinks. “I will not jeopardize you or your family again, I swear it.”

Relief washes over his face, and I slip the key into the purse at my waist and leave.

Chapter Eleven

D'ALBRET AND HIS MEN HAVE not yet returned from Ancenis when we retire for the evening. I wait for what feels like an eternity for Jamette and Tephania to undress me and prepare me for bed. The fact that Jamette chatters like a nervous magpie does not help the time go by quicker. At long last, they finish their fussing and take their leave.

When I am finally alone, I go to my chest and look among my few poisons for one that is both swift and merciful, but I have none. Some are gentle but work slowly, and those that work quickly, cause too much pain and discomfort to be used for a merciful killing.

Instead, I remove my favorite knife and a sharpening stone, then go sit by the fire and begin sharpening the blade. I still do not know if the prisoner can sit a horse, or ride one, or if he is even conscious. If he is not, he will be of no use to the duchess. Not unless she can use his dead, martyred body to incite loyalists to take up arms.

He will not be marked, but I no longer care about that.

It used to scare me, the idea of killing without a mark from Mortain to guide my hand, but now, stepping outside His grace holds no more fear for me. Especially since what little I know of that grace has been harsh. My biggest fear has always been that once I began killing at my own whim rather than Mortain's, I would become no better than d'Albret. But over the past few days, I have begun to wonder if being the daughter of Death is any different than being the daughter of a cruel, sadistic murderer. There is little enough difference that I can see, so better to make my own choice in this, the one I think will do the most good.

The nuns' warnings for the fate of my soul rise once more in my mind, but what the fool nuns did not realize is that my life is already a living hell, so trading one form for another is not so great a deterrent.

When a full hour has passed, I dress and collect the supplies I have selected. In addition to the night whispers and the newly sharpened knife, I arm myself with two other knives and a garrote bracelet as well as my lethal crucifix. If the knight must die tonight, then I will go immediately from the dungeon to d'Albret's chamber, where it will be easy enough to gain access with him gone. Once there, I will simply lie in wait for him. Even he must sleep sometime. And when he does, I'll make my move.

I will most likely not survive the attempt, but at least I will have tried, and surely that will prove that the darkness that lives in him does not live in me.

It is not the sort of escape I have prayed for, but it *is* an escape.

When I reach my door I pause just long enough to feel a faint throb of a heart beating steadily on the other side. Is it Jamette with her constant spying? Or some new guard my father has posted?

I quickly prepare a half a dozen lies and excuses, then open the door.

It is Tephane. She is rolled up tightly in her cloak, like a sausage in its casing, sleeping outside my door.

I scowl down at the foolish girl, but while her presence is puzzling, she is easily enough dealt with if she discovers me. I close the door softly behind me, then step over her and make my way down the stairs to the main floor. Sensing no guard or sentry, I step out into the night.

The moon is nearly full and shines down onto the palace courtyard with the light of a thousand candles. My heart slams against my ribs as a shadow flies overhead, then swoops in among the trees in the outer court. An owl. It is only an owl, hunting for its dinner.

I wait a moment to be certain the movement has not caught anyone's attention, then skirt along the palace wall toward the old tower. I am filled with an unfamiliar calm. I know in my heart that what I am planning is the right thing to do. The sensation is as welcome as it is unfamiliar. This time, my hands are steady as I remove the key from the small pouch at my waist and then fit it to the lock.

There is a satisfying snick as it turns and I send a heartfelt thank-you to the cautious silversmith and his skill. As soon as I step inside, I am swarmed by the spirits of the tower, their icy presence chilling me to the bone.

Hugging the crumbling wall for support, I descend until I come to the second door. The key works here, too, and then I am standing in front of the final door. I move to the side, out of the line of the jailor's sight. I can hear him shuffling across the floor, muttering unintelligibly to himself.

When I am certain that he is not near the door, I slowly bring my face up to the grille and peer in. If I could get close enough to his ale pot, I could drop some of my own sleeping draft into it, but it is too far from the door. My only choice is to call him over and use the night whispers powder. With my hood pulled low he will not be able to recognize my face when he wakes up. I cannot help but wonder if I am truly doing him a favor by not killing him outright. There is a good chance d'Albret's wrath will fall on him if the prisoner is found dead, and the punishment will be swift and brutal.

Unless the prisoner is well enough to travel. Then all the jailor will have is a groggy head. At least until my next visit to break the knight out.

Just as I pull the twist of night whispers from my wrist sheath, there is the scrape of a boot on the stairs behind me. I glance around the antechamber, but there is no place to hide. I shove the packet back in its hiding place, grab the handle of my knife, and whirl around to face the stairs.

The tall, dark figure scowls in disbelief. "Sybella?"

Merde! It is no mere guard or sentry, but Julian. He takes three silent strides toward me and grabs my arm. "What are you doing here?" Behind the anger, I see true fear in his eyes.

"You're back." The joyful lilt in my voice is so convincing that even I almost believe it. I smile coquettishly. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I searched until I thought to check the one place you should not be." He gives my arm a little shake. "You cannot imagine the danger you have put yourself in."

"I could not sleep for the rattle and clank of the ghosts. Did you know this tower is haunted?"

"You could hear the sounds of haunting all the way from your chambers?" His eyes are wide with disbelief.

"Of course not." I glance out from under my lashes. "I came to the chapel to pray for your safe return. That's when I heard the rattling."

The harsh planes of his face relax slightly. "While I appreciate your prayers, you have put yourself in harm's way, prying where you should not."

"How was I to know my prayers would be answered so quickly?" I smile, as if with true gratitude. Then I grow serious once more. "*Ghosts*, Julian. Can you feel them?" I allow a shiver to rack my body—easy enough with the chill of all the unquiet dead clinging to me like a mantle and so much fear coursing through me. I make certain to put a sparkle of excitement in my eyes. "Ghosts of all the prisoners who have died here, unshriven." There is a faint rattle of chains just then, the first I have heard from the prisoner all night. I clutch at his arm.

"There! Did you hear it? They could sneak into our rooms at night and suck the souls from our bodies." I cross myself for good measure.

He studies me for a long, silent moment, then seems to make a decision.

"Here. Let me show you these ghosts." He lets go of my arm, then pounds once on the grilled door. As footsteps shuffle toward us, he glances down at me.

"How did you get in?"

I blink, as if I do not understand his question. "I opened the door and walked in."

“Impossible,” he hisses. A dark eye peers through the grille. He looks up so his face can be seen, then there is a rattling sound as the latch is lifted.

Interesting that the jailor opens the door so easily for my brother. Just how deeply is Julian in d’Albret’s confidence? I had thought him peripherally involved in d’Albret’s schemes, just enough to keep from drawing attention to himself, but now I must rethink that.

The door opens, and the strange little man makes a crooked bow. “That,” I say, looking at the creature, “is no ghost, but a crippled old man. Or a gargoyle.”

Julian shoots me an exasperated look, grabs my arm, and half drags me across the small room. I cover my nose with my hand. “And that is most definitely not an otherworldly stench,” I say.

“Behold.” Julian thrusts me toward a second door that also has a barred window at the top. “Your ghost.” Julian takes a torch from the wall and shoves it through the bars.

“Sweet Jésus,” I whisper. The man groans and tries to turn away from the bright flames. His face is beaten and misshapen and lumpy and crusted with blood. He is half naked, with naught but rags to cover him, and two great wounds in his left arm ooze darkly. I cannot believe this is the same creature who so valiantly fought off the duchess’s attackers but a fortnight ago. D’Albret has taken yet another bright, noble thing and ruined it. “Who is he?” It is no great trick, putting revulsion and disgust in my voice, for the prisoner has been treated like the vilest of criminals, a violation of all decent standards for ransom. We would not treat our oldest hound this poorly.

“Just a prisoner from the battlefield. Now come. If anyone else learns that you have been here, I do not think even I can save you from our father’s wrath.” With that, Julian sets the torch back in the wall, then drags me from the dungeon.

Once outside the cell, I take in great gulps of the sweet, cold air. “Is our lord father planning to ransom him?”

“No.”

“Why doesn’t he just kill him, then, and be done with it?”

“I think there is some old history between the two of them, and our father has planned some special revenge. I believe he intends to use the man to send a message to the duchess.”

I keep my voice light. “The man does not appear capable of getting a message across his cell, let alone to Rennes.”

“You misunderstand me. The knight will be the message. When his hanged, drawn, and quartered body is delivered to the duchess, it will serve as a warning that even her strongest and most loyal men cannot stand against the d’Albret name.”

The vileness of this plan makes my stomach roil. I smile and poke Julian playfully in the ribs. “My, but you are fully in our father’s confidences now. Have you risen so very high in his favor?”

We have reached the top of the stairs. Julian ignores my question and turns to face me. “How did you get in, Sybella?” It is his most serious voice, the one he always uses when he worries we are in danger.

“The door was unlocked,” I tell him. “Was it supposed to be otherwise? If so, you’d best check with the guards and see who was last on duty, for it was not when I came upon it.”

He still looks unconvinced. I step closer to him and ignore the sharp wave of revulsion that rises up from deep within me. I place my arms around his neck and rise up so that my lips touch his ear. “I am telling the truth, but you may search me if you like. It would make a very fine game.” My heart is thundering so hard in my chest, it is a wonder he does not hear it. Afraid that he will, I do the only thing I can think of to distract him. I place my mouth on his.

His eyes widen in surprise, and then he wraps his arms around me, drawing me closer so that our hearts beat against each other and I can feel the entire length of his body against mine. He pulls away long enough to sigh my name.

He is not my brother, he is not my brother.

When he moves in to kiss me again, I step sharply back, rap him on the chest with my fist, and scowl. “Next time, do not leave me for so long,” I say with a pout. If he thinks I am playing a game, he will play too. If he thinks I am rejecting him, he will turn on me. I wait, holding my breath, wondering which it will be.

When he blinks in mild surprise, I know the moment of danger has passed. “How did things go with Mathurin?” I ask to more fully distract him. “Was our father satisfied with the explanation you gave him?”

“Yes. He was pleased, in fact, that you acted so quickly to see to his interests.” Julian almost smiles, for he knows how poorly that sits with me.

“And the others. Have they returned yet?”

“No. I rode on ahead. To hurry back to you.” His voice holds an accusing note, and his eyes are but pools of darkness in this lightless place. I wonder if he is telling the truth or if he is more wrapped up in my father’s games than I have guessed.

But no, not Julian. He is the only one in my entire family who hates our father as much as I do. But he has also changed in the three years I was away at the convent, and it worries me, for I do not know him as well as I once did.

Besides, he has betrayed me before. There is nothing to say he will not do so again.

Chapter Twelve

OUR TRIP BACK TO THE room is long and tense and we do not speak at all. I glance sideways at him, but his face is obscured by the shadows.

Has he bought my explanation? Has he guessed my true purpose in going to the dungeon? No, he cannot have, for even *I* was not sure of my true purpose. Although now that I have seen how weak and injured the prisoner is, I am even less certain he can be saved, let alone ride the twenty-six leagues to Rennes, where the duchess awaits him.

When we reach the residential wing of the palace, Julian nods to the newly posted sentry at the door. As we climb the stairs to the upper floor, my desperate kiss to divert Julian's suspicions lies thick in the air between us. I fear he has taken it as a bold invitation. What will he do once we reach my room?

We stop at my chamber door, and even though I know Julian is waiting for me to open it, I turn as if to bid him good night. "I am glad you are back safe and sound," I murmur.

He steps closer to me and leans forward to nuzzle at my hair. "You know I hate being parted from you. I came back as soon as I could."

I put my hands on his chest and play with the gold braid on his doublet to keep him from pressing closer.

It does not work. He ignores my hands between us and moves his lips from my hair and brings them down to my mouth. Despair fills me, and I scramble to think of some way to turn his own desire against him, but I cannot. Not now, when I am tired and chilled and the panicked dregs of discovery still run through my veins.

Then, praise Mortain, the door behind me opens and I nearly tumble backwards into the room. Julian's head comes up, black fury in his eyes. I whirl around to see who has interrupted us, wanting to get my body firmly in front of Julian until he can get his temper in check.

It is Tephanie. Dear, awkward, *sweet* Tephanie! Her gaze flickers briefly to Julian and then comes back to me and never wavers. "You asked me to wait for you, my lady."

"I did—thank you, Tephanie." My voice is calm, steady, and holds the faint note of scorn Julian would expect.

I glance at Julian as if to apologize for this overly dutiful servant. His temper has dissipated, and in its place is a faint mocking expression. "It is late, and I am

sure your attendant would like some sleep before the night is over.” He turns to Tephanie. “You may leave,” he tells her.

Hidden behind my skirt, my hand reaches out and grabs her arm, an iron grip that holds her in place. She curtsies and murmurs, “It is no inconvenience, my lord, but a great honor to be able to serve my lady in any way she wishes.”

I tilt my head at Julian. “Do you hear that, my lord brother? She is honored to serve me in any way she can.”

He looks at me, then at Tephanie, and I see in his eyes the exact moment he concedes the battle. “I cannot argue with such devotion, then. I bid you both good night.”

After Julian takes his leave, I stumble into my chamber and nearly sag to the floor. My knees weaken, my guts turn watery, and I cannot stop trembling.

“My lady?” Tephanie’s simple face is clouded with worry. “Are you all right?”

“I am fine.” Uncertain of my ability to school my features just yet, I do not look up.

Ignoring my words, she hurries to my side. I brace myself for her barrage of questions, but she surprises me by saying nothing. She simply takes one of my ice-cold hands in hers and begins chafing some warmth back into it.

Something about her touch, the simple, undemanding nature of it, makes me want to weep. Or perhaps it is still the aftereffects of my fright.

Once again, Julian has interfered, ruining my plans and destroying my hard-won resolve. Even worse, I suspect he is more fully in d’Albret’s confidence than I had thought. How far will his loyalty go? Which is his greater desire—to keep me safe or to serve our father?

And the knight! Sweet Jésus, what they have planned for him! To be hanged, drawn, and quartered is the most hideous torture I can imagine. He will be hanged by the neck—but not so long that he actually dies. No, they will cut him down before he escapes into that sweet oblivion. Then they will slice him open and remove his entrails while he watches, finding endless ways to keep him conscious and alive as they do so. When that is done, they will throw him to the ground, secure each of his limbs to a horse, and send them all galloping off in different directions until he is ripped apart.

Fearing I will be sick, I force the image from my mind. Sensing my shivering, Tephanie leaves my side long enough to fetch my night shift, then quickly helps me undress by the fire. She slips the clean gown over my head, presses a cup of heated wine into my hands, and goes to warm the bed.

When she has finished, she curtsies, still not meeting my gaze. “Will that be all, my lady?”

I study her bowed head and flushed cheeks and wonder what makes her so loyal to me when all the others revel in my fall from favor. But loyal she is, and determined, too, with her stubborn insistence on serving me in the face of Julian's not insignificant displeasure. "Stay." I intend it as a command but fear it sounds more like a plea.

She blinks in surprise, then curtsies an acknowledgment. While she makes ready for bed, I crawl between the covers. Even the warmth from the heated bricks cannot remove the trembling from my limbs.

Is the prisoner cold in his dungeon? Or is he well past consciousness and too far gone to feel anything at all?

The bed dips as Tephania crawls in. I give her a moment to settle, then scoot back toward her heat, as hungry as any ghost for her vital warmth.

Just as I finally stop shivering and begin my downward tumble into sleep, I feel a pair of soft, tender lips press against my hair. Or perhaps it is but a dream. Either way, it seems like a promise of absolution.

Chapter Thirteen

MY FATHER AND THE REST of his men are back in time for the midday meal. They have not taken the time to wash, and they reek of horses, sweat, and old blood, but that is not why my appetite evaporates at once. It is the sight of d'Albret in such high spirits, for he is only ever that cheerful when he is planning something truly heinous. As I take my place at the table, Julian sends me a look of warning—*Tread carefully.*

With Julian's discovery of me in the tower dungeon, all my fine plans have turned to ash. I cannot possibly break the Beast out now, or save him from the fate they have planned. They have probably doubled the guard on the tower. Plus, Julian will know precisely who is to blame.

Although, since I would likely not survive the attempt, I suppose that part does not matter overmuch. My fingers drift to the ring I wear on my right hand, the black cut-obsidian stone that hides a single dose of poison. One meant only for me.

With his eerie sense of timing, d'Albret turns his sharp gaze in my direction just then, his eyes dancing with a predatory gleam. "What have you been up to while I was away?"

It is all I can do not to look at Julian. Surely he hasn't spoken of my trip to the dungeon with d'Albret?

No, of course he hasn't, for if he had, d'Albret's beard would not be bristling with goodwill. I decide a humble approach is best, at least until I know what this is about. "I entertained myself with the ladies of the castle and went into town to see what amusements it offered."

He takes a sip of wine, studying me the entire time, letting the silence—and my apprehension—build until I fear my nerves will snap. "I also had a belt that needed fixing," I tell him, not sure if this is a test to see if my explanation matches Jamette's.

"So?" he asks, gesturing with his goblet. "How did you find the city? Did they treat you well? Deserving of your station?"

His face is unreadable, and I cannot tell if I am walking into a trap or if he is actually curious. "The townspeople were circumspect, although the workmanship of the smiths was not what we are used to."

He nods, as if he expected nothing else. "And how was the mood of the town? They are always sullen when my soldiers ride through, but that is the way of

townspeople toward soldiers. How they received you is a better indication of their true loyalties.”

I think back to the smith and his reluctance to wait on us. Of the nervous glances of the pie seller and how the shopkeepers looked at us with suspicion. I shrug. “They were accommodating enough.”

Jamette turns and looks at me in surprise. It is then that I see her new bauble—a round, pink pearl that dangles in the middle of her forehead from a delicate gold chain. “Did not the smith almost refuse to wait on you?” she says.

I cannot decide which I wish to rip out first—her loose tongue or her too observant eyes. I do not *think* she was close enough to the smith and me to make out the actual words between us. “I fear you are mistaken. He was merely unsure of whether he could have the job done in the time I required.”

“Oh,” she says, looking faintly sheepish.

I turn back to my father, wanting to make certain the smith will not fall into his disfavor. “He was courteous, if a bit provincial. And his wife was most obsequious.”

“That is too bad,” my father says.

Marshal Rieux looks at him in surprise. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

My father grins, truly one of his most horrifying expressions. “I was looking forward to making an example of their lack of respect.”

A chill scuttles down my spine and I try to think of something to divert his attention from the smith. I receive help from an unexpected quarter.

Pierre, who has had too much wine, raises his glass. “Instead, we should make an example of the duchess and ride on Rennes!” Baron Vienne’s wife sits at his side, ignored and forgotten. She looks as if she has aged ten years over the past few days, whether because of her husband’s recent death or Pierre’s attentions, I cannot be sure.

Julian looks at him askance. “Except that they are too well supplied and can easily withstand a siege. We will be left standing on the battlefield looking like fools.”

“Not with *our* might,” Pierre slurs.

Julian pointedly waves away the page who is waiting to refill Pierre’s goblet. “Might counts for nothing if we cannot get inside the city walls.”

D’Albret’s expression turns sly and he begins playing with the stem of his goblet. “Ah, but what if we *had* help from inside,” he says, and my heart drops. Has the duchess not purged her council of all the traitors? There is no one left, by my reckoning. All of the traitors sit here at this table.

“Help?” Rieux says, clearly puzzled.

D'Albret draws out the moment, draining his wineglass and waiting for the steward to refill it before continuing. "I have sent men to infiltrate the ranks of the mercenaries Captain Dunois has hired to augment the duchess's troops. They have been ordered to ensure they are assigned to the vulnerable parts of the city—the gates, the bridges, the sewers; anyplace that could provide an entrance point.

"Once they are in position, we will have several chinks in her armor to use at our convenience. When the time is right, they will be able to open the city gate for us. Once our forces are inside, it will be easy enough to overpower her guardsmen and man the ramparts with our own. The duchess's sanctuary will quickly become her prison." He smiles, his teeth brilliantly white against the blackness of his beard.

It is clear that d'Albret's unbridled ambition will yield to nothing but death. The thought of his forces descending on Rennes and invading the city causes my stomach to shrivel into a sour knot.

Pierre raises his goblet in salute. "Is now the time to send her our message, my lord?"

D'Albret stills, and for one long moment, I fear he will hurl his goblet at Pierre. Instead, he smiles. "Tomorrow, whelp. We will send her our message tomorrow."

It appears the injured knight has just run out of time.

Chapter Fourteen

I LEAVE JULIAN SPRAWLED IN a chair by the fire. His head is thrown back, his mouth agape. He almost looks dead. Indeed, I thought—briefly—about killing him, but in the end, I could not. Not even after all he has done. We have survived too much together, been each other's allies when no one else would stand by us.

Besides, he is one of the few things that has ever loved me and survived.

He will feel groggy and ill from the overdose of sleeping draft I gave him, but it is no more than he deserves for coming to my chamber uninvited. Just the thought that I will never again have to endure his nightly scratching at my door is enough to lighten my step.

Once I have armed myself with every weapon I own—the knives, the daggers, and the garrotes—I slip from my room. Indeed, I feel like a traveling tinker with as many potions, weapons, and tools as I carry on me. I am lucky I do not clink my way down the stairs.

There are few enough options left to me, and there is no room for error. I will finally fulfill my wish to kill d'Albret—or at least, I will attempt to. If I fail—and there is a good chance I may—then it is even more important that the knight live, for he must escape the fate d'Albret has planned for him and get a warning to the duchess as soon as possible.

I am the only one in a position to stop d'Albret. And even my chances are slim, since my plan relies on a grievously injured knight and my own limited skill.

Nearly all the servants and men-at-arms in the palace are asleep as I make my way from my chamber to the courtyard. It did not come easily, and has taken every drop of poison in the pearls from the hairnet and glass beads on my crucifix chain. I slipped all of it into the men's dinner while the stew still bubbled in the pot hanging at the fire. Such a diluted dose will put the entire garrison to sleep, but only for a few hours. When they wake, they will feel as if they have been trampled by a herd of oxen, but at least they will be alive.

I would have loved to poison them all, for if they are loyal to my father, they do not have an innocent bone in their body. But killing so many men reeks too much of one of d'Albret's schemes. Instead, I satisfy myself with the knowledge of how much trouble they will be in when morning comes and the full impact of my night's activities becomes clear.

Only the guards on duty at the eastern gate will present trouble, for they have not had their suppers yet. I will have to deal with them in order to get the prisoner to the waiting cart.

The cart cost me dear, as the night-soil man was loath to lose the source of his livelihood. But when presented with enough jewelry, he finally agreed to empty the cart and drive its mysterious load out the east gate. Of course, I did not pay him with my own finery but with Jamette's. It was easy enough to slip into her room and take a handful of the baubles her betrayal of me had brought her.

As I draw closer and closer to the tower, the weight of secrets and careful movement, of illusions maintained and lies convincingly whispered, falls from my shoulders, leaving me so light I wonder that I do not float across the courtyard.

I reach the old tower and slip the key into the lock. My blood is moving so wildly through my veins that I hardly even notice the waiting spirits as they rush toward me, their chilling presence barely penetrating the heat of the moment.

At the foot of the stairs, I pause long enough to pull my hood close to shield my face from view, then nearly laugh at the gesture. After tonight, it does not matter any longer. Even so, old habits do not die easily, and I leave the hood in place.

I have thought long and hard on what to do with the jailor. I am surprisingly reluctant to kill him, for every kill I make without Mortain's blessing is but one more step to embracing the very evil I loathe in d'Albret. But I cannot risk his ruining my plans, for if the knight is too wounded to ride to Rennes, I will have no choice but to put him out of his misery, as undoubtedly he has suffered enough.

Besides, if I fail and d'Albret lives through the night, any punishment he bestows on the jailor will make the little man wish he had died. Looking at it that way, it is clear I will be doing him a favor by killing him.

When I peer through the grille I think perhaps some god is smiling on this venture after all, for the old jailor lies on the floor, sound asleep. If I can get to him without waking him, he should be easy enough to deal with.

I step quietly into the dungeon. There is no sound from the prisoner's cell, and the gargoyles do not stir. Perfect. I creep closer and lift my knife, ready to slit the man's throat. But before I can strike, the little demon leaps up and swings at me with his empty tankard.

I hiss and dodge the blow. The jailor grunts and then faces me, and any chance I had for surprise is gone.

"Surrender and be done with this," I tell him, careful to pitch my voice low. "You cannot stop me."

I lunge for him, but he twists away—how can one so clumsy and awkward move so quickly?—and throws himself in front of the cell door.

Keeping my eyes on his contorted little face, I change my plan. “I will not kill you. Just put you to sleep for a while. Just long enough to free the prisoner. You will have a goose egg on your head and can explain to the others how you were overpowered and were helpless to prevent the escape.”

At the word *escape* the little man stills and cocks his head. He pauses for a long moment, then carefully steps away from the door and motions me toward it.

I frown. What trick is this?

The little man gestures at me to open the door while he nods and smiles. At least, I think it is a smile, for it is hard to tell in his creased, misshapen face. “You *want* me to free him?” I ask.

He nods vehemently, then takes another step back.

I cannot begin to fathom what his purpose is, but time is not standing still for me to figure it out. D’Albret will be on his way to visit Madame Dinan’s chamber, if he is not already there, and that will afford me my greatest chance of catching him unawares. “Very well, come with me.” I motion toward the cell. I will not risk his shutting me in with the prisoner, then crying for help. He nods happily but scuttles away like a spider.

Keeping one eye on him, I withdraw the key again and unlock the cell door. The ripe stench makes me blink but I ignore it and hurry over to the corner where the prisoner lies on the floor.

He is the size of a giant. Any hope I had of being able to drag him anywhere, let alone up a flight of stairs, evaporates. He does not stir at my approach, but neither did the little gargoyle, so I remain on my guard. When he still doesn’t move after a few moments, I reach out and nudge him with the toe of my boot. Nothing.

At a sound behind me, I spin around, dagger at the ready. But it is only the gargoyle standing there, watching. I narrow my eyes. “Is he dead?”

An emphatic shake of the head, then the man places his hands against his own cheek as if sleeping. *Ah*, I think. “Can he walk?” I ask sharply.

The old man hesitates, then puts his hand out and wiggles it back and forth. A little. Maybe. My heart sinks. There is no way I can drag him. *Merde*. How will I ever get word to the duchess?

I kneel down next to the knight so I can see just how injured he is. A large cut bisects the left side of his face. I think, but cannot be certain, that it is an old scar rather than a fresh one. The rest of his face is battered, and old crusted blood still clings to it in places. It is also a strange yellow and green color. At first, I fear it is putrid flesh, then realize his entire face is one giant bruise. A great wound

festers in his left leg, and another two in his left arm. I take a deep breath, then put my hand on his shoulder. “Hsst! Wake up. We must get moving.”

He stirs, then groans, but that is all. Muttering a string of curses, I reach out and try again, this time grabbing his arm in a pincer-like grip and tugging on it. “Come on, you great ox. I cannot carry you out of here.”

His massive head rolls to the side, then lifts a few inches from the floor. The eyes open and squint in my direction. I cannot tell if his vision is blurry from his head wound or if he cannot see me at all. I look over my shoulder at the jailor who is no jailor. “Get over here and help me.”

He scuttles forward, hops onto the other side of the knight, and grabs his arm. With much grunting and urging and swearing, we manage to get the prisoner to a sitting position, but that is all. Despair begins to fill me, more chilling than the touch of the spirits hovering nearby. The man’s injuries are inflamed and he himself is feverish. If I am able to get him out of here, I am not certain—not certain at all—that he will not die of blood fever on the way to Rennes. Even so, I must try. I nod to the gargoyle and we both stand, trying to pull the prisoner up with us, but it is no use. We might as well be attempting to move the dungeon itself.

I nearly weep with frustration. If I were more certain of my ability to kill d’Albret tonight, I could just put the prisoner out of his misery, but I am not. D’Albret is uncanny in his instinct for survival, and if I fail, someone must warn the duchess of his plans.

Besides, what sort of cruel god robs a man of a glorious death on the battlefield and leaves him to rot—or worse—in a dungeon? If I close my eyes, I can still see him on his magnificent horse before they brought him down; how valiantly he fought, never stopping, not even when the odds were overwhelming.

That’s it! I must find a way to tap into his battle lust. The very thing that drives him to such unholy feats on the battlefield is the only thing that will get him out of here.

I glance over at the jailor, give him a nod of reassurance, then turn back to the injured man. “Get up,” I hiss. “The duchess is in danger.” His head snaps up. “If you do not get up right now, they will be upon her within minutes. Get up.” I pull on his arm and he growls. “Will you cower here on the floor like a whimpering babe while your duchess is in peril?”

The jailor looks at me, horrified, shaking his head, for the beast is rising in our knight. Blood rushes into his face, and fire kindles in his eyes. “You would never have been chosen to protect the duchess if they’d known how weak you truly are,” I whisper in his ear.

And then it happens: like a great wave rolling up from the ocean floor, the knight propels himself to his feet. He sways for an instant, regains his balance, then lets loose with a mighty roar and lunges in my direction.

I dance nimbly out of his reach. As soon as I leave his side, he nearly topples over onto his face, but the small gnome of a jailor wedges himself under the knight's arm and keeps him from falling.

Furious and befuddled, like a bull in a field, the prisoner swings his head from one of us to the other, not sure whom to attack first. "Come," I say before he can collect his wits. "The duchess is this way. If we hurry, we can get to her in time." And in truth, it is no lie I offer him.

The words act like a lance to his backside. He takes a step forward, then grunts as his face turns white with pain. As his leg gives way beneath him, I realize I have no choice but to help him again and hope he will not kill me on the spot. I return to his side and insert myself under his arm to prop him up. But he is huge and weighs twenty stone at least and nearly drags me to the ground with him. I brace my knees and my back, and between the jailor and me, we keep him upright. As he sags against us, I know we cannot carry him the entire way, but it is as if all the fight has seeped out of him. Already my own shoulders and arms grow numb from his weight. We will all die here like rats in a trap if we cannot get him moving.

Fear and anger lend urgency to my voice. "Would you let your duchess be taken while you rest your lazy bones and thick head? *Move!*"

With a deep-throated growl, the man lurches forward, a great shuffling step that brings us nearly to the door. I snag the lone torch from the wall with my free hand and pray that I will not set myself—or the prisoner—on fire. But we need it, as the stairs are in pitch-darkness and there is no way we can maneuver him up by feel alone. Indeed, as we stop at the first step, it is not clear than we can maneuver him up at all.

The gargoyle mutters and grunts and motions me to get in front. As I move around them and hold the torch so they may see where to place their feet, I see that the jailor has inserted himself under Beast's arm, a human crutch for the prisoner to lean on. His right leg is strong and he is able to climb the stair with it, even though his left arm hangs limp and useless at his side. He braces his right arm against the wall and hops up onto the next step, and the weight his arm does not take is supported by the jailor. The prisoner's face contorts with pain and I pray he will not faint before we reach the cart.

"Hurry," I whisper urgently. "They are circling her even now." The agony of not being able to reach his duchess is plain upon his face, and my heart aches for him, but I harden it. Softness will not serve either of us now.

He pauses, sweat beading upon his face, his lungs working like a blacksmith's bellows.

Only four more steps. "How will you kill them," I call out softly, "these men who have threatened your duchess?" He lunges forward another step. "With your bare hands, is my suggestion, so you may look into their bulging eyes as you drive the air from their lungs." From beneath the giant's arm, the little jailor squints up at me with faint horror, but I do not care, for we have gained another step and I can feel the cool night air upon my back. "Mayhap tear them limb from limb."

With a faint growl, he lunges up the last step. I put my hand out to stop them both, afraid Beast will barrel out the door and straight into a passing sentry.

But he leans against the wall and closes his eyes while the jailor pets at his arm.

I peek out into the courtyard. There is nothing there but darkness. "We must make for the east gate. There are only two sentries posted there, and once I have dispatched them, we will be able to get across the bridge unseen. A cart with horses waits there to carry you to the duchess." The gargoyle's eyes widen in surprise, then he smiles. At least, I think it's a smile. It looks far too much like a grimace for me to be certain.

"Can you do it?" I ask, hating that I must trust this mysterious jailor with such matters. "Can you get him to Rennes?"

He nods so hard I fear his neck will snap.

It is easier going outside. For one thing, there are no more stairs, and for another, there is a thick solid wall for the knight to lean against. We make slow, shuffling progress, the skin along my shoulders urging me to hurry, but we cannot. Indeed, it is a miracle we have come this far.

I glance once behind me. A light shines from one of the upper chambers. Good. D'Albret still lingers with Madame Dinan. I wonder whom he will have guarding the door tonight, for he always posts two sentries when he visits her chamber. I find myself hoping that one of them is Captain de Lur, as I would dearly love an excuse to kill him.

When we reach the end of the wall, I see the small gatehouse and the two guards there. They are not standing at attention but instead are speaking together in low voices. "Here." I thrust a small square of yellow and black fabric at the gargoyle. "You will need this to get out of the city. There are some supplies in the cart, and also some jewels that you can use to purchase what you need. Put the plague flag on the wagon and no one will stop and search you. Understand?"

When he nods his understanding, I motion for him to stay put until my signal, then creep forward.

The guards are grumbling that the others have not come to change the watch and are trying to decide whether they should stay here or go fetch the captain.

Clinging to the wall like a shadow, I move into position behind the first guard. I must kill him—I cannot risk them raising the alarm and I have no idea how long the sleeping draft will last or how deeply the others sleep.

I remind myself that these deaths are necessary. There is no way we can get the knight past the sentries, and if they are d'Albret's men, they are no doubt guilty of some terrible crime.

The weakest link in my plan is killing the first guard without alerting the second guard to my presence. Speed and stealth are my greatest weapons, for if the second guard sees me, there is a good chance he will call out a warning before I can silence him.

One thing at a time, I remind myself, then slip silently out of my hiding place. I take the cord from my waist and wrap it around my fists as I creep toward the first sentry, looping it once, twice, to be sure it will not slip. When I am directly behind him, I make my move. Sensing me, the guard starts to turn my way, but I step up, quickly slip the cord around his neck, and yank with all my might.

The man jerks in surprise, his weapon clattering to the ground as he scrabbles for the rope at his throat. I pull harder and drive my knee into his back for leverage, dodging his elbow as it tries to connect with my ribs.

But the clatter of his weapon has called the second guard's attention. His eyes widen when he sees me and his hand goes for his sword as he takes a step forward. I swear, for the first man is still struggling and taking far too long to die. I cannot even let go to reach one of my throwing knives and defend myself. The alerted sentry draws his sword and rushes toward me. I put the dying guard between us to afford myself some protection. There is a small thud, and the attacking guard stiffens in his track, then keels over like a felled tree. I glance up to see the gargoyle, a sling dangling from his right hand and a look of satisfaction on his twisted little face. Just then, my victim finally slumps into death. I do my best to block my mind to his soul as it slithers from his body, and I release the cord from his neck.

The jailor gives me a nod as if to say *You're welcome*—even though I have not said thank you—then motions for me to get moving, as if it is he who is leading this rescue.

I tamp down my irritation, and we both hurry back to where the knight leans against the wall. His eyes are closed, and his face is bleached white by his efforts to get this far. I cannot tell if his battle fever has left him or if it still simmers quietly in his veins. Pray Mortain the latter, else we will never get him across the bridge.

Even so, now that his mind is no longer clouded, it is the best time to give him my message. “Listen to me, for this is important. When you get to Rennes, you must get word to the duchess. D’Albret has men inside the city’s walls, men who will open the gates to him when the time comes. Can you remember to tell her that?”

Merde! I cannot tell if he nods in agreement or if his head is simply lolling to the side. Frustrated, I turn to the gargoyle. “Did you get all that?” He nods and I sigh. It will have to do.

I adjust the massive arm around my shoulders, then begin the long torturous journey across the courtyard. At the bridge, the knight pulls his arm off me and uses the side of the bridge as a crutch. I do not argue with him but instead slip ahead to be sure the promised cart is there and to give the driver his instructions and the rest of the payment he was promised.

At first I do not see the wagon, and my heart jolts in dismay, for we cannot coax this man much farther. But when I look again, there it is, tucked deep in the shadows against the city wall, two decrepit-looking mules dozing in their harness. The driver, however, is missing. He must have decided that half the promised payment was better than the entire amount, for at least he’d live long enough to spend it.

I turn back to see the men’s progress across the bridge, but they have paused midway. Do they not realize how closely we have shaved this? We do not have time to stop and admire the scenery. I glance back at the palace windows and see that the light is out in Madame Dinan’s chamber, and renewed urgency fills me. I must get there soon, while he is still tangled in her sheets and distracted.

I rush back to the others. “Hurry! We need to get to the cart before we are seen. New sentries could arrive any moment.”

The jailor looks up at me with his sad little face and shakes his head. He does not think his prisoner can take another step. I glare at him, wishing he would speak so he could be the one to cajole this knight forward. I had not thought it possible to hate myself more than I already did, but the vile things I have called this tortured knight have proven me wrong. “Wake up, you. How dare you sleep while your duchess is in danger?” His eyelids flicker, but that is all. True worry sets in and I must use the most cruel weapon in my arsenal. “They are closing in on her, those men. D’Albret’s men. Do you know what they say about d’Albret? How he treats his women?”

The jailor motions to me—to my face. There is a softness in his gaze that I do not understand. He motions again and I put my hand up to my cheek. It is wet. I glare at him as I scrub the dampness away. “If you cannot be bothered to bestir

yourself on her behalf, he will maul her with his rough, hairy hands, violate her flesh—”

With a roar that startles a bray from one of the waiting donkeys, the knight pushes himself from the wall and lurches forward. The little jailor tries to steer his lumbering charge to the cart, but the knight resists, instead lunging toward me. Startled, I look up and our eyes meet. His are a pale, silver blue, I realize, just before his fist connects with my jaw and everything goes black.

Chapter Fifteen

I SLOWLY BECOME AWARE THAT I am dreaming, for I feel as safe and snug as a babe in a cradle. Or perhaps a babe in a boat, bobbing in the sea.

A very bumpy sea, I amend, as a jarring thud rattles my entire body. I try to open my eyes, but it is as if they've been sewn shut. When I finally wrench them open, all I can see is a dark sky filled with fading stars.

Where in the names of the Nine Saints am I?

I try to think, shuffling back through my memories like a banker through stacks of coin. The knight. I was getting him to the cart and then . . . what? Filled with a trickle of foreboding, I struggle to sit up. The movement has my stomach roiling like a nest of eels. Just in time, I lean over the side and retch miserably.

When I have finished with that, the throbbing in my head lessens enough that I can begin to make sense of my surroundings. A strong smell of manure fills my nose, making me think of retching again, and I see a jaunty yellow flag flapping in the night breeze.

Frantic, I glance around. The knight lies still and lifeless beside me as we jolt and bump along the road. There are no houses, no shops, no city walls anywhere. There is nothing but gently rolling countryside and farmsteads as far as my eye can see.

I am in the be-damned cart! The knight . . . he hit me. Knocked me out cold with his great ham-shaped fist and, for some reason, he—and the jailor—have brought me with them.

No. *No!* I look around once again to try to get my bearings. How long have I been out? Moments? Hours? More important, how far away are we from Nantes? Perhaps it is not too late to go back.

But no matter how hard I squint and peer, I cannot see the walls of the city. Which means all my plans—and my hard-won resolve—have turned to ash. The giant ogre beside me has given Fortune's wheel such a hard turn that it has spun out of my grasp entirely.

The prisoner next to me does not so much as stir at the vile oath that flies from my mouth, but the jailor, who is driving, looks over his shoulder and tips his cap. That cheerful gesture infuriates me further and I scramble to my feet, ignoring the wave of nausea that follows. As we hit a bump in the road, I nearly tumble out. Grabbing the back of the bench, I clamber gracelessly into the front next to the jailor, then wait for the dizziness to pass before I begin railing at him. "What

have you done?" I finally manage to get out. "I was not supposed to come with you! You have ruined everything!"

The little gnome shrugs and points his thumb at the unconscious knight.

I glance at the hulking form laid out in the wagon bed. How dare he? What addlebrained thought crossed his fevered brain and caused him to bring me with them? I want to leap into the back of the cart and pound my frustration out on his thick, misbegotten hide. Instead, I curl my hands into fists, press my nails into my palms, and hope the pain of it will clear my head. To have been denied my desire to wreak vengeance upon d'Albret for so long, only to have it snatched away when it is finally in my grasp, is nearly unbearable. It is all I can do not to put my head back and roar out my fury at God and all His saints.

Then suddenly, like a kettle boiled dry, my anger is gone and I am left feeling as empty and hollow as a drum. My one chance, the one I have waited months—no, years!—for, has been irrevocably lost. Never again will I be in such a position to exact vengeance on d'Albret.

Never again. The words rattle around in my head like two stones in a bucket.

But that also means I cannot go back—cannot be *sent* back—for even the cold-hearted abbess will recognize how impossible it would be for me to earn d'Albret's trust again.

Which means . . . I have escaped.

I try to think. In all my seventeen years, have I ever known anything—anyone—to escape d'Albret? Not his wives, nor his children, nor his enemies. Only the duchess, and she did so twice, once in Guérande and the second time almost a fortnight ago.

While it makes sense that the gods would bestir themselves for the duchess, I cannot believe they would bestir themselves for me. They never have before.

Escape. The word is as ripe and seductive as summer's first fruit, so much so that I must shy away from it and remind myself that hope is but the god's way of mocking us, nothing more.

I give myself a moment, then another, to compose myself, then turn to the jailor beside me. I pretend I have not stormed and railed and fumed for the last mile and ask calmly, "How is our charge?"

Relief crosses his wrinkled little face, and he gives an enthusiastic nod of his head. I glance over my shoulder, uncertain the knight's condition warrants such enthusiasm, but say nothing. With all my other options scuttled, it seems my best course of action is to get the knight to Rennes. Alive, if possible.

And with that thought comes a reminder. None of it will matter a whit if d'Albret finds us, for even now he is likely gathering forces for pursuit. Luckily,

all of his soldiers will be groggy and ill for a few more hours yet, and I do not think he will ride out himself.

Somewhere in the distance, a rooster crows. Soon, sleepy farmers will stumble out of their cottages and begin tilling their fields. And see us. We cannot risk that. “We must find shelter,” I tell the jailor.

He nods sagely, as if he has already thought of this.

“There *will* be pursuit,” I warn him. “So our shelter needs to be well hidden from the road.” What has taken us all night to travel could be covered in a matter of hours by one of my father’s men on a swift strong horse.

The jailor nods again, points to a copse of trees in the distance, then steers the cart in that direction.

I study his crooked, lined face. Can I trust him? For the hundredth time I wonder at the strange relationship between the knight and his jailor. Does the Beast of Waroch command courage and loyalty even from those who guard him? For surely my father assigned only the most loyal of his men to tend to his valuable prisoner, and yet the jailor not only did not try to prevent our escape but joined us.

Hopefully, he has not risked so much and come so far only to betray us now.

Just as true dawn breaks, we come in sight of an old stone lodge. It is far from the main road—indeed, from any road at all, I realize as the cart bumps over a rock—and well secluded in a patch of woods. The gargoyle pulls the cart to a halt and waits just inside the trees. It is a small manor house built of gray stone and, by all appearances, deserted. There is no activity in the courtyard, no scratching chickens or bleating goats, and no smoke rises from the chimney. It is almost too much to hope for, that this hidden place is empty and waiting for us. Still not completely sure of the jailor’s motives, I jerk my head toward the house. “Go see if anyone is inside.”

His quick nod of compliance assures me somewhat that this is no trap. Still, someone must scout the place out to be certain it is clear. Until the old man has proven himself to be fully trustworthy, he may as well be the one to do it.

As he looks around, I steer the cart to the back of the lodge and fret once more over my situation. *Should* I attempt to return to Nantes and finish my self-appointed task? Once I am committed to a purpose, it is no easy thing for me to walk away.

I could claim Beast abducted me.

Except they know how weak and wounded he was, and my involvement is the only explanation for the drugged guards. I fear my hand in this is plain to see.

Perhaps, a small voice inside me whispers, *Mortain has simply answered your prayers*. Can it not be as simple as that? But of course, nothing—nothing—has

ever been simple.

Our shelter is one of the late duke's lesser lodges, the sort he would retreat to with a handful of his most trusted men or one of his least favorite mistresses. It is perfect for our purposes: sturdy and hidden from the casual passerby. Most important, I have never heard d'Albret or any of his men speak of it, which gives me some hope that they do not know it exists.

Just as the jailor comes scampering out, indicating that no one is home, the thick clouds overhead release their burden and it begins to rain. However, even wounded and ill and passed out, the knight is still a giant of a man. "We cannot carry him in," I tell the jailor.

He reaches out and shakes the knight, but not even his eyelids flicker in response. Concerned that he has died on the way here, I look to his chest, relieved when I see it rise and fall with his breathing. The jailor begins to shake him harder, but I stop him. I glance up at the rain falling from the sky, big fat drops that plop down onto my face. Cleaning the prisoner up will be a mighty chore involving buckets and buckets of water. "We will let the rain do some of the hard work for us. It is not a freezing rain—let it wash some of the prison grime from him before we take him inside."

The jailor scowls, as if this is some great insult or injury I have offered his master, but I ignore him, grab two of the bundles tucked up against the side of the cart, and head for the lodge. He can follow or not, it makes no difference to me.

While the jailor stays to cluck over the knight, I make a quick exploration of the lodge to see with my own eyes that no one is here. The back door opens directly into a large kitchen with a fireplace. There is a hall beyond, and three chambers on the second floor. They are all empty of any but the most basic furnishings, and nothing but cold ashes sit in the hearths.

Since getting the knight up the stairs is out of the question, we will have to set up a trestle table in the kitchen. I go to the door and see the jailor dripping by the side of the cart, as if his getting soaked will somehow lessen his prisoner's discomfort. I motion him over.

When he is close enough, I hand him a rough cloth to dry himself. "I need to set up a table in here, but I cannot move it myself."

Together with many grunts and muttered oaths we get the trestle in the kitchen and cover it with two old blankets we found. The effort has chased any remaining chill from my bones. "Let's go see if we can get him in here," I say with a sigh of resignation, for it will be as easy as trying to maneuver a greased ox.

Outside, the rain has not only cleansed some of the filth from the patient but roused him from his sleep. As the jailor and I peer down at him over the sides of the cart, he blinks up at us, the water spiking his thick lashes. When he sees me, his eyes cloud with confusion, and suddenly my anger rises up in me again, a white-hot fury that he has robbed me of my prize—the one thing that would have justified all I have endured the past six months. I lean down and get my face close to his. “I have been sent on the duchess’s own orders to aid you, and how do you repay me? By ruining all my carefully laid plans.”

His eyes widen in surprise. “From now on, until I get you safely to Rennes, you will do exactly as I say and no more, do you understand? Else I will leave you here to rot in the rain.”

“What did I ruin?” His voice is rough, like a shower of rocks tumbling downhill.

“Plans that I worked six long months to put in place. Why? Why did you do it?” I ask.

“Do what?”

I reach up and touch my tender jaw. “Take me with you.”

He shakes his head, as if trying to clear it. “The last thing I remember is an insistent, soul-searing voice spewing venom and lies.”

“That was me,” I say curtly.

“You?” He looks thoroughly nonplussed, as if he cannot reconcile that voice with what he sees before him.

“Yes, you great lummoX. It was the only way I could get you moving up the stairs and into the cart.”

“You *tried* to bring the battle lust upon me? Have you feathers for brains?”

“No one had a better idea on how to get you out of that dungeon. I simply used the tools at hand.”

“You’re lucky you only got a clout to the jaw.” He squints up at me again, as if trying to make sense of something in his mind. “Besides, you looked afraid,” he mutters.

I gape at him. “Now who has feathers for brains? I had a mission—there was no fear involved.” But that is a lie. I was terrified, and I hate that he saw it.

Chapter Sixteen

PALE AS A CORPSE AND breathing heavily, the knight eases onto the trestle table, then the jailor helps him lie down. He closes his eyes, and it is clear that even this small amount of activity has cost him much. *Merde*. It is just as well I am not returning to Nantes because this man will need every ounce of my paltry healing skills—and a bit of the gods' own luck—in order to make it to Rennes. If he dies on the road, then I will have well and truly nothing for all my work and sacrifice. I snag a bucket from a hook on the wall and thrust it at the jailor. "Here. We'll need water to finish washing him. And fetch the two bundles left in the cart."

Without questioning me, he takes the bucket and heads back outside into the rain. I take a tinderbox from one of the bundles I brought in and move to the fireplace to start a fire. The clouds overhead will likely mask any smoke that manages to clear the treetops. Even so, I build only a small fire, just enough to heat some water for the poultices I must make up for the knight's wounds.

When the jailor returns, he sets the two bundles next to the others, then busies himself pouring water from the bucket into a battered old tin pot. I thrust a wad of cloth in his hand. "Finish washing him so that I may tend his injuries. Cut away his garments if you have to." Again the jailor does what I ask, and I begin to relax somewhat.

For the next little bit, we work in companionable silence, the jailor washing the prisoner, the prisoner gathering the strength to ask all the questions I can feel swirling in his head, and myself mixing the powdered elm bark and mustard with the boiling water and praying the damage to his body is not too far beyond my skill.

When my preparations are done, I slowly rise. It is time to see just how dire his situation is.

The man's feet jut over the edge of the table, and his face, still ashen beneath the black and green bruises, is as cheerfully ugly as any I have ever seen. His cheeks are pockmarked, and a long scar puckers one side of his face. His nose has been broken—more than once—and he has a notch in one ear. None of which will improve once the swelling and bruising go down.

His body is as thick as a boar's, with bulging ropes of muscle and sinew. If a sculptor wanted to bring brute strength to life, he would carve a body such as

this. Nearly all of it is covered in some sort of scars, the red, angry recent ones mingling with the silvery white of the older.

In spite of myself, I am fascinated—perhaps even impressed—by the damage this one man has sustained.

And survived.

I step closer, and, of its own volition, my hand reaches out to him, my fingers skimming oh so lightly across his battered, ravaged flesh. “How is it you are still alive?” I wonder.

“I am nearly impossible to kill.” The deep rumble of his voice fills the room to the rafters. My gaze snaps up to his face; I had not realized I’d spoken aloud. His eyes, though filled with pain, are fiercely intelligent and put me in mind of a wolf’s, with their eerie light coloring.

“Ah,” I say, “that is good to know. Now I need not worry quite so much while I tend to your wounds.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You?” Those fierce blue eyes rake up and down my entire body, not with prurient interest but in detached assessment.

I make a great show of looking around the empty kitchen. “You have someone else in mind? Your jailor, perhaps? Surely if he were able, he would have tended to them already.”

I thrust my hand out at the jailor, who has been watching our exchange with nervous eyes, and wiggle my fingers. After a moment’s uncertainty, he hands me the cloth, and, in spite of my threat of roughness, I begin gently cleaning the patient’s face, removing yet another layer of grime. It does not help his appearance any, but I am relieved to see there are no serious cuts or breaks under the dirt.

I turn my attention to the long gash that runs along the meat of his forearm. It does not go to the bone, nor were any tendons or ligaments severed, but it will need a deep cleaning, which will not be pleasant for either of us. The two puncture wounds from the arrows in his left shoulder are infected and inflamed. Covering my fingers with the cloth, I press gently against them, searching for any remaining shards of wood or iron. The patient sucks in his breath sharply, but that is all.

“No splinters, then, so those will be easily enough dealt with. And the arrows appear to have missed any vital ligaments.”

He nods, but says nothing.

There is more bruising and swelling along his middle. I reach out and gently press. He gasps, then grabs my hand with his good one, surprising me, for the gentleness of his touch is incongruent with his size and bulk. “You do not need to prod and poke at my ribs for me to tell you they’re broken.”

“Very well. There is nothing left to do but examine your leg, and that is the one injury that frightens me the most.”

The jailor was too lazy—or modest—to remove the man’s riding breeches, so I take the small knife from the chain at my waist and quickly cut away the sodden, filthy leather. As I reach to pull it aside, he swats my hand aside. Puzzled, I look up to find his cheeks pink and cannot help but smile. The Beast of Waroch is embarrassed. “Pish,” I tell him. “It is nothing I have not seen before.” His eyes widen in surprise, but I reach out and pull the leather from his thigh.

The jailor gasps—in shock, perhaps?—and I suck in my breath. “That bad?” the knight says.

The entire thigh is red and swollen and hot to the touch. Foul stuff oozes from the wound itself, and streaks of red have begun to work their way up and down the leg. I glance up to find a faint grin on his face and, not for the first time, wonder if all he has endured has caused him to lose his wits. I turn my gaze back to the cut. “It is bad,” I agree. “Fortunately for you, I am not a surgeon, so I cannot cut it off were I so inclined.”

“Nor would I let you.”

“I am not sure you are in a condition to stop me,” I mutter, then hold up my hand before he can begin arguing. “I will not cut it off, but what I must do will not be enjoyable either.”

Beast studies me. “Who are you that you know so much about caring for battle injuries? I have yet to meet a noblewoman who tends wounds like a field physician.”

To give myself some time to think, I return to the fire and fetch the hot brew from the bubbling pot. *What do I tell the man?* I wonder as I begin spooning the herbs and mud into the linen cloths I have prepared. *I am d’Albret’s daughter, you oaf, and you have just ensured he will follow us to the ends of the earth.* But I find I am unwilling to trumpet my true identity. Indeed, I wish to leave it far, far behind me, bury it like a corpse, and never speak of it again. Besides, if he learns who I am, he will never trust me to get him to safety. Still, I must tell him something.

I think back to the first time I saw him, down in the field with the duchess and her party. “I am a friend of Ismae’s.”

“Ismae!” He tries to prop himself up on one elbow, then winces and eases back down on the table. “How do you know Ismae?”

I can feel his eyes upon me, assessing, weighing, but I concentrate very carefully on folding the square of soft linen around the boiled herbs. “We trained at the same convent.”

There is a moment of silence during which I think he will let the matter drop, but no. "If you are an assassin trained, why are you here tending me?"

Unable to help it, I twist my mouth into a bitter smile as I return to his side. "It is a question I have asked myself many times, you can be certain. My orders were to ensure you got safely to Rennes so that you could further serve the duchess." I look up and meet his gaze. "So that part of my taunting was true."

We stare into each other's eyes for a long moment, before the knight gives a small nod—of understanding or forgiveness, I am not certain. "Well then." He smiles, an utterly charming and devastating grin that makes me want to smile back at him. Instead, I lay the hot poultice on his thigh.

He sucks in his breath so hard I fear he has swallowed his tongue. His face grows red from the heat and the pain and the effort to not cry out. "I thought you said you were not here to kill me," he finally says with a gasp.

"I am sorry," I say. "It is the only way to draw out the poison so you will not die of blood fever."

"Just warn me next time."

"Very well, I am putting one on your shoulder now."

He gasps out again, but it is not as forceful as before. Good. The wound is less tender, then, and will hopefully be that much quicker to heal. I glance back up at him to see how he is doing. "You should, by all rights, be dead from these wounds."

A brief flash of white teeth. "A gift from Saint Camulos. We heal quickly."

As the poultices draw the foul humors from his body, I turn my attention to his arm. "This must be cleaned," I warn him. "Vigorously."

My patient grimaces. "Do what you must so that I may have full use of the arm."

The next hour is not a pleasant one. I lay a wet cloth on the cut to soften it, then replace the poultices with fresh ones. "Would you like some wine or spirits to ease the pain?" I ask, but he gives a sharp shake of his head.

When the scab is soft enough I take a cloth and begin gently sponging away the dirt and grime and old mud that cakes the wound.

"You never said how you know so much about treating injuries," the knight says.

I glance up at him in annoyance. "Why have you not yet passed out from the pain?"

"I welcome pain; it lets me know I am alive."

While I cannot help but admire his spirit, I remind myself that it is wasted effort to like someone who will likely die of his wounds anyway. "You are as mad as your reputation suggests."

He grins. “You have heard of me?”

I roll my eyes. “I have heard of a madman who dons battle fever like most men don armor and charges out into the field killing nigh unto hundreds of souls.”

He settles more comfortably onto the blanket. “You *have* heard of me,” he says, the satisfaction thick in his voice. “Ow!”

“My pardon, but the gravel and mud is ground in deep.” I work in blessed silence for a while, marveling that a man so ugly can have such a charming grin. Annoyed that I am thinking of such things, I get up to fetch a knife. The wound is infected and will need to be drained.

“You still have not told me how you come to know so much about treating injuries.”

“You talk too much. Lie still and try to heal quickly, will you?” I say, returning to his side with the knife. “We have a long way to go and your condition will slow us down considerably. Indeed, we will likely be captured if you do not get better soon.”

The Beast of Waroch scowls, and I can feel the jailor studying me. I wonder how much he has pieced together from my visit to the dungeon with Julian. “Perhaps you are hiding something?”

Only the truth of who I am. “No, I just prefer to work in silence. However, since you insist—I was trained at the convent in small medicines such as this.”

Disbelief is plain on his face. “This is no small medicine.”

I lay the finely honed blade of my knife along the oozing scab. It parts easily, like a flower opening before the sun. “My brothers were knights as well. They often had injuries such as these that needed to be treated.”

“By their sister?” he asks between clenched teeth.

“We were close.” Also, my father did not keep a physician on staff, and my brothers were too embarrassed to seek out the surgeon of the men-at-arms for the beatings and lashing my father bestowed upon them. “However, now that I have answered your question—”

He snorts. “That was no answer.”

“—you must answer one of mine.” He looks at me cautiously. “Who is your pet gargoye and how is Count d’Albret’s own jailor more loyal to you than to the count? For not only did he allow you to escape—he helped me.”

All of a sudden, all lightness and good humor disappears from Beast’s face. “Perhaps he did not wish to stay behind and accept d’Albret’s punishment.”

“Perhaps not,” I say, disappointed, for I know that is not the reason, or at least, it is only one part of it.

“What do you know of d’Albret?” Beast asks.

“More than I care to,” I mutter as I place another poultice on his arm to draw out the infection.

“You do well to fear him. Even for someone with your skills, it is not safe to be near the man.”

I fight the urge to laugh in his face for daring to warn *me* of the dangers d’Albret presents. “You need not worry. I know all about Count d’Albret. Stories circulated throughout his hall faster than the annual plague. Indeed, it was one of the old women’s favorite pastimes, terrorizing us with the tale of d’Albret’s first wife. Have you heard it?” I glance up, my eyes wide and innocent.

He gives a curt shake of his head.

“Oh, la, everyone knows the story of his first wife. Indeed, it has become legend, one told by beleaguered husbands and tired matrons when they wished their wives or young charges to be more pliant. ‘Did I ever tell you the story of Count d’Albret’s first wife, Jeanne?’ they would ask. ‘She thought to escape her wifely duties and fled to her family home, where she begged sanctuary with her brother. Well, her fool brother should have known better than to come between a man and his wife, but he had a soft heart and agreed to harbor her against the cruelty she claimed of her own husband.

“‘But that d’Albret,’ they’d say, often with admiration in their voice, ‘he let no man take what was rightfully his and certainly not some baron from Morbihan. He rode with a full battalion of men straight to the baron’s holding, where he burst through the gates and slaughtered every one of the men-at-arms as they scrambled for their weapons. He rode his horse right into the main hall and killed the baron at his table, and then d’Albret struck down his own wife even as she begged for mercy.’” As I tell the story, I feel those earlier tendrils of hope begin to wither. What was I thinking? There can be no escape from d’Albret. All I have done is delay the inevitable.

“To be certain his point was made,” I continue, “d’Albret killed the baron’s wife and two young sons and the newborn babe she nursed at her breast.” My heart twists painfully at the thought of that babe. “Wives usually did what their husbands asked of them after that tale was told.” I look up to see that Beast’s face is hard as stone. “So yes, I do know what d’Albret is capable of.”

I remove the poultice, relieved to see the swelling has already gone down. Next, I reach for the flask of spirits. “This will sting a bit,” I tell him. It is a lie, for it will burn like fire, but I cannot talk to this man anymore. I know from long experience that hope is but a taunt from the gods, and I hate that somehow this man causes me to feel it.

Beast opens his mouth to speak just as I tilt the flask. “My sister was his sixth wife—” The spirits hit his raw flesh and he rears up on the table, roaring in pain, before finally blacking out.

Chapter Seventeen

SHOCKED, I STARE DOWN AT the unconscious giant before me. His sister was d'Albret's wife? How can that be? What crazed, tangled web have the gods woven around us?

I study the lumpy, bruised face, searching for signs of Alyse, d'Albret's sixth wife. She spoke of having a brother, but it is hard to imagine them springing from the same womb.

Knowing I will not be able to sleep with Beast's admission plaguing me like the biting flies of high summer, I tell the gargoyle that I will take the first watch. Even though this hunting lodge is well hidden, we dare not lower our guard.

He does not argue and curls up near the dying fire and falls asleep with an ease I cannot help but envy. Only then, when no one can see, do I let myself think of Alyse.

Her hair was the reddish blond of a fox kit's fur, and her face covered in freckles that my brothers claimed were the pox but that I thought were merely homely. She was always bringing flowers into the house, not just from our formal garden, but from the meadows as well. Even budding branches from the fruit trees in our orchard, which made the servants think she was daft.

Even more exhilarating, she brought smiles and laughter. It was as if the sun had finally emerged from the clouds in our household, or at least at first. My older brothers took cruel delight in tormenting and teasing her. And Julian, well, I think he begrudged her my affection, for every minute I spent with her was one I did not spend with him. And even with all of that, she was kind to me up until the end.

That Beast is her brother . . . well, clearly the gods are having a rich jape at my expense.

Or . . . the thought comes to me slowly . . . perhaps they are giving me a chance to balance the scales of justice. For if I am able to save this man from d'Albret's dungeons and deliver him safely to Rennes, I will have paid back some small part of the debt I owe his family.

Desperate to distract myself from the truth I have just learned, I push away from the sleeping knight and pick up the filthy discarded clothing and the dirty rags. We will have to bury these. Or perhaps I will send the gargoyle out to burn them. If he could set the fire at a great enough distance, it might even direct d'Albret's search away from us.

When I have tidied as best I can, I take a sharpening stone from one of the bundles and move outside. The rain has stopped, which will make it easier to listen for approaching horses. I remove one of my knives from its sheath and draw the stone along its edge. The faint scraping sound is as calming as a lullaby to my frayed nerves. Like a scavenger eager to pick over carrion, my reeling mind keeps returning to the one thing I do not want to think about. Truly, the gods have outdone themselves this time, for there are few people in this world I owe a greater debt to than Alyse. There are fewer people my family has wronged more horribly.

Is it possible I have been given a chance to right those wrongs?

Not that it matters, for getting Beast to Rennes alive and whole and without being found by d'Albret's scouts is not any easier simply because he is Alyse's brother.

It is, however, that much more vital that I do so, for more than the kingdom's future hangs in the balance—my one small chance at redemption does as well.

When I run out of chores to keep me outside, it is time to return to the kitchen. There is much to be done—new poultices to be prepared, bandages to be cut, fires to be tended. Those tasks do not care one whit for the newfound shyness I feel toward Beast. Will he bring up the subject of his sister when he awakens? And if he does, how can I keep all the questions I have from spilling out?

Inside, I see that Beast's eyes are open and he is staring at the ceiling above him. "You are still alive," I say. "That is more than I dared hope for."

He turns his head to me. "I told you I was hard to kill."

"You did warn me, yes." I can feel his eyes on me as I busy myself with putting more water on to boil. Does he even remember that he spoke of Alyse? And what would a simple assassin wish to know of that connection? Nothing, most likely. "Is that why you were not slain on the battlefield?" I ask. "Some gift of Saint Camulos? Or was it because d'Albret had other plans for you?"

"Saint Camulos does not protect us from death." Beast's voice is dry. "Nor did the men realize whom they had unhorsed. However, once d'Albret saw who I was, let us just say he is not one to let such an opportunity go to waste." He is quiet for a moment, then speaks again. "Do you know what they had planned for me?"

Unable to help myself, I look up and meet his gaze. "I do."

He nods. "Then you understand the debt I owe you."

Uncomfortable with the gratitude I see in his eyes, I look back to the pot of water. "Do not be so very grateful. If I had not been able to get your lumbering

carcass up those stairs, I would have killed you myself and saved d'Albret the trouble."

"Then I would have owed you an even greater debt, for not everyone recognizes the mercy in a quick, clean death." He pauses then, studying me. "How would you have done it?"

His question surprises me. "You mean how would I have killed you?"

"Yes. Do you have a favorite method for such things?"

Since he knows I am an assassin, there is no need to be coy. "I prefer a garrote. I like the intimacy it allows me when I whisper reminders of vengeance in their ears as they die. But in your case, I had sharpened my favorite knife especially for the occasion."

His brows quirk up. "Why no garrote for me?"

I look pointedly at his thick neck, bulging with muscle and sinew. "I do not have one big enough," I mutter. "Besides, yours was to be a merciful death. A knife is quicker and less painful." If I thought my confession would shock him into putting some distance between us, I was sorely mistaken, for the great lummoX laughs.

Frustrated by this kindness—one I do not deserve—I set the new poultice on his thigh, and his laughter quickly turns to grunts of pain.

Shortly after that, I gently nudge the gargoyle awake, for if I do not get some rest soon, I fear I will grab Beast by his shoulders and force him to answer all the questions crowding their way onto my tongue. It would not take him long to figure out my connection to d'Albret if I were to do that.

The jailor springs nimbly to his feet, checks once on his prisoner—now his patient—then goes to sit by the door. I stretch out by the fire and pray I will not dream of Alyse. Indeed, I do not wish to dream at all.

I come awake with a start, surprised that I have slept. It is nearly dark outside, and the ashes are cold in the hearth. I have slept almost all day. As I sit up, it occurs to me that it is too quiet. Is that what woke me? And then I hear it. The faint jingle of a harness and the soft whinny of a horse.

Panic surges in my breast and I leap to my feet. The gargoyle lurks in the doorway, peering out into the yard. With one hand he holds up three fingers, and in the other he holds his slingshot and a fat round rock the size of a quail's egg.

There is a rustle as Beast stirs. I hurry over to him, desperate to keep him quiet. He opens his eyes, but when he sees me put my fingers to my lips, he

gives a curt nod, then motions me closer. "Give me a weapon," he whispers hoarsely.

"You are too sick to fight," I whisper back.

He grabs my arm, his eyes burning with determination. "I will not go back there alive." A moment of complete understanding passes between us. I nod, then retrieve one of the knives strapped to my ankle and hand it to him. When he takes it, his hand wraps briefly around mine and gives it a firm squeeze. "How many?" he asks.

"Three," I tell him. "With horses."

His eyes light up and he smiles. "Horses?"

I hurry back to the door and peer out. The men have reached the courtyard and I can hear their voices. "I still say we should just make for Nantes. We'll be there shortly after dark."

"Empty-handed," another one points out. "And I don't relish being the one to tell d'Albret that they got clean away and we've nothing to report."

The little jailor sends me a sly look.

"Hell, we don't even know what we're searching for. The girl? The prisoner? How far could either one of them have gotten?"

"I say we should just keep riding and not return," one of them mutters darkly. "Who knows where his wrath will fall."

As the men dismount, I chafe at the convent's theology. It is not nearly well enough suited to the real world for my liking. I am allowed to kill in self-defense, but is the danger these men present enough to qualify as self-defense? For all that I have decided I no longer care what the convent or Mortain thinks, their teachings are not as easy to discard as an old gown.

But these are d'Albret's men, not innocents. And if I do not kill them, Beast will not reach Rennes. Which means their deaths are necessary for me to follow the convent's most recent orders. If Mortain does not like it, He can take it up with the abbess herself.

"See to the horses," the leader says, taking his saddlebags from his mount. "I'll go start a fire."

"Don't drink all the wine!"

The leader's grin flashes white in the gloaming. The others dismount and head for the stables. The gargoyle and I exchange a glance. Our presence will be known once they see the mules and cart. A minute later, a shout goes up, and one of the men sticks his head out of the stable door. The captain pauses.

"Someone's here," he calls out.

The captain nods. "We will tell them we need lodgings for the night." His hand goes to his sword hilt. "And we will discourage them from arguing the

point.”

I catch the gargoyle’s eye and hold up my garrote, letting him know that I will take the captain. He nods his understanding and points to the stable. He will take the first one to come out. The third one is up for grabs—whoever gets to him first. My knife would be quicker, but in the dusk I cannot be certain of a kill strike, and I do not want to risk his calling out a warning.

I wrap the ends of the garrote firmly around my hands and wait. The captain approaches, calling out a greeting. “Hello? You in there. We have need of your hospitality.”

When there is no answer, his hand drifts away from his sword. As he draws closer, a still calm descends over me. When he is within arm’s length, I step quickly from the shadows, wrap the wire around his neck, jam my knee into his kidneys, and pray for strength. My movements are so quick and sure there is not even a whisper or a gurgle. But the man is strong and he flails against me, trying to grab his sword. I lean my body weight into him and jam his hand against the stone wall of the lodge.

The second man emerges from the stable. His eyes widen as he sees his captain and I locked in our deadly embrace. Before he can reach for his sword, there is a soft *thwack* as the gargoyle’s stone splits his forehead.

But the third guard must have heard something for he comes out of the stable with his crossbow cocked and loaded. I maneuver the struggling captain around so his body can shield mine, then brace myself for the violent bite of the crossbow bolt. There is a faint whisper of sound instead, as if a swift bird has just darted by, then a knife—my own knife—is jutting from the man’s throat.

I look over to find Beast hanging out the window. He is pale as milk and leaning heavily against the sill, but he sends me a grin. “I’ll take the chestnut gelding,” he says, just before his eyes roll up and he crashes to the floor.

Merde. I hope he has not ripped out the stitches.

Once we are back inside, the jailor starts to scuttle over to the fallen Beast. I tell him to leave him be, then grab a blanket from the trestle bed and cover the passed-out giant. Except for the paleness of his face, he looks as if he is sleeping peacefully. I cannot decide if I want to kick him or thank him. It will be impossible to keep him alive if he does not have a care for his wounded body.

I look up to find the little gargoyle watching me, his head cocked as if he is puzzling something out. “Go fetch your master some new clothes from the fallen men,” I tell him. “And weapons. Collect all the weapons they carry. We will have need of them soon enough.”

The little man's face lights up and he heads outside. "And check their saddlebags for any provisions!" I call after him. I packed only enough for two, and for only three days. I fear we will need twice that much to reach Rennes now. If Ismae were here, she would say that Blessed Mortain had delivered a solution into our waiting hands, but I say I have just grown adept at snatching providence from the jaws of disaster.

I return to the hearth to stoke the fire back to life so that I may prepare yet another batch of poultices. As much as they pain Beast, they are no fun for me, either. My hands are red and raw from the heat and the mud. At least they will not look like a noblewoman's much longer.

The little man returns carrying a pile of clothing, and I sort through the pickings, looking for the ones that will come the closest to fitting Beast. The soldier that took the knife in the throat is the biggest by far, but now there are bloodstains on his jerkin. Even so, we use the bulk of his clothes, and I remove a jerkin from the next largest soldier. The rest I will use for bandages.

"We will take their horses with us when we leave," I tell the gargoyle. "Then we can change out the pulling team on the cart, which should allow us to make better time."

"I will not be hauled around like a bushel of turnips to market." Beast's deep voice rumbles from behind us. "I will ride one of the horses."

Slowly, I turn around. "You're awake."

"Aye."

All my questions about Alyse crowd their way to my tongue and nearly leap out of my mouth. Instead, I ask, "How do you plan to stay in the saddle when you cannot even look out the window without fainting? It is a full twenty leagues between here and Rennes."

"I did not faint. And being carried in that cart is like being bumped along the road in a sack full of rocks. I will arrive in Rennes with my bones ground to dust. Lash me onto one of the horses instead. That way, even if I lose consciousness, I will not fall off."

And that is when I finally see a faint resemblance between him and his sister: in the stubborn set of his jaw. "You are not even well enough to sit up, much less ride a horse for the next several days."

"I am better," he says obstinately, this time reminding me far too much of my sister Louise when she had lung fever and did not want to miss the Christmas festivities. "See?" He moves his injured arm more freely than before. I kneel next to him—to inspect his wounds more closely, I tell myself. But even as I put the back of my hand to his forehead, my eyes search his, looking for echoes of

Alyse. Her lashes were not so dark or thick, but her eyes were very nearly as light a blue. “You still have a fever,” I tell him.

“But it does not burn as hot.”

“True.” Next, I inspect his arm. The redness and infection have gone down by half. “But your other injuries. Your ribs—”

“You will bind my ribs tightly so they will not move. I can ride with only one hand on the reins.”

I look up into his cold blue eyes that are not cold at all. “And what of your lance wound?” I reach for the blanket so I may look at it.

The wound is still red, the flesh angry and swollen and oozing. “It will hurt like the very devil,” he concedes, “but the pain will help keep me alert.”

The man is truly mad, possessed by battle fever even when there is no battle. “Everything I know of blood poisoning says the patient must rest in order to be strong enough to fight off the infection.”

“Put another sack of mud on it,” he says, as if that will make this scheme more reasonable.

“I plan to,” I say, annoyed that the person I risked so much to rescue is now ordering me around as if I were a serving wench.

He leans closer, pressing his case. “You know I am right. We will move at a slug’s pace in a cart and be an easy target for any pursuers. Or random bandits and outlaws, for that matter.”

And of course, he *is* right. I glance behind me at the door to the courtyard, where the three men-at-arms lay dead, a chill moving across my shoulders at how very close d’Albret came to discovering us. “Very well,” I concede. D’Albret has cast his net, and if we do not get moving, he will find us.

We spend the next hour making our plans. We will sleep one more night here, then leave as soon as it is light enough to see. I make another small fire in the hearth and set the mud and herbs for another poultice to boiling. When the mixture is nearly hot enough to blister skin, I fill a linen square with the mud and herbs, wrapping it as quickly as possible so the heat does not escape, nearly burning my fingers in the process.

As I move away from the hearth, the jailor comes in from the yard, where he has collected every weapon d’Albret’s men carried. He sets them down next to Beast, then moves to take a turn at the dwindling embers in an attempt to prepare something for our empty bellies.

Beast hisses as I lay a poultice on his shoulder. “Lie still,” I tell him.

“I am,” he says between clenched teeth, then hisses again as I place the second poultice on his festering leg wound.

He glares at me. “You needn’t enjoy this so much.”

I send him a scathing glance. “You are deranged if you think I am enjoying being trapped in an abandoned hut with an ogre and a gargoyle as my only companions.” I turn away from him to collect the linen strips I made from the soldier’s unused shirts, surprised to realize I *am* enjoying this. There are no vipers slithering about underfoot nor nightmares lurking in the shadows.

When I turn back to him, I make sure none of my thoughts show on my face. “Can you sit up so I can bind your ribs?” If he cannot sit, best we know it now so we can alter our plans. He grunts an assent, the muscles in his abdomen shifting and rippling like waves as he pulls himself into a sitting position. His eyes close for a moment.

“Are you going to faint again?” I hurry around to block his fall so he will not crash to the ground. Although like as not he would just take me to the floor with him.

“No,” he grunts.

I wait a minute to be sure he isn’t fooling himself, then go back and pick up the linen strip and begin wrapping it around his torso. Even after being locked away for more than a fortnight, he is as thick as a tree trunk.

“For a woman with a sharp tongue, you have surprisingly gentle hands,” he says.

“I think your injuries have caused you to lose the feeling in your body, for while I am many things, none of them are gentle.”

He says nothing but watches me, as if trying to peer past my skin and my bone to my very soul. Under his scrutiny, my movements grow clumsy. “Here,” I say shortly. “Hold that in place.” I turn and fetch another piece of linen.

“Did these brothers of yours suffer broken ribs often?” he asks.

“Once or twice,” I mutter, busying myself with the second strip. “They were clumsy lads and constantly falling from their horses.” I do not meet his gaze, for of course they were not. Pierre’s ribs were broken when, at twelve years of age, he was unseated from his horse by a blow from a lance in tourney practice. My father kicked him until he rose to his feet and remounted his horse. He suffered far more from my father’s kicks than from the fall.

And Julian—ah, Julian. His ribs were broken while trying to protect me from my father’s wrath.

“What’s wrong?” Beast asks softly.

“Nothing,” I tell him, pulling the bandage so tight that he grunts in protest. “I only worry about how we will get you back on your horse if you fall off.”

Beast says nothing more until the gargoyle motions to us that our supper is ready. I secure the last bandage and hand Beast the bowl of what appears to be

gruel with something unsavory-looking floating in it. “So,” I say, taking my own bowl. “Your man cannot tend wounds, nor even wash your face properly, nor is he a cook. What, precisely, is he to you?” I ask.

Beast ignores me and shovels the gruel in as fast as he can. If his appetite has returned in full, that is a good sign. Or perhaps he is merely afraid that if it grows cool it will be inedible. Certainly that is my fear.

When he is done, he sets the bowl down and turns his steady gaze to me. “Yannic was once my squire. When my sister left for d’Albret’s household, I ordered him to accompany her and send me regular reports on her well-being.”

I gape at him, then turn to stare at Yannic. I am certain I never saw him in our household, although that would not be so unusual. My father has hundreds of servants and thousands of vassals, many of whom I have never met. “Could he speak then?” I am afraid I already know the answer.

“Aye,” Beast says grimly. “And write, too.”

I glance down at Yannic’s right hand to see that the top half of each of his three middle fingers has been removed so he cannot hold a quill. Unwilling to look either of them in the eye, I pretend I am busy fishing for a piece of sausage in my bowl.

Did d’Albret remember this connection between his prisoner and his sixth wife’s attendant and use it as one rubs salt into a wound? Or was Yannic the only one available who lacked the power of speech and so made an ideal jailor? One could never be certain with d’Albret. “Does that mean Yannic would not mind if we asked him to pile the dead soldiers into the cart and set fire to them? It would be better to leave no signs of our stay.”

The two men exchange a dark look, then Beast answers. “No, he would not mind a bit.”

“Good, because we should not waste an opportunity to lead our pursuers well away from us. The smoke from such a large fire should get their attention, and the dead bodies will make them question just how many are in our party. If Yannic can drive the cart a mile or two east of here, the fire will also lead them in the wrong direction.”

Beast grins. “If you ever tire of being Mortain’s handmaiden, I am certain Saint Camulos would be more than happy to accept your service.”

I roll my eyes at the mere idea of such a thing, but his words please me, all the same.

Chapter Eighteen

WE TRY TO GET AN early start the next day, but between the little gnome of a jailor, the wounded giant, and—what role do I assign myself? The charioteer?—we are like a mummers' farce. At last we get the horses ready and the gear packed and—most difficult of all—the lumbering, crippled Beast onto his saddle. I am exhausted before we even leave the yard, but when we finally do, I breathe a sigh of relief.

In spite of what Beast claims, he is far from well enough to travel. We should stay at the hunting lodge another day or two to allow him more time to recover, but we dare not. While the lodge is well off the main road and not widely known, I have no doubt more of d'Albret's men will find it soon enough. Luckily, I do not think it will be the first place they look, for they will assume we want to put more distance between ourselves and our pursuers. And they are right. The back of my neck tingles with foreboding.

Brisk winds have blown the rain clouds away, and the sky above is clear and blue. All that clear sky makes a perfect backdrop for the thin trickle of smoke that rises from the smoldering remains of the night-soil cart and its inhabitants nearly a mile away.

Please Mortain, let it buy us some time.

But in case it does not, we are each armed with weapons scavenged from d'Albret's men. With Yannic's help, Beast has altered a scabbard so he may wear the sword on his back within easy reach. I, too, have a sword, but it is strapped to my saddle next to the crossbow that hangs there. Beast has also purloined the woodcutter's ax from its place near the lodge's woodpile. It hangs from the left side of his saddle near his injured arm. Although how he expects to wield it, I do not know.

We ride out in silence. Beast is wisely conserving his energy, and I have far too much to think about to waste time in idle conversation. If all goes well, we should be there in four days. *If* the fever does not consume Beast's weakened body, and *if* he can stay in the saddle, and *if* d'Albret's riders do not find us.

My mind keeps running over what I know of the countryside, trying to think of the best route for us to take. The area around the hunting lodge is sparse woodland, which serves us well enough, but eventually we will come to fields or a road or, worst of all, a town. How many men will d'Albret have sent out, and where will they focus their search?

And how long can Beast stay in the saddle? Already his head nods and he looks to be dozing. Or perhaps he has fainted again. I nudge my horse over to him to check, surprised when his head snaps up, his eyes focused on the trees in front of us. “Do you hear that?”

I tilt my head. “What?”

We continue forward, but more slowly. “That,” he says, his head cocked to the side. “Raised voices.”

I stare at him in disbelief, for my own hearing is as sharp as anyone’s and I have not heard a peep. “Mayhap it is simply ringing in your ears from your injuries.”

He gives a sharp shake of his head and urges his horse forward.

“Wait!” I make a grab for his reins but miss. “In order to avoid trouble,” I remind him, “we move away from the noise, not toward it.”

His head swings around and he pins me with the full force of his intense gaze. “What if those are more of d’Albret’s men? Will we have some innocent pay for our freedom?”

“Of course not,” I snap. “But I am not used to this idea that your god allows you to kill at your own whim.”

Beast’s eyes narrow in that way he has that sees past my skin into my very bones. “My god allows me to save the innocent,” he says. “Does yours not?”

I am ashamed to admit that my god does not allow any such thing. “There are no innocents where Death is concerned,” I tell him, then move into the lead. We continue our approach, easing our horses forward until we have a clear view of where the noise came from. It is a mill house, its wheel turning briskly in a stream made fat by the recent rains. It is as peaceful-looking as a painting. “See? It was nothing. We can continue on our way with no one the wiser.”

Just as Beast nods in agreement, a man steps out of the mill and hurries toward us. When he is half a bowshot away, he stops. “The mill is closed today,” he calls out. “Broken, and needing repair.”

“Something is not right,” Beast says quietly. “The man is whey-faced, and sweat beads his brow.”

“My job is to get you to Rennes in one piece, not to stop and offer assistance to every peasant in need we come across. Perhaps he has simply been working hard this morning? Besides, once you dismount, I am not sure we can get you back on that horse.” But something *isn’t* right. The man’s heart is beating at a frantic pace.

“For one, he is a miller, not a peasant. And two”—Beast gives me a grin as infectious as the plague—“I can kill without getting off my horse.”

Easing my own horse forward with small, unthreatening steps, I allow myself to draw closer. “We have no need of the mill,” I call out to him. “We are just passing through and thought to refill our water skins.”

The miller wrings his hands. “This is not a good place for that. The bank is too steep. There is a much shallower access just a short way up the road.”

I nudge my horse to take another step, then another, and that is when I feel four more heartbeats nearby. One of those is lighter than the others but racing as wildly as the miller’s.

“Ah, but we are thirsty now.” I swing out of my saddle and onto the ground. “And the sound of all that sweet water so close by is like torture to our dry throats.” I keep my voice and movements light as I turn and remove one of the water skins from my saddle. While my body is blocking my movements, I also load and cock the crossbow, poke an extra bolt through the fabric of my gown, then unhitch the bow. I give Beast a pointed look, and he nods. Hiding the crossbow in my skirts, I turn around and head toward the miller.

He hurries forward, nearly dancing in distress. “No, no. You must not—”

I put one hand to my stomach as if I am ill and stumble into him. “Who is it they have?” I whisper. “Your wife? Your daughter?”

His eyes widen in fright, and he crosses himself, then nods.

“All will be well,” I tell him, and hope that it is not a lie. There! A glint of steel from the barn door. Another from the branches of the tree in the yard. “The barn!” I shout to Beast as I pull my crossbow out and aim for the man in the tree. I hear his grunt as the bolt finds him. Before his body hits the ground, I slap the second bolt in place. A girl screams and darts from the mill into the yard, followed by a soldier. He raises his crossbow in my direction, but mine is already trained on him, and my bolt catches him in the chest before he can release his own. The girl screams again as he tumbles to the ground, nearly taking her down with him. The man from the tree is not moving, and there is no heartbeat coming from the barn, so Beast’s aim must have been as good as mine. Just to be certain, I draw a knife before hurrying to the girl and the fallen soldier.

Beast steers his horse to the miller. “Peace,” he says. “We will not harm you. We merely wanted to stop trouble in its tracks.”

The miller’s relief is tempered with wariness and he begins talking fast, proclaiming his own innocence, telling how these soldiers, these thugs, showed up at their door and began beating and questioning them. “They had just gone into the mill to cut open all the sacks of grain when they heard you coming.”

It would, I admit, be a good place to hide. I let Beast deal with the outraged man and turn to the daughter. Her blouse is torn and she is breathing fast, too fast, as if she has run some great distance, and I can still feel her heart beating

frantically in her breast, like a small, frightened bird. “Did they harm you?” I ask quietly.

She looks at me, her eyes wild with barely checked terror, then shakes her head no.

But I know it for a lie, even if she does not. Those men have destroyed her sense of safety for months—possibly years—to come. Unable to stop myself, I reach out and grip her shoulder. “It was not your fault,” I whisper fiercely. “You and your father did nothing to deserve this except be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was not a punishment from God nor any of His saints—it was simply brutish thugs who happened upon you.”

Something in her frightened eyes shifts slightly, and I can see her grasp my words like a drowning man grabs a rope. I nod, then turn to retrieve my crossbow bolts.

We do not tarry long. Between Yannic and the miller and myself, we hoist the three dead bodies back onto their horses, and take the horses with us when we go.

“We will have to veer farther west if we wish to avoid d’Albret’s men,” I tell Beast as we ride away.

Beast nods in agreement, then grins. “I’ve never met a lady who enjoys her work as much as I enjoy mine.”

“My work?”

“Killing. Assassin-ing.”

“What are you implying?”

He looks puzzled at the anger in my voice. “That you are very good at what you do. It was a compliment, nothing more.”

Of course, *he* would mean it as a compliment. “Just how many other lady assassins have you met?”

“Other than you? Only Ismae. And she seemed to approach her duty with more earnestness than true joy, whereas you come alive with a knife in your hand.”

Hotly uncomfortable with his assessment, I fall silent.

Do I enjoy killing? Is it the act itself that brings me joy? Or do I embrace the sense of higher purpose it gives me?

Or do I simply enjoy having something at which I excel, as there are few enough skills that I possess?

However, if I do enjoy killing, how does that make me any different from d’Albret?

It is only Mortain—His guidance and blessing that separates us. And I have rejected that.

But Beast kills as well, efficiently and expertly, and does not seem tainted by the same darkness that colors d'Albret and myself. I have never seen anyone kill so cheerfully or eagerly, and yet he is light of heart. "How did you come to serve your god?" I ask, breaking a long silence.

Beast grows quiet, grim even. Just when I have decided that he is not going to answer, he speaks. "It is said that when a man rapes a woman while the battle lust is still upon him, any child that results belongs to Saint Camulos. I was such a babe. My lady mother was assaulted by a soldier while her own husband was off fighting against King Charles."

"And yet she loved you and raised you as any of her other children?" I ask, somewhat in awe of her charitable nature.

Beast snorts out a laugh. "Saints, no! She tried to drown me twice and smother me once before I was one year old." He falls silent. "It was Alyse who saved me, usually toddling in at just the right moment."

"You remember that far back?"

"No, my lady mother was wont to throw it in my face at every opportunity. She was afraid of explaining my presence to her lord husband, but in the end, he never returned—he was killed on the fields of Gascony, pierced through with a lance.

"By then, I was nearly two years old, and little Alyse had grown fond of me. She rarely left my side in those years. I think she was afraid of what would happen to me if she did." He grows quiet for a long moment before speaking again. "I owe Alyse my very life, and I failed her."

I dare to ask the question that has been haunting me since I learned that Alyse was his sister. "Why did your mother wish for the marriage? Why did d'Albret, for that matter?"

"D'Albret pressed for the marriage because part of Alyse's dower lands abutted one of his lesser holdings that he wished to expand. And she was young and healthy and able to bear him many sons. Or so our lady mother promised him."

And thus sealed her daughter's death warrant when Alyse could not. What sort of woman promises such things?

"I did not want her to marry him," he says softly. "I did not trust him, or the fact that five wives had preceded Alyse. But our lady mother was blinded by his title and wealth, and Alyse herself was always eager to keep our mother happy." His voice trails off, and the silence that follows is so filled with sorrow, I cannot bring myself to break it.

Leaving Beast to his painful memories, I turn my thoughts to our travels. How far west will we need to go to avoid d'Albret's men? And when should we

release the horses with the dead soldiers? I fear we are still too close to the miller and his daughter, and I would not wish the dead to be found anywhere near them.

Even though we cannot see it through the trees, we are drawing near a large stream that, by the sound of it, has swollen to the size of a river with the recent rains. The raging water rushing over the rocks is nearly deafening and I must shout for Beast to hear me. "We must look for a place to cross."

He nods and we turn our horses in that direction, skirting the thicket until the trees finally thin and we are able to gain passage onto the bank of the stream.

Where soldiers wearing d'Albret's colors are watering their horses.

Chapter Nineteen

THERE ARE TWELVE MEN ALTOGETHER. Two kneel at the water's edge, filling their water skins. Another is watering three of the horses, and a fourth is taking a piss by a tree. That is the only thing that saves us with such uneven numbers: that half of them have dismounted and are taking their leisure. That and Beast's quick reflexes.

Before I have fully registered my surprise, Beast draws his sword and charges into the startled group of men before they can react. He aims straight for the three closest riders. The bank explodes in activity as soldiers scramble for their weapons.

As Beast rides into the fray, my body reacts without conscious thought. I drop my reins and pull my knives from my wrists. The first one strikes one of the mounted soldiers closest to me, catching him in the throat. My second knife takes the next mounted soldier in the eye so that he is thrown backwards just as his horse leaps forward. Some days, like today, my aim and timing is so true it takes my breath away and I feel certain Mortain's hand guides my own.

As I reach for my crossbow, Beast gives a battle yell that fair curdles my blood. His sword arcs through the air, decapitating one soldier and then slicing a second man near in two on its backstroke. Before Beast can regroup, a third raises his sword, then reels in surprise when a stone from Yannic's slingshot punches through his teeth, giving Beast time to finish him off.

My crossbow loaded and cocked, I turn to the riders by the stream and pick one off. Two others go for their own crossbows, but not fast enough. The bolt catches one and sends him stumbling into the second man, which gives me time to grab another of my knives and throw it, the silver blade whipping fast and sure across the distance to sink into his eye socket and send him reeling into the stream.

I use the time that buys me to reload my crossbow, but one of the mounted men breaks away from Beast and wheels in my direction before I can get it cocked. I drop the bow and pull the sword from its scabbard, getting it between me and my attacker. "Lady Sybel—" It is only when he hesitates long enough for me to get past his guard and cut off the rest of his words that I realize they have been ordered to take me alive.

Which gives me some small advantage, for I do not care if I kill them. Indeed, I pray that I will.

One of the remaining men is reloading his crossbow, which is aimed right for me. I am out of knives, and Beast is too far away to help. He shouts, drawing the man's attention, and then I watch open-mouthed as Beast hurls his sword toward him.

I hold my breath as it spins through the air. The hilt catches the soldier full in the face, stunning rather than killing him. But it is enough to give the charging Beast time—he draws his ax, surges forward, and delivers a sickening blow to the soldier's head. Yannic finishes off the last two of them with well-slung rocks.

The stream's bank is awash in departing souls, shocking in their chillness, as if winter had suddenly returned. Some rush upward, eager to flee the carnage, even though it can no longer harm them. Others hover, like desolate children, lost, adrift, not sure they understand what has just happened.

It sickens me that I somehow manage to feel sympathy for them. To chase the unwelcome feelings away, I whirl around to rail at Beast. "What in the names of the Nine Saints was that? *Throwing* your sword? Is that some special trick of Saint Camulos?"

He grins, and I am startled by how feral he looks, all gleaming white teeth and pale eyes in a blood-splattered face. Indeed, I do not believe he is quite human in that moment. "It slowed him down, didn't it?"

"By mere chance," I point out. It was the most foolish, jape-fisted bit of buffoonery I have ever seen, and I am impressed in spite of that.

A short while later, as I stare down at the bodies of the six men I have just killed, I cannot help but wonder: *Do* I love killing? Of a certainty, I love the way my body and weapons move as one; I revel in the knowledge of where to strike for maximum impact. And of a certainty, I am good at it.

But so is Beast. He is perhaps even better at it than I am, and yet for all that, he feels as bright and golden as a lion who roars in the face of his enemies and stalks them in broad daylight.

Whereas I—I am a dark panther, slinking unseen among the shadows, silent and deadly.

But we are both great cats, are we not? And do not even bright things cast a shadow? "Were they waiting for the men at the miller's?" I ask. "Or are they a separate party of scouts altogether?"

"A separate party, I think. See?" Beast points to a series of hoof prints in the muddy bank where the men had just crossed the stream. "They were on their way back."

My heart sinks. “Which means they have all the western routes covered. We will have to head due east and approach Rennes from that direction.”

We risk riding into the arms of the French, but at least they will simply kill us and not try to take us back to d’Albret. If the truth be told, I’d rather take my chances with the French.

By the time we stop for the night, Beast is gray with exhaustion and fatigue and hardly able to do more than grunt. As we make camp, it is hard to know which is the greater threat: d’Albret and his be-damned scouts or the blood fever coursing through Beast’s veins. In the end, I decide we must risk a small fire for the poultices, but by the time they are ready, Beast is fast asleep. He does not so much as stir when I place them on his wounds. As I stare down at his still, ugly face, I find myself praying that I will not be left with nothing but his limp, dead body to bring before the duchess.

By some miracle or stubbornness of constitution, Beast is better in the morning. Even so, I insist we travel at an easy pace, well away from the roads. When we stop for a midday break, I almost decide to make camp for the night then and there so Beast can rest, for he is exhausted again, and fresh blood flows from the injury at his thigh. He waves my concerns aside. “It is a good thing, for it will wash the foul humors from the wound.” He insists we keep going, as the farther we get from our pursuers, the better.

Shortly afterward, we draw near the main road to Rennes. Apprehension fills me, for I am certain d’Albret will have it watched, but we must get across. Besides, even d’Albret does not have enough soldiers to man the entire road. Our hope is to find an unguarded section.

We lurk awhile, watching the travelers from our hiding spot in the trees. A farmer carrying hens by a pole across his shoulders goes by, followed by a tinker who clanks and clatters along. Neither of them tarry or linger or appear to be dawdling, so I doubt they are spies. A short while later, a sweat-stained courier races by on a lathered horse, and we can only wonder what news he carries, and to whom.

Since he is not followed—or accosted—we deem it safe to cross. We put our heels to our horses and hurry to the other side before anyone else comes along. Beast catches my eye and flashes me a grin, the first I have seen today, then leads us into the brush and spindly trees on the east side of the road, where we turn north.

I glance over to see how he is faring only to find him watching me. “What?” I ask, uneasy under the weight of that gaze—the man has a way of looking at me as if he can see beneath all the layers of my deception. It is most unsettling.

“One of the soldiers recognized you,” he says.

Merde! With all that was going on, how could he have heard that? “Of course he recognized me,” I scoff, as if he has hay for brains. “I have been in d’Albret’s household for some time. How else do you think I was in a position to rescue you?”

Is it just my imagination or does his face clear somewhat? He frowns as if trying to work out some puzzle. “How did the convent secure you a position in d’Albret’s entourage? By all accounts, he is more suspecting and distrustful than most.”

“The abbess has many political connections among the noble families of Brittany.” I use my most haughty voice in the hopes that it will deter further questions.

It does not look as if it will, for Beast opens his mouth once more, then—praise Mortain!—pauses and cocks his head to the side, an alert look on his face.

“Now what?” I ask.

Beast holds his hand up for us to halt. As I rein in my mount, I hear it: it is not the sound of fighting, exactly, but shouting and men’s voices. “Oh, no,” I whisper at him. “We are not playing at rescue again. You barely have enough strength today to stay in the saddle.”

Ignoring me, he gives some silent command to his horse, who moves forward, winding along a path among the trees and drawing closer to the sounds. Hoping to forestall him, I follow, while Yannic hangs back with the pack animals.

There are five men with horses stopped in front of a farmhouse. Two sit upon their destriers with great, white fluffy bundles in front of them. It takes me a moment to recognize the bundles as sheep. Two of the others are trying frantically to corner a goose, which is doing its best to evade them, honking in irritation all the while. It would be almost comical except for the farmer and his wife standing in the yard held at spear point by the fifth man.

“French,” Beast spits out.

“They do not appear to be harming the farmer or his wife.”

“No, just raiding their food stores to feed their own troops.” He turns to me and smiles. “We will stop them.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “No, we won’t. We cannot pick a fight with every soldier we see between Nantes and Rennes!”

“We cannot just leave these poor people to be bullied by our enemies. Besides”—he shoots his maniacal grin my way—“that will be five French

soldiers I will not have to kill later.”

“We cannot risk something happening to you over *foodstuffs*,” I hiss back.

At an impasse, we stare at each other. Then his horse lifts its leg and steps forward, breaking a small branch under its hoof. A loud crack echoes through the air, and the shouting stops. “Who’s there?” a voice calls out.

I glare at Beast. “You did that on purpose.”

He scowls in mock annoyance. “It was the horse. But now that our presence is known, we have no choice.” He removes the crossbow from its hook on the saddle and pulls three quarrels from the quiver.

I resign myself to our fate and decide to get it over with as quickly as possible. “I must get closer. When I am in place, I will hoot like an owl.”

Now it is Beast’s turn to frown. “I am not sure that is safe.”

I roll my eyes as I dismount. “You are not my nursemaid. Remember, *I* am rescuing *you*.” I loop the reins around a nearby branch and begin to move quietly through the trees toward the house.

The leader is ordering one of the goose-chasing men to go in search of the noise they just heard. The woman is wringing her hands and crying about her new down pillow, but I block all of that out as I pick my spot next to a tree that is partially covered by a thick shrub. I pull out my knives and take careful aim at the soldier closest to the farmer and the one most likely to harm him. As I hoot like an owl, I send the first knife flying.

With knives, the two best choices for a kill shot at this distance are the throat or the eye. My aim is perfect and the knife catches him in the throat. The farmwife is made of sturdier stuff than the miller’s daughter, for she does not scream, simply jumps out of the way of the splatter of blood.

My second knife and Beast’s three crossbow bolts make quick work of the rest of them. When they are all dead, the three of us emerge from the trees. The farmer and his wife approach us, their greeting effusive. “Praise be to Matrona! She has sent you to deliver us from certain disaster.”

“Well, you were not in *mortal* danger,” I point out.

The farmwife bristles at this. “Not in mortal danger? What is starving to death, then, if not mortal danger?”

The farmer glances uneasily at the road. “Do you think more of them are coming?”

Beast follows his gaze. “Not immediately, no. But we’d best get the horses and bodies out of sight.”

“*You* will do no such thing.” I angle my horse to block his. When he starts to argue, I urge my horse closer and lower my voice. “If you do not have a care for

yourself, then at least give a thought to what the duchess and my abbess will do to me if I arrive with nothing but your lifeless body.”

An odd, pained expression crosses his face and I think that at last he understands my peril, if not his. “Besides, it will take all of us working together to get you off that horse and laid down somewhere where I can tend your wounds.”

The farmwife’s hand flies to her cheek. “Was he injured?”

“’Tis an old injury, but a bad one. Is there somewhere we can settle him?”

The farmwife nods. I leave Yannic and the farmer to help Beast from his horse and let the farmwife lead me into the house. As I enter, I look around in surprise, for outside, the farm seemed to me somewhat poor and rundown. Inside, the house is anything but. The farmwife meets my eye. “’Tis not by accident. Living so close to the border, and with so many wars and skirmishes over the years, we have learned to conceal our prosperity. When we are lucky enough to have it.”

She stops at a small storeroom, takes a key from the ring around her waist, and unlocks the door. Two boys spill out, wearing fierce glowers. “Next time let us stay and fight,” one of them says. He is on the cusp of true manhood, all gangly limbs, clumsy feet, and too-large nose.

“Mind your manners and greet our guest.”

For the first time, both of them notice me. Even though I wear three days’ travel grime instead of my finest jewels, their gaping admiration does wonders for my spirits.

The farmwife clucks her tongue. “Go on now, go help your father and the others get rid of the bodies.”

“Bodies?” They perk up, then clatter out of the house.

“My husband is old and no threat to the soldiers, but I could not trust these hotheads not to do something foolish.” The farmwife rolls her eyes, but it does not disguise the pride she feels in her sons.

The farmhouse has a large kitchen and a great room with a long table and benches. While looking for a spot for Beast to rest, I also try to note any exits. We may need to leave suddenly, for there is no guarantee the French will not send others to check on their comrades. And if the French can stumble upon this place, so can d’Albret and his men.

Besides the front door, the three windows with wooden shutters are the only way in and out. And certainly there is no place big enough to conceal Beast.

I nod to the area in front of the hearth. “That will work. The fire will keep him warm and allow me to mix the poultices I need for his leg.”

Her face creases in concern. “How bad is it?”

I meet her intelligent brown-eyed gaze. “Bad enough. If I had any surgeon’s skills, I would consider removing it, but luckily for him, I do not. A prayer or two on his behalf would not go amiss.”

She nods. “This whole family shall pray for him,” she says, and I know I can consider it as good as done.

Chapter Twenty

THE FAMILY IS SO GRATEFUL for our intervention, and so wonderstruck at being saved by the mighty Beast of Waroch himself, that once the floodgates of their gratitude have opened, it is impossible to stop it. They insist on slaughtering the goose so they may reward him with a feast fit for a hero of the realm. ("May as well start working on that pillow now," the farmwife points out.) Since we are all of us in need of a decent night's rest and would not begrudge a good meal, we accept their kind offer.

Amid much muttering and grumbling, Beast is assisted inside and made to lie down where I can tend him. It chafes him sorely to have to rest while other men take care of the remains of the French soldiers. "Leave it be," I tell him. "Anyone can hide those bodies or dispose of them, but only you can help the duchess, and she will have my hide if I do not deliver you as safe and sound as possible."

Fortunately for me, he is so exhausted that once he is laid out flat and the poultice is placed on his leg, he falls asleep. The bruises have faded away by now, and nearly all the facial swelling has gone down. He is still as big and ugly as an ogre.

"Won't win a prize at the fair, will he?"

I glance up to find the farmwife standing right behind me, staring down at Beast. "He has other skills," I tell her sharply.

"Eh, don't be biting my head off. I didn't say he wasn't worth his weight in gold. Besides, I wager he's very skilled with his blade." The faint leer in her voice makes her meaning plain enough, as well as her assumptions on what sort of relationship Beast and I have.

My even sharper retort is interrupted by a great clatter as her two sons come bursting inside, brandishing the weapons they've stripped from the soldiers. "Papa says we might as well profit from the stinking Frenchmen," the younger one says, nearly decapitating his brother with a sword that is almost as long as he is.

"Profit, yes; do bodily injury to your brother, no. Go on now, put those away."

The boys scramble up the ladder to their rooms, and I start to follow the farmwife as she heads to the kitchen to begin preparing the meal, but she quickly shoos me away. "Those were your knives that pierced two of the brutes. What kind of thanks would it be if I made you cook? Here." She thrusts a bucket of

water at me, then takes a kettle from the hob and adds it to the bucket. “Go have yourself a wash. I’m sure it’ll feel good after being on the road.”

I should be insulted, but I am too grateful to have the opportunity to get clean. I take the bucket of water and go upstairs to the loft so I may take advantage of this unexpected bounty.

The dinner is as satisfying as any feast I have ever eaten. Not only is the goose cooked perfectly, crisp skin and juicy succulent meat, but there is a thick, hearty stew of mutton, leeks, and cabbage, dark brown bread and new cheese, thin red wine and pear cider, as well as baked apples with cream.

The dinner has the air of a party, with the farmer and his wife—Guion and Bette—full of the good cheer that follows a near miss. Even Yannic smiles and nods happily—although perhaps that is simply because his belly is finally full. The farmer’s sons dither between awed hero worship that they are dining with the Beast of Waroch and clumsy attempts to impress him. Or at the very least, to shame the other.

“Anton squealed when the soldiers first arrived,” Jacques says.

Flushing, Anton elbows him hard in the ribs. “Did not. My voice cracked is all.”

Jacques snickers. “From the force of the squeal.”

“Well, at least I didn’t try to use a ham as a weapon. Besides”—he raises his arm and brandishes his purloined dagger—“next time I will be armed and the French will not get off so easily.”

“I do not know that lying dead amid the cow dung in your barn could be called getting off easily,” I point out. Much to my surprise, everyone laughs.

“True enough,” Guion says, raising his cup. Then he sobers. “What is happening with the French, Sir Waroch? Are we at war with them again?”

“It is not good,” Beast says. “Half the duchess’s council has left her side. Marshal Rieux has joined with Count d’Albret, and they hold Nantes against her.

“The French have been looking for any excuse to invade our kingdom and have crossed our borders to pursue that goal.” He turns to me. “Have they taken any cities other than Ancenis?”

“Not that I’ve heard. Nor has d’Albret given up on his plan to force the duchess to marry him.” I turn back to Bette and Guion. “She only narrowly escaped a trap the baron laid for her, thanks in large part to Sir Waroch. That’s how he came by his injuries.”

The farmer and his wife raise their cups to him, which makes him duck his head in embarrassment.

The farmer's face creases in worry. "So those are our only choices now? To be ruled by the French or by Count d'Albret?"

Bette shudders. "I'll take the French, I think," she says, then drains her cup. Interesting that the dark tales of d'Albret have traveled this far.

"We will know more once we reach Rennes," I say. "The duchess is there with her advisors and they are no doubt forming a plan even as we speak."

"And I," Beast says, "I will be rousing the good people of Brittany to her cause. As soon as I can ride out in earnest," he adds with a grumble.

Young Anton, his face alight with thoughts of valor, raises his knife. "I will fight for the duchess," he says.

It is all I can do not to sigh. Beast does not even have to ask—peasants are already promising to follow him.

"It may come to that, lad, and if so, the duchess will be glad of your support. Yours, too," he tells Jacques.

Both boys turn to look at their mother, who is torn between pride that they are willing to fight and dismay that they are old enough to do so. The farmer takes one look at his wife's face and says, "Enough of this grim talk, eh? Surely a man such as you has a story to entertain us with?"

We spend the rest of the dinner telling stories. Beast has more than a few lively tales of campaigns and skirmishes that cause Anton's and Jacques's eyes to glow with promises of glory. It is easy to see that they imagine themselves in his role.

When all the dishes have been picked clean and everyone is stuffed, it is time for the last round of evening chores before bed. Yannic has fallen asleep at the table, so we simply lay him out on the bench to sleep for the night. The clatter of plates and crockery do not cause him to so much as stir.

I find I am surprisingly reluctant to end this evening. I have eaten finer dinners, supped in far more elegant surroundings, and been entertained by far wittier companions. And yet, there is a simple warmth and joy here that is headier than the strongest wine I have ever drunk. Two years ago I would have mocked their simple life. Now I envy it.

"Here, I'll take those," Bette says. "You go tend your man and his injuries."

I want to protest that he is not my man, but instead I thank her and go fix one last round of poultices while Anton and Jacques help Beast back to his place by the fire.

By the time the poultices are ready, everyone else has gone up the stairs to their beds. One of the boys murmurs some last taunt to his brother, which is followed by an *oof* after the offended party throws something at him.

"Do that again," Beast says.

I look up, confused. “What?”

“Smile. I have never seen you smile before.”

“You are daft. Of course I smile.” Uncomfortable under that gaze, I turn and begin removing the bandage from his leg.

“How long were you hidden in d’Albret’s household?”

My heart thuds painfully. Has he figured out who I am? “Why do you wish to know?” I ask, stalling.

He looks away and plucks at the bandage on his arm. “I was wondering if you might have been there when Alyse was still alive.”

And just like that, I am completely undone. His words pierce my heart and erode the last of my defenses against him. I put the poultice on his leg and stare at it as if it is the most fascinating thing in the world.

“You knew of d’Albret’s other wives,” he hurries to point out. “I thought perhaps you knew of Alyse as well.”

Stick as close to truth as possible—that is what we learn at the convent about crafting lies. “Yes,” I say, and hope my reluctance does not come through in my voice. “I knew her, but not well.”

“Tell me of her.” He stares at me intently, as if he would pluck the answers he seeks from my skin.

I look away, my gaze scanning the room, the fire, anything but his ravaged face. What do I tell him of Alyse? That she grew thin with nerves and fright? That the calm, serene woman turned into one who would jump when she was touched and who startled at loud noises? That Julian and Pierre teased her cruelly because of it, making every loud noise they could think of, sneaking up behind her in the dark empty corridors? That she ate little in the last months before her death?

Or do I tell him of the few stolen happy moments she found? Our trip to pick blackberries, their plump sweetness bursting in our mouths so that the juice would trickle down our chins and make us laugh? Or how the minnows nibbled at our toes when we dipped our feet in the brook?

“She was kind and pious,” I finally say. “Always remembering to honor God and His saints. Bluebells were her favorite flower, and there was an entire meadow of them behind the keep one spring. The taste of honey made her nose stuffy.”

Beast smiles, a heartbreakingly wistful thing. “I remember that,” he says softly.

Of course he knows that. I rack my brain for something to comfort him. “She was strong of spirit and laughed a lot.” At least at first, and that was what caused

me to lower my guard and befriend her, in spite of all my vows to never grow close to any of d'Albret's wives again.

A deep silence grows in the room, fed by our separate memories.

"I came back for her."

"What?" I ask, certain that I have not heard him correctly.

"I came back for her." Beast repeats the words casually, as if coming back for her were the most natural thing in the world.

But it is not. For despite all the wives d'Albret has ill used, and all the vassals and innocents he has wronged, no one—*no one*—has ventured forth to speak for any of them or to claim justice on their behalf.

My world is so completely upturned by this revelation that it takes me a full minute to find my voice. A thousand questions fill my mind, but none of them are anything a daughter of Mortain would be hungry to know. "What happened?" I finally ask, careful to keep my voice neutral and my eyes on the new bandage I am preparing.

"When three of my letters to her went unanswered, I knew something was wrong, so I obtained a leave of absence and came looking for her.

"When I arrived in Tonquédec, I was refused entrance. And when I thought to linger, I was encouraged to be on my way by a party of twelve armed soldiers." His hand drifts up to the scar that bisects the left side of his face. "They sought to improve my appearance somewhat."

"But they let you live?"

Beast cuts a scornful glance at me. "There was no *letting* about it. I fought my way free."

"Against twelve of d'Albret's men?"

He shrugs, then winces as his shoulder pains him. "It did not take long for the battle fever to come over me." He flashes a grin that is two parts death and one part humor. "I killed eight of them, leaving four to limp back and explain the disaster to d'Albret." Then the grin fades, and the depth of pain and despair I see in his face takes my breath away. "As soon as we've secured the duchess's crown against the French, I will pay another visit to d'Albret and call him to account."

I decide that it is a very good thing I did not tell him that Alyse died trying to help me.

Chapter Twenty-One

IN THE MORNING, WE MAKE ready to leave. Anton and Jacques are desperate to saddle up the dead Frenchmen's horses, grab their new weapons, and follow us to Rennes, but we refuse their offer. There are at least twelve more leagues between here and Rennes, all of them crawling with d'Albret's scouts. We will need the gods' own luck to get there. Which means it is too dangerous for them to travel with us. "Better to meet us in Rennes in a fortnight," Beast tells them.

So they content themselves with the plan they cooked up over breakfast. Guion, Anton, and Jacques saddle up the French soldiers' horses and hoist the dead men across the animals' backs. They take a tabard Yannic stripped from a d'Albret scout and tie it around one of the dead soldier's arms. "Maybe that will prod the French to tangle with d'Albret's men and buy you a little time," Guion says.

It is a pleasant thought, but in my experience, the gods are not nearly that accommodating.

Then Guion and the two boys lead their grisly retinue south, while Beast, Yannic, and I head north. Our path to Rennes will be like trying to thread a needle, weaving our way through d'Albret's men to the west, and Châteaubriant to the east with all its ties to the Dinan family and therefore to d'Albret. Not to mention the added spice of French sorties scattered throughout. But we have no choice. We must keep moving, especially if we do not want to risk d'Albret's stumbling upon this innocent family.

Well, perhaps not so innocent now, after their encounter with the French.

I feel as if the huntsman's snare is closing in around us, and it has me fair twitching in my saddle. Since I do not wish to spook my horse, I force myself to stillness, an art I have mastered during my long years with d'Albret.

I glance over at Beast. He is still pale, and it seems as if he does not sit as tall in the saddle as he once did. No matter how strong a man he is, he is only human. Or at least, mostly human. It is a wonder he has made it this long, and I can only hope his strength holds until we reach Rennes. Guion told us of a small abbey run by the brothers of Saint Cissonius where we can take shelter for the night.

Unless d'Albret has thought to post guards at all such places.

Hopefully they will have medical supplies as well, for my own stores of healing herbs are running dangerously low. And while Beast's fever has gotten

no worse, neither has it gotten any better. For once, he is being smart and not wasting his dwindling energy. Or at least, not at the moment. Who knows what he will do if we come across some lost goat or wandering child?

I came back for her. The memory of his words still echoes in my head. It makes no sense that five simple words should shift everything so sharply, but they do. It is as if I have woken up in a world as different from yesterday as spring is from winter. It is the difference between a world with hope and one without. I wish to crawl back into my younger self and hand her this knowledge, this small spark of light, and see how it would shift her perceptions of the darkness all around her. Or would it have been more cruel, that glimmer of hope causing her to look for a rescue that never came?

The farther we get from Nantes, the more I am plagued by doubts. While this taste of freedom is as sweet as I dreamed it would be, I cannot help but wonder about the cost. For so long, I was convinced it was my destiny to kill d'Albret. As relieved as I am to be gone from him, I fear I have shirked my fated duty.

But there was no other choice, I remind myself. To have ridden boldly back into his arms after drugging the entire garrison and freeing Beast would only have ensured my slow and painful death.

I also cannot help but worry about the convent and my role there. It was the one place I felt safe from d'Albret, hundreds of leagues away on an island inhabited by assassins. But I have gone against their teachings, their rules, defied Mortain's will and replaced it with my own. If they cast me out, what then?

Just before noon, the goat track we have been following opens up onto a small meadow. On the far side of the meadow lies the main road, and on the other side of that is the forest. It will be slower going, but d'Albret's soldiers cannot scour every inch of forest between here and Rennes. With luck, we can avoid being seen.

As we draw closer to the road, I hear the sound of an approaching party. I pause to listen for the distant hoofbeats. More than a few. And they are riding hard. No merchant party, then, nor casual travelers.

The timing could not be worse. I glance behind us, but we have crossed over half the meadow and the shelter of the trees is too far away.

"We must get across the road. Quickly!" I order the others.

The whiff of danger has stirred Beast from his dozing and he spurs his horse forward to the road and the thick screen of trees and low branches on the other side of it. Yannic bounces along behind him like a sack of the miller's grain, and I bring up the rear, nipping at their heels, urging them to move faster.

We are in luck, for there is a sharp bend in the road, and while the jingle of harnesses and the rattle of weapons grows louder, the party is still out of sight.

Which means they cannot see us either. We hit the road at a full gallop and cross it in a few swift strides. Beast reaches the cover of the trees first, then Yannic. Just as my horse leaves the road, a shout goes up from behind. We've been spotted.

"Faster!" I shout to the others, but the forest is a tangle of fallen limbs and gnarled roots, forcing us to slow down. Beast falls back to ride beside me. "Return to the road and keep riding. Yannic and I will lead them away."

"You're daft!" I shout, ducking a low-hanging branch. "I'll not leave a wounded man and a cripple to stand alone against so many."

"Now you're being daft. Did you see how many there were?"

"Twenty. Maybe more. Here!" We have reached a small clearing with a ring of tall, jagged ancient stones, some of them high and wide enough to hide us from sight. At least until we are ready to make our stand.

Beast's mouth is set in grim lines as he nods Yannic toward one of the stones. His jaw is clenched—at first I think he is in pain, and then I realize he is furious. "Go!" He puts the full force of command in his low, urgent voice. "I'll hold them off."

I look at him in disbelief. "Your fever has eaten your brain if you think I'll leave now."

He leans out of his saddle as if to grab me, then stops as his ribs bite him. "This is no fight."

"I know." I steer my horse toward one of the stones. The sword is not my favorite weapon, but its longer reach will be of greater value here. Once I take out a few with my throwing knives—

"No!" Beast makes a grab for my reins, but he misses and nearly falls off his horse. "I will not stand by and watch you struck down before me." His eyes burn—with anger, I think, until I see that he is also afraid. Afraid for me.

His concern inflames my own temper, for I do not deserve such consideration, and certainly not from him. I will not abandon Alyse's brother like I abandoned her. "And I will not stand idly by and watch you die a second time," I tell him.

Then d'Albret's men are hard upon us. Resigned, Beast draws the sword from his back with his right hand while his left closes around the handle of the ax. "I will not let them take you alive."

Of all the things he could have said, that is the one thing that comforts me the most. "Nor I you," I say around a strange lump that has formed in my throat.

Then he smiles his great big maniacal grin just as our pursuers burst out of the trees, their horses' hooves churning up the forest floor.

Yannic makes the first move, launching one of his rocks with his customary skill and striking one of the foremost men on the temple. I raise the crossbow

and take the leader between the eyes. While he is still reeling from the force of the bolt, I drop the bow and reach for my throwing knives. Beast keeps the rock wall at his back and stands in his stirrups to swing at the four horsemen who engulf him.

Even as my first three knives hit their targets, I know there are too many. I reach for the sword strapped to my saddle, but before I can free it, one of the men charges me. I throw myself to the left as he swings, and misses. Before he can swing again, there is a loud *thwap*, and he slumps forward on his horse. I send a silent *Thank you* to Yannic, until I see the arrow in the man's back. Yannic does not have a bow.

I have no time to look for the archer as I struggle to free my sword from its scabbard. A half a dozen men have Beast pinned against one of the stones. His sword arm flashes quick and bright, but his left arm is barely able to move the ax. I spur my horse toward him, lunging forward with the sword. It is an awkward, clumsy thrust but it does its job.

Except that the soldier's horse jerks away, taking the dying man and my sword with it. *Merde*. I pull my last two daggers from my wrists. I glance at Beast. Should I save them for us or use them to attack? Before I can decide, arrows rain down from the trees, shocking me into stillness. Even as I ready myself for their sharp bite, five of d'Albret's men wheel around to meet this new attack, and a second volley is let loose. Suddenly, the small clearing is alive with movement as the trees and the forest floor itself comes to life, spitting out creatures of the old legends. Or demons spawned in hell. They are dark of skin and misshapen. One has a leather nose, another's arm seems to be made of wood, and a third appears to have had half his face melted away. Whatever their infirmities, they finish off the rest of d'Albret's men with ruthless efficiency, pulling the men from their horses and dispatching them with wicked little blades or quick twists of their necks. Within the span of a dozen heartbeats, all of d'Albret's soldiers are dead, and we are surrounded.

Chapter Twenty-Two

BEAST RAISES HIS DROOPING SWORD, but a curt command from the man with the leather nose stays his hand. He tilts his head up to the branches above us. I follow his gaze and see a dozen archers hidden there, arrows trained upon us. We all eye one another warily.

The leather-nosed man steps forward. He is small and wiry and wears a dark tunic and a leather jerkin over patched breeches. As he moves out of the shadows, I see that he is not as dark-skinned as I had first thought—he is coated with grime. No, not grime. Dust. Or ash, mayhap. As he draws closer still, I see a single acorn hanging from a leather cord around his neck, and then I know. These are the mysterious charbonnerie, the charcoal-burners who live deep in the forests and are rumored to serve the Dark Mother.

With no more noise than a breeze rustling through the leaves, the rest of the charbonnerie emerge from their hiding places. There are twenty of them, counting the archers in the trees. I glance over at Beast. We cannot fight our way out of this one.

With an effort, Beast straightens in his saddle. “We mean you no harm. By right of Saint Cissonius and the grace of Dea Matrona, we wish only to pass the night in the forest.” It is a bold gambit, and a smart one, for while the Dark Matrona is not accepted by the Church, the Nine are her brethren gods, and invoking their blessing cannot hurt.

One of them, a thin fellow with a chin and nose as sharp as blades, spits into the leaves. “Why do you not spend the night at an inn, like most city dwellers?”

“Because there are those who wish us ill, as you just saw.” As Beast speaks, another of the charcoal-burners—a young, gangly fellow who is all elbows and knees—sidles up next to the leader and whispers something in his ear. The leader nods, his gaze sharpening. “Who are you?”

“I am Benebic of Waroch.”

The man who had murmured in the leader’s ear nods in satisfaction, and whispers of *the Beast* go up around the charcoal-burners. Beast’s exploits have made him famous even among the outcasts.

“And who is it the mighty Beast wishes to avoid?”

“The French,” Beast says. “And those who would support them. At least until I can heal and meet them in a fair fight.”

I hold my breath. The charcoal-burners hate the French as much as most

Bretons do, and I can only hope that having a common enemy will give us common cause. One of the older men, the one with a wooden arm, nudges a body with his foot. "These men aren't French."

"No, they're not. But they are traitors to the duchess and wished to detain us." Then Beast grins one of his savage grins. "There is plenty of room for you in the war against the French, if you so desire. I would be honored to have such skilled fighters on my side."

There is a long pause, which makes me think the charbonnerie receive few such invitations.

"What is in it for us?" the sharp-faced man asks, but the leader motions for him to be silent.

Beast smiles. "The pleasure of beating the French." To him, any fight is its own excuse.

The leader reaches up and scratches his leather nose, suggesting it is a recent replacement. "You can spend the night in the forest, but under our watch. Come. Follow us." He motions to the others, and a half a dozen of them fall in around us.

They are eerily silent as they guide us deeper into the forest, and our horses' hooves are muffled by the thick layer of decaying leaves on the ground. The gangly youth cannot keep his eyes off me, and when I catch him staring, he blushes to the roots of his hair.

The trees here are ancient, tall and thick and gnarled like old men bent with age. Even though there are hours of daylight left, little sun gets through the thick tangle of foliage overhead.

At last we reach a large clearing ringed by a half a dozen mounds of earth, each one as big as a small house. Smoke burbles from holes in the mounds, which are tended by nearby men. Interspersed among the mounds are small tents made of stripped branches and stretched hides. Cooking fires are watched over by drably dressed women, while dark, gritty children play close by. When we enter the clearing, everyone stops what they are doing and turns to look at us. The youngest child—a girl—sidles up to her mother and slips her fingers into her mouth.

The leader—Erwan is his name—grunts and points to a section of the clearing far away from the earthen mounds. "Make your camp there."

All of them watch as Yannic and I dismount, secure our horses, then turn to help Beast off of his.

His breath comes in quick, shallow gasps. "Did you take a new injury?" I ask quietly.

“No.” His grunt is followed by a short bellow of pain. By the time we have him off his horse, the entire camp knows of his condition. Yannic and I are able to steer him but a few feet before he comes to a complete stop. “I think this is a good place to make camp,” he says, then grabs for a nearby tree so he will not crash to the ground.

“Not sure that one is going to live through the night,” the wooden-armed man mumbles, and I glare at him.

The gangly fellow catches my eyes. “Oh, don’t mind Graelon, miss. That’s just his way.” He glances mischievously at the old man, then leans in closer to me. “He was like that before the fire got his arm.” The youth’s charm is infectious.

“I’m Winnog, my lady. At your service.”

“As if she’d have you,” someone mutters.

Ignoring the mutterer, I give Winnog my brightest smile. “Thank you.” As I turn back to Beast’s side, it is all I can do not to clap my hands at the onlookers and cry, *Shoo!* But they would no doubt consider that a rude repayment of their hospitality, meager as it is.

I sense a movement behind me and feel the beating of a lone heart. Still untrusting of these charbonnerie, I whirl around, hand going to the knife concealed in my crucifix.

The woman I see pauses and casts her eyes down in a gesture of submission. She is dressed in a dark gown, and, like the rest of the women, her hair is wrapped tightly in a coif of some kind. She carries a small sack. “For his wound,” she says. “It will help.”

After a moment, I take the sack from her and peer inside. “What is it?” I ask.

“Ground oak bark to keep infection from setting in. And ashes of burned snakeskin to hasten the healing.”

“What is your name?” I ask.

She glances up at me, then down again. “Malina.”

“Thank you,” I say, and mean it. For I am running out of ideas on how to keep Beast’s wounds from overtaking him before we make it to Rennes.

“Do you need help?” she asks shyly.

While I am certain Beast will hate having his weakness seen by others, it seems prudent to accept any help they offer, an attempt to forge some tenuous bond between us. “Yes, thank you. Do you have any hot water?” She nods, then slips away to fetch it. While she is gone, I quickly sniff the oak bark and the ashes, then put a dab to my tongue to be certain it will do no harm.

“It was not in jest that I invited them to fight with us.” Beast’s voice rumbles up at me. “Did you see how ferocious they were? How unexpected their tactics?”

He is as excited as a squire with his first sword. “They could prove valuable allies.”

“If they do not stab us in the back,” I mutter. “Are they not known to be clannish and untrustworthy?”

Beast considers a moment. “Clannish, yes, but that is not the same as being unworthy of trust.”

Malina returns just then, bringing a halt to our conversation. She and I tend Beast’s wounds while he lies back and pretends he is dozing, but his jaw clenches as we work on him. By the time we are done, supper is ready, and, much to my surprise, we are invited to partake of it. It seems we are to be treated as guests rather than prisoners, then. Wishing to capitalize on this, I take one of the cheeses and the two roast chickens that Bette gave us to contribute to the meal.

The charbonneries’ eyes widen with pleasure and the unexpected bounty, and when I sit down to eat, I can see why. Dinner is some sort of mash—acorn, I think. As I take a bite, I cannot help but remember how I called the convent’s food pig slop and how Sister Thomine threatened to force it down my gullet.

A lump forms in my throat, one that has nothing to do with the mash and everything to do with a sense of deep homesickness, for as much as I rebelled against the convent, it was the safest place I have ever lived. I miss Ismae and Annith more than I ever thought possible.

Yannic shovels his gruel into his silent gob steadily, and, beside me, Beast eats with great gusto. “You like it?” I ask softly.

“No. But I do not wish to insult their hospitality.” Since these words are delivered with a pointed look to my own barely touched portion, I turn my attention to eating it while it is still warm.

When dinner is over, the charbonnerie linger around the fire. A few murmur among themselves, but most of them simply stare at us. One of the boys brings out a small wooden flute and begins piping a soft, haunting melody. Erwan leans back against a rock, folds his arms, and studies us in the flickering light. “Tell us of this war with the French,” he says.

Beast takes a sip of whatever spirit it is they have given us. Fermented dew collected from the trees, most likely. “Our young duchess is besieged from within and without. Upon the duchess’s father’s death, the French tried to declare her their ward. Of course, she laughed in their long-nosed faces.” He takes another swig. “But they do not give up, those French. They know that she is young and untried, and as yet unwed. They see our country as ripe for the plucking and are looking for any chance to do just that.”

Erwan appears unmoved. “What is in it for us if we fight?”

“Freedom from French rule,” Beast says simply. But it is clear these cautious men will need more to convince them than that.

“Your way of life,” I add, drawing their eyes to me. “We Bretons at least respect your right to the wildwood. The French will not, and they will claim all the forests and the wood in it as their own. You will be forced to pay dearly for what you now have for free.”

Erwan studies us in silence a moment longer, then barks out a harsh laugh and leans forward to put his arms on his knees. “Freedom, you say? Freedom to scavenge in the forest, reviled by all? Freedom to sell our wares to people who would like to pretend that we do not exist and that their charcoal is left on their doorsteps by some korrigan of hearth tales?”

Beast meets his gaze, unblinking. “The French will not honor your right to the old ways, your right of woodage and coppings. In France, men must pay hard coin for such rights; they do not come to them by birth. And while yours is not an easy life, it was always my understanding that you chose it, chose to follow your god into this exile.”

The other men shift restlessly on their seats and Erwan looks away from Beast to stare deep into the flames. “*Choice*. That is a funny word. Our father’s father’s father chose for us, did he not? And how long must we live with that choice?” He turns and looks to the pile of sprawling children asleep under their blankets. “And how long must they?” he asks, his voice softening.

“What would you wish different?” I ask.

He looks surprised by the question, but before he can answer, Malina does. “To not have people whisper when we walk by; to not have them make the sign against evil when they think we are not looking; to not be chased from villages or markets when all we wish to do is buy combs for our daughters’ hair or new wheels for our carts.” She looks at me, defiant, her head held high.

“Respect,” I say. “You want respect and to not be reviled.”

Our eyes meet in a moment of perfect understanding, then she nods. “Exactly so.”

“Perhaps if the people saw you take up the duchess’s—and the country’s—cause, they would regard you in a different light,” Beast suggests.

“Most likely not,” the dour Graelon says. “And we’ll have lost our lives for nothing.”

“Every action has some measure of risk,” Beast points out. “You could lose good men simply by doing nothing.” He gestures to those gathered around the fire, with their missing limbs and ruined faces, injuries received while tending the charcoal pits.

“Tell me of the Dark Matrona,” I say softly, giving the truth of Beast’s words time to simmer and do its work. “For I have heard very little of Her.”

Erwan snorts. “That is because the Church does not accept Her.”

Malina takes up the story. “It is said that when Dea Matrona and the rest of the Nine are not strong enough to answer your prayers, it is time to turn to the Dark Mother, for She is a fierce and loving god who especially favors the fallen, the scarred, the wounded, and the castoffs.

“She rules over those places where life rises up out of darkness and decay. The first green shoot in a forest devastated by fire, the pile of dead ash that holds a single red ember, the small creatures that are born in the midden heap.

“Which is why the Church did not invite Her into its fold. The priests saw Her as competition for their Christ and His promise of resurrection.”

Malina reaches up and fondles the acorn at her neck. “The darkest hours of night, just before dawn, belong to Her. The moment when all hope is lost, and yet you dare to hope one more time. That is the power of the Dark Matrona.

“It is She who gave us the gift of coal. Back when we were simple forest dwellers, we grew careless with our fires, and the entire forest went up in flames. For days it burned, killing every tree, every bush, every shrub and blade of grass, until nothing but ash and dust remained. Or so we thought.

“But hidden in those ashes were pieces of wood that had only partially burned and still held the heat of the flames. That charcoal was Her gift to lead us to a new livelihood.”

Malina looks from the flames and meets my eyes. “So of course, we honor Her still, She who provided in our hour of need and gave us hope when it was all but lost.”

In the silence that follows her tale, all that can be heard is the crackle and snap of the burning logs in the fire pit. I cannot say why, but I am moved by this idea that hope—that life—can spring from darkness and decay. It is not something I’ve considered before. “What if this is another chance She is holding before you?” I ask.

Malina blinks in surprise.

“You have given up hope of gaining respect or fellowship, and yet here we are, offering you just such a chance.”

Beast leans forward. “We can do little to sway the Church, but the people *can* be swayed, and they often embrace things the Church wishes they would not. And so I ask you: Will you join us?”

Their gazes hold across the fire—Beast’s challenging, yet inviting. Erwan’s doubting and full of questions. Before either of them speaks, Malina says, “Let us consult with Brother Oak.”

There is a murmur of consensus among the charbonnerie, then an ancient man creaks to his feet and draws near the fire. His gnarled, trembling hands untie a pouch at his waist and he extracts a big, misshapen brown lump. At first I think it is an enormous dark mushroom, but when he draws closer to the fire, I can see it is an oak gall.

The old man places it carefully on one of the rocks that circle the fire, then removes a small ax that hangs from his waist. He closes his eyes and holds the ax over the fire, his lips murmuring in some old language I do not understand. The rest of the charbonnerie murmur with him. When they stop their murmuring, the old man takes the ax and, with surprising strength, brings it down to break open the oak gall. Because I am close, I can see a small white grub wiggling in the wreckage. After a moment, the grub spreads its wings—no grub, then—and flies.

The old man looks up to the waiting charbonnerie. “The Dark Mother says we fight.”

And so it is settled.

We ride out at dawn’s light, accompanied by a full cadre of charbonnerie. As luck would have it, they have a load of charcoal to bring to a blacksmith in Rennes. I have disguised myself as one of their women, and Beast sits in the back of one of the carts and plays the simpleton. Yannic fits right in.

Not even d’Albret, with all his suspicion and distrust, would think to look for us here.

Chapter Twenty-Three

FOR ALL HIS EARLIER PROTESTS that he would be pummeled to pulp if he rode in a wagon, Beast sleeps the entire way to Rennes laid out in the back of one of the charbonnerie's three carts. Twice d'Albret's scouts pass us on the road, and both times they scarcely glance at the charbonnerie, let alone think to look for us among them. And best of all, by the time we come in sight of the city walls, Beast is better, whether due to all the rest or to the herbs Malina provided, I am not sure.

The cathedral bells are ringing out the call to late-afternoon prayers as we approach the city gate. Although I do not know all of d'Albret's men by sight, I study the sentries and everyone in the crowd at the city gates. I ignore the slouching of the peasant and the confident stride of the city guard; I stare past the clothes they wear and study their faces, for if I can don a disguise, so can they.

I cannot believe we have done the impossible. Not only have we escaped d'Albret, but we have evaded recapture as well, and that is hard to wrap my mind around.

Beast point-blank refuses to be hauled into the city with a load of charcoal, so we pause long enough to get him up on a horse. A hum of urgency buzzes in my head like a swarm of gnats, and there is an itching between my shoulder blades that is nearly unbearable. Four men and much grunting later, the great lummo is astride his mount. Soon, I promise myself. Soon he will no longer be my responsibility but someone else's—someone far more capable than I. The thought does not cheer me as much as it once did.

As our small group makes ready to approach the gates, I try not to fidget. We are heavily covered in black dust from the charcoal-burners and their wares, which aids our disguise somewhat, but nothing can disguise Beast's size or bearing. "Slouch a bit," I tell him.

He looks at me quizzically, but honors my request, bringing his shoulders forward and bowing his spine so that he slumps in his saddle. "Why?" he asks.

"You are difficult to hide, and the longer we keep your arrival secret, the better. It would be wise to prevent d'Albret and his forces from knowing we are in Rennes for as long as possible."

And then we are at the gatehouse. Erwan informs the soldiers of his charcoal deliveries and is waved through. One of the soldiers eyes Beast warily, but the

truth is, between the knight's time on the road and his stay in the dungeon, not to mention the grievous injuries he still bears, it is not difficult for him to look like a giant simpleton.

I breathe a hearty sigh of relief once we are inside the city. Indeed, every one of my muscles seems to unclench now that there are twelve-foot-thick walls, twenty leagues, and an entire city garrison between us and d'Albret.

Much like my own mood, the city's borders on jubilant, drunk on its own importance of being the duchess's place of refuge, just as I am nearly drunk with the thrill of completing my mission. But there is caution here as well, in the way the people going about their business glance at newcomers, assessing.

We stay with the charcoal-burners as long as possible, passing by the tannery conducting its foul-smelling business down by the river, then turning up the street that leads to the section of town where the smiths can be found. They consume enough coal in their furnaces to keep the charbonnerie in pottage for the entire winter. We bid the charbonnerie goodbye, and Beast promises to send word when he has spoken to the duchess and her advisors of his plan to use the charcoal-burners against the French.

As he and I begin making our way toward the nicer part of town, I unwind the distinctive charbonnerie coif from my head and comb my fingers through my hair, then take the shawl from my shoulders. I use a clean corner of it to wipe the charcoal dust from my face so I am no longer one of the despised charbonnerie but merely a comely—if grubby—serving maid.

By the time we reach the palace, dusk is falling, and the sentries are just lighting the torches. It is not like Guérande, where people came and went as they pleased. The guards at the door speak with everyone who wishes to enter. "That's new," Beast says.

"At least someone has an eye toward the duchess's safety." It is one more barrier between d'Albret's spies and the duchess, and it will give them pause if they must stop and present themselves. "However, the guards will likely not grant us an audience with the duchess when we look like this, at least not without a full explanation of who we are, and I do not wish to announce your arrival to these men."

Beast pauses in wiping the charcoal dust from his face. "You don't trust them?"

"It is more accurate to say that I don't trust anyone. I wonder if Ismae is still assigned to the duchess. Perhaps I can get a message to her."

Beast glances at the sentries. "I am not sure they would grant you an audience with Ismae even if she is here."

I grimace, for he is most likely correct.

Beast thinks a moment, then reaches into some hidden pouch tucked on his person and removes something. “Here.” He hands me a small brooch—the silver oak leaves of Saint Camulos. “Ismae should recognize this, and if she does not, Captain Dunois will. As will the guards. They will honor any who carries this symbol.”

Holding the brooch tightly in my hand, I dismount, leaving him and Yannic to stay with the horses. I approach the palace and wait for the guard to finish questioning a burgher who is there to meet with the chancellor and complain about the most recent round of taxes. After the burgher has been told the chancellor has much more important business at hand—such as keeping the city from being attacked by the French—he is sent on his way, and then I am facing the sentry. He scowls at my poor clothing and the grime I am covered in. Even so, I tilt my head and give him my most fetching smile. He blinks, and his scowl softens. “What do you want?” he asks. “If you’re looking for scullery work, you must go around to the kitchens.”

I glance at the handful of pages lingering just inside the door. “I wish to get a message to one of the duchess’s attendants.”

The second sentry saunters over. “What business could you have with one of the duchess’s ladies in waiting?” he asks, as if the mere idea is some great jest.

I decide that a little mystery will aid my cause. “Ismae Rienne is no mere lady in waiting,” I tell him. “Give her this and bid her come as quickly as she can.”

I do not know if it is the mention of Ismae or the sight of Beast’s silver oak leaves that catches the guard’s attention. Whichever it is, he takes the brooch, hands it to a page, and murmurs some instructions. When the boy scampers off, I saunter over to wait by the wall, trying to look important but harmless—a surprisingly difficult combination. After a few moments, the sentry decides I won’t dash in on my own, so relaxes his guard somewhat.

I rest my head against the stone and allow the sense of jubilation to flow through me. Beast is still alive and we are as safe here as anywhere in the entire kingdom. With the abbess tucked away at the convent on the other side of the country, she will not know that I have arrived in Rennes until she receives a message. She cannot send me on a new assignment. At least not for a while. That gives me some time to work out what I would like to do next. Suddenly, the world looms large, full of possibilities and freedom.

And no one—*no one*—here in Rennes knows my true identity, so my secrets will be safe.

At the faint murmur of approaching voices, I carefully tuck my moment of triumph away and inch toward the causeway.

“No, you cannot kill him. He is the duchess’s own cousin,” a man’s voice points out wryly.

“All the more reason not to trust him,” a woman says.

It is Ismae, and the joy and relief I feel at hearing her voice is nearly overwhelming.

“If something should happen to the duchess,” she continues, “he stands to inherit the kingdom. Besides, he has been a guest of the French regent for the last year. How do we know where his true allegiance lies?”

“He was a prisoner!” The man’s exasperation is nearly palpable.

When Ismae speaks again, she sounds aggrieved. “Why did you not stay with the council? The message was for me, not you.” Unable to stop myself, I smile. For it is such a very Ismae-like thing to say.

“Because the message was the sigil of Saint Camulos, whom I serve, not you.”

Then she and the gentleman emerge from the entryway and hurry toward the sentry. “Where did you get this?” the nobleman demands. He is tall, with dark hair and the well-muscled grace of a soldier.

The guard points to me. The man’s head snaps around and I am speared by a gray gaze that is as cold and hard as the stone at my back.

He takes a step in my direction. “Who are you?” he asks in a low, angry voice.

Before I can answer, Ismae shoves him aside. “The message was for *me*, Duval. Oh! Sybella!” Then she throws herself at me and I am encased in a fierce hug. I hug her back, surprised at how very much I want to weep into her shoulder. She is alive. And she is here. For a long moment, that is enough, and I simply savor the feel of her familiar arms about me.

She pulls away to eye me carefully. “Is it really you?”

I smile, although I can tell it is a lopsided effort. “In the flesh.”

“The oak leaves?” The nobleman’s impatience rolls off him in waves as he clenches the silver brooch in his hand. Duval, Ismae called him, which means he is the bastard brother of the duchess.

“I have brought you something,” I tell them. “There.” I nod to where Beast and Yannic wait on their horses.

Duval’s face lights up just as Ismae’s did when she saw me, but before he can hurry to him, I grab his arm. “He is gravely injured. Once you get him off that horse, you will need men and a litter to move him. And you must do it quietly. I bring much news and none of it good.”

Duval frowns his understanding and gives the guards an order to send for help—and to keep quiet about it—then rushes off to greet his friend.

“You did it!” Ismae whispers fiercely. “You got him free. I knew you could.”

I stare at her. “You knew of my orders?”

She grabs my hands. “It was my idea! The only way I could think of to get you out of there. Every time I saw you in Guérande, I feared for your safety and your sanity. Now here you are, and that haunted, mad glint is gone from your eyes.”

I do not know whether to kiss her for getting me out of d’Albret’s household or slap her for all the trouble her idea has caused me. In any case, her words ring true. I no longer feel as if I dance along the edge of madness.

Ismae puts her arm though mine, and we begin walking toward the others. “I will never forgive the reverend mother for assigning you to d’Albret. She might as well have sent you into the Underworld itself.”

A faint wave of panic threatens, then recedes. Ismae does not know—has never known—my true identity, for all that we are like sisters. I am saved from further conversation when I hear Beast bellow, “Saint’s teeth! You’re *alive*? How is that possible?”

It is Duval who answers. “By the same batch of miracles that has you astride that horse, you great ox.”

Then Ismae and I must jump aside as a half a dozen men come trotting by bearing an empty litter. Ismae points them toward Duval and Beast. “Come,” I say. I let go of her arm and hurry after the litter. “I must give them instructions as to Beast’s care.”

Over Beast’s loud protestations that he is fine, I warn Duval that, in addition to having a fever, Beast cannot put any weight on his leg.

Duval and the men have a quick conference among themselves. “We will take him to the convent run by the sisters of Saint Brigantia. If anyone can tend his injuries, it will be them.” He shoots me a look that lets me know he will be wanting answers soon, then he directs his men to help Beast.

But it is no easy thing to remove an injured twenty-stone man from his horse, and it cannot be done without some jostling and bumping. Beast grits his teeth, and his face turns white as he mutters something about being tossed around like a sack of onions. Then one of the men loses his grip, and the horse startles, slamming Beast’s wounded leg between its flank and the helping guard, and Beast faints.

I sigh. “I fear that has become a new habit of his,” I murmur to the others. “Although it is probably for the better.” I motion for Yannic to dismount so he and I can show the damn-fool soldiers how to get Beast off the horse without killing him.

It is clear that Duval is torn between concern for his friend and his duty to his sister. In the end, I assure him that Yannic is as able as any of us to see to

Beast's care, so he gives stern instructions to the men on what to tell the sisters of Saint Brigantia, with promises that he will be there shortly. Then he turns to me. "Come now. We would hear your accounting of what has happened."

"But of course, my lord." Indeed, I cannot wait to discharge what I know. It is as if I have been carrying a hot ember deep inside my body that is slowly turning my insides to ash. It will be no hardship to be rid of that burden.

Ismae loops her arm through mine as we follow Duval to the palace door.

"Where is he taking us?" I ask under my breath.

"To the duchess's chamber, where she is holding council with her advisors."

"At this hour?"

Ismae grows sober. "At all hours, I'm afraid."

"Are they trustworthy, these advisors of hers?" I have not been impressed with the steadfastness of her guardians Marshal Rieux and Madame Dinan.

She grimaces. "Yes, that is why it is such a small group."

As Duval leads us through the maze of palace halls and corridors, I allow myself to adjust to the cacophony of the beating hearts and hammering pulses. It is as if a hundred minstrels have all decided to bang their drums at the same time.

I also study the faces of the people I pass—servants, retainers, even the pages—trying to get a sense of their characters.

Duval leads us to a small chamber guarded by two sentries, who step forward to open the door to admit us. The duchess stands at a large table flanked by three men who stare at the map in front of her. One is dressed in travel-stained clothes and it is clear he has only just arrived. The second man is dressed in bishop's robes and hovers near the duchess like a fat scarlet toad. The third is slender and serious, his brow wrinkled in thought. With relief, I realize I recognize none of her advisors, which means they will not recognize me.

It is the first time I have seen the duchess up close. She is young, and short, with fine skin and a high noble brow. Even though she is but thirteen years of age, there is something regal about her that commands respect. At the sound of our entry, they all look up, questions in their eyes.

Duval's smile transforms his face. "Beast is here. In Rennes."

The duchess clasps her hands together as if in prayer and closes her eyes, joy lighting her young face. "Praise God," she says.

"I rather think we should be praising Mortain," Duval says dryly, "as it is His hand that guided him here." He motions in my direction, and all eyes turn to me.

"Then you and your saint have my most sincere thanks and profoundest gratitude," she says.

I sink into a deep curtsy. “It was my pleasure, Your Grace. However, I bring you not just your noble knight but vital information concerning Count d’Albret and his plans.”

“You mean the man is not content to steal my city out from under me and sit on it like a brooding hen?”

“No, Your Grace. Even now he has put into motion a number of plans, any one of which could bear rich fruit.”

The thickset bear of a man on the duchess’s right gestures with his hand. “By all means, share with us these plans.”

“Count d’Albret, Marshal Rieux, and Madame Dinan hold the city against you, and while there are many who remain loyal to Your Grace, Count d’Albret does his best to make it . . . difficult for them to remain so.”

“Wait, wait. Start at the beginning. How were they able to take the city from the attendants and retainers who were still in residence there?”

Before I can answer, there is a rustling behind me, a sound that reminds me of a snake slithering in dry grass. In that moment, I recognize why I am uneasy: I sense eight pulses but see only seven bodies before me.

Slowly, as if I am in a dream, I turn around and see the abbess of Saint Mortain standing behind me. She skulks in the far corner, like a spider, which is why I did not see her when I first came in. Her blue eyes study me coldly, and my heart plummets like a stone.

I have not escaped my past; it has been waiting for me here all along.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“GREETINGS, DAUGHTER.” WHILE HER WORDS are friendly enough, her voice is cool, and the kiss of welcome she gives me is as cold and impersonal as Death Himself. “Excellent work. We are pleased that you were able to perform your tasks so admirably.”

I curtsy deeply, my eyes watching her warily. Ismae and Annith always got along well with the abbess, and genuine fondness seemed to exist among them. Indeed, Annith was treated like a court favorite much of the time, and Ismae always saw the woman as her savior, as if it were the abbess’s own hand that had lifted her up from her drab life as a peasant.

The abbess and I had a different sort of relationship. One built on mutual dislike and distrust, brought together only by our shared needs: mine for a sanctuary, hers for a finely honed weapon she could let loose as Mortain willed. I trust her as much as I do a viper.

She motions for me to rise, then she turns to the others in the room. “I would remind you that Sybella has traveled far and at great discomfort and risk. No doubt she would like to make herself presentable before she tells the rest of her tale.”

At her words, I am suddenly aware of just how filthy and travel-stained I must appear, as if I am some grub that has scuttled out from under a rock.

The duchess is quick to apologize for her lack of hospitality and insists I take the time to refresh myself before reporting to the council. I had been so concerned with sharing my news that I had given no thought to my appearance until the abbess pointed it out. The evil cow. She likely did it on purpose, to throw me off balance.

My unease increases when the abbess insists on escorting me to my chamber herself. Ismae sends me a nervous glance as I curtsy to the duchess and then follow the reverend mother from the room.

As we walk, she says nothing except to order a servant to fetch things for a bath and make the room ready. She holds her head high, her posture rigidly straight as she glides down the hall. I do not know if her silence is because she fears being overheard or if it is yet another way to unnerve me.

We reach a chamber with a cheerful fire. A tub has been placed in front of it, and two maids are emptying kettles of hot water into the bath. The abbess quickly dismisses them. Once we are alone, she turns to face me, her beautiful

face contorted with anger. “What are you doing here, Sybella?” she hisses. “You were only to free him, not personally escort him to Rennes.”

I toss my head in the face of her anger, both to give myself strength and to annoy her. “And how would he have gotten here, with me practically having to carry him from the dungeons? It was only after days of my tending his wounds that he was even able to stay on a horse—and then only when he was tied on.”

The abbess’s nostrils flare in irritation, for as much as she longs to, she cannot argue with my logic. She shoves her hands in her sleeves and begins pacing. “But now we have no one in Nantes.”

“It does not matter, Reverend Mother, for none of the traitors was *marqued*. Not Marshal Rieux, not Madame Dinan, and not d’Albret.” I watch her carefully to see if she recognizes that her promise to me—that I would be able to kill d’Albret—was broken.

She does not. “There is still great value in having you there. Someone will need to keep the duchess informed.”

And suddenly I am furious. Furious that she does not even care that she lured me back to hell on earth with a false promise and that for a span of time, death was more inviting to me than the life I was forced to live—the life *she* had forced me to live, using lies and a lure she knew I would find irresistible.

I take a step toward her, my hands clenched into fists so that I will not slap her. “Great value? Great value? For whom? And at what cost? You promised me I could kill him. Promised me Mortain had *marqued* him and was waiting for me—not any of His handmaidens, but *me*—to go back there and kill him. You lied to me.”

She tilts her wimpled head and studies me. “Something as paltry as a lack of Mortain’s permission would not stop the Sybella I know. Perhaps in the end, your ties to d’Albret are stronger than your ties to Mortain. You have, after all, known him and served him far longer.”

Her words strike all the air from my lungs and I am so shocked by a sense of violation that I cannot dredge up anything to say and am left gaping at her like a fish.

She gives me a scornful glance. “Make yourself presentable so you can report to the duchess,” she says, then lifts her skirts and sweeps out of the room.

As I stand in the empty room, the abbess’s words echo in my head and take up residence like a nest of maggots in a rotting corpse. I feel small and tainted, as if I should not be in this room, this palace, this city. I start to rub my arms, then stop, for my skin feels flayed raw by her accusation.

Then, praise God and all His saints, the anger comes, a sweet hot rush of fury that burns the pain I am feeling to ash. I have done what I was told to do, what I promised I would do. I have risked much and ventured back into my worst nightmares, all because I believed the abbess—believed that even though she did not like me, her service to Mortain would ensure that she would be truthful with me, see me as a useful tool, if nothing else. But clearly I have been duped and have allowed myself to be the worst kind of pawn.

Even worse, I wasn't able to accomplish the one thing that would have made it all worthwhile—killing d'Albret.

Anger surges through my body, so powerful that I shake with it. I glance around the chamber, desperate for something to break, to throw, to *destroy*, just as the abbess has destroyed me. But there is nothing. No mirror nor crystal, only the candles, which would start a fire if I threw them, and while I am angry, I am not angry enough to bring down the very castle that holds us.

Which is something, I guess.

Instead, I cross to the bed, grab a handful of the thick, burgundy damask curtains, wad them up in my fist, then shove the wad into my mouth and scream. The relief of all the anger and fury leaving my body is so sweet that I do it again, and again. Only then do I let the crushed, wrinkled fabric fall from my hand, and I turn back to the room, somewhat calmer.

I will leave this place, leave Mortain's service. I have warned the duchess of d'Albret's plans. Once I have told them all that I know about his intent to infiltrate their defenses, my duty is done. And my duty to Mortain? I snort like one of Guion's pigs. Look what my service to Him has gotten me so far.

Heartened by this decision, I reach behind and begin to unlace my gown, thrilled to be able to step out of its grubby drabness. I walk naked to the tub and am pleased to find the water scented with lavender and rosemary. The duchess, at least, is not stingy with her hospitality. Slowly, and with a great sigh of contentment, I lower myself into the water.

The heavy curtains are drawn against the cold winter winds, and the room is lit only by the fire burning in the hearth and a brace of beeswax candles. As I sit there, I imagine all of my anger being drawn from me and let it flow out of me into the warm scented water, for I will not be able to make effective plans if my vision is clouded by my own anger. I lean forward and dunk my entire head so that I may wash it, too. Who knows what vermin I have picked up over the last few days' travels?

Just when I pull my head back up and am rubbing the drips out of my eyes, there is a soft knock at the door. "Sybella?"

At the sound of Ismae's voice, I call, "Come in."

The door opens, then closes as Ismae hurries into the room. “I’ve brought you some clean clothes,” she says, pointedly not looking at me naked in the bathtub.

Her familiar modesty cheers me, and I lean back and place my arms along the sides of the tub, fully exposing my breasts, just to fluster her. However, she knows me too well and simply rolls her eyes at me. “Would you like me to wash your hair for you?”

I find that I would, surprised at how much I missed the kind, gentle touch of friendship. Because I want it so much, I only shrug. “If you wish.” I do not think she is fooled, for she plucks an empty ewer from one of the tables and moves behind me.

We are both silent as the warm water sluices down my head and falls across my back. “I have been so very worried about you,” she whispers. “Annith checked the crows daily for word of your whereabouts and safety, but there was nothing. And no matter how many doors she listened at, she could not catch a whiff of where you’d been sent or what your assignment was. When you didn’t come back for months, we began to fear the worst.”

“And now you know. I was sent to d’Albret.”

Behind me, I feel a shudder run through Ismae’s body. “I do not understand how the abbess could ask that of anyone.”

For a moment, a brief, reckless moment, I consider telling Ismae the truth—that it was my own family I was sent back to—but I am not sure I am willing to risk it, not even with her.

“I must write to Annith. She will be so relieved to hear you are safe. She’s checked every message that’s come to the convent since you left, desperate for news of you. Better still, once you are rested enough, you should write her yourself.”

“I will,” I say, halfheartedly, for the plain truth is, I am jealous of Annith, safe and snug behind the convent’s walls. I have never envied her special place in the convent’s heart more than I do now. “Has she been sent out yet, or is she still waiting in vain for her first assignment?”

Ismae hands me a linen towel with which to dry myself. “How did you guess that all this time, they never intended to let her set foot out of the convent? I received a message from her just after you left for Nantes.” She takes a step closer to me. “Sybella, they mean to make her the convent’s new seeress. Sister Vereda is ill, and they want Annith to take her place.”

Is that why there was no order to kill d’Albret? Not only could I not see it, but neither could Sister Vereda? “At least she will be safe,” I say, thinking of how often I longed to be back behind those thick, cloistered walls.

“Safe?” Ismae asks sharply. “Or suffocated? If memory serves, you could hardly bear being held behind those walls for three years, let alone the rest of your life.”

I wince at the memory and cannot help but marvel at how hard I worked to escape the convent when I first arrived. I remember Nantes, d’Albret slaying those loyal servants, the look of terror in Tilde’s eyes, and the scratching at my own door. “More fool I,” I say quietly.

As she helps me into a clean gown, the look on Ismae’s face softens. “Assigned to d’Albret’s household, you have faced more horrors than any of us. But truly, Sybella, I do not think you understand how hard it is to be left behind, to feel as if you will never be given a chance to prove yourself or make a contribution. Especially for one such as Annith, who has trained for this her entire life.”

“She would not survive a fortnight outside those walls,” I say, my voice harsh.

Ismae sends me a disappointed look. “She will never know now, will she?”

Since I do not have the heart to argue with her, I change the subject. “What is between you and Duval?”

She makes herself very busy pouring us each a goblet of wine. “What makes you think there is something between us?”

“The way you look at each other. That and the fact that you listened to him when he told you you could not kill whomever you were talking about. So, do you love him?”

Ismae nearly drops the goblet she is handing me. “Sybella!”

“You *are* in love.” I take the goblet and sip the wine, trying to decide what I think about that.

“What makes you say such a thing?” she asks.

“You are blushing, for one.”

She fiddles with the stem of her goblet. “Mayhap I am embarrassed you would ask such forward questions.”

“Oh, do not be such a stick-in-the-mud. Besides, remember who taught you how to kiss. Duval has much to thank me for.”

Unable to restrain herself, Ismae picks up the wet towel and throws it at me. “It is complicated,” she says.

For some reason, I think of Beast. I swirl the wine in my goblet. “It always is,” I say, then drain the cup.

“He’s asked me to be his wife.”

This surprises me, but it also makes me like the man more. “Are you not still married to the pig farmer?”

“No. It was never consummated, and the reverend mother had it annulled the second year I was at the convent.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I would think about it. For, while I love him, and will do so always, it is very hard to give anyone that kind of power over me again.”

“What did the reverend mother say?”

Ismae wrinkles her nose and refills her goblet. “It is just one of the reasons I have fallen so far out of her favor.”

“You? But next to Annith, you were her favorite.”

“No.” Ismae gives a firm shake of her head. “It was not I who was her favorite, but the blind, adoring acolyte that she loved.”

And that is when I know just how fully Ismae has changed.

Before we can talk further, there is a knock at the door. Ismae answers it, and a whispered, urgent conversation takes place before she closes the door and turns back to me. “The council meeting will not be resumed until tomorrow. The duchess’s sister has taken a turn for the worse, and the duchess wishes me to mix a sleeping draft for her.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You are a poisons mistress, not some healer for hire.”

Ismae gives me a sad smile. “It is a dance with Death, nevertheless.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

SINCE I AM DRESSED IN one of Ismae's habits, the guard at the palace door salutes respectfully and makes no move to prevent my leaving. I step out into the cold night air and head toward a bridge that is lit by a sparse row of torches whose light is reflected in the dark water below.

It also leads to the convent where Beast is being held. I need to assure myself that I did not bring him all this way only to have him expire while in the sisters of Saint Brigantia's care.

I reach the main gate at the convent and find it closed. Just to the right of the gate is a large bundle of what looks like rags. It takes me a moment to realize it is a sleeping Yannic, as loyal as the most faithful of hounds and no doubt banned from the convent for being a reasonably healthy man. Only ill or wounded men are allowed through those doors. I consider ringing the summons bell and announcing my presence to the entire convent, then reject the idea. What if they will not let me in? Or worse, what if they ask why I am here? For a moment, uncertainty grips me. Surely Beast has no need of me. Not now, when he is surrounded by the most skilled healers in our land.

I pause. Why am I here?

He is safe. And will soon be in a position to help the duchess. My role in his life is done. I saved him from d'Albret, the way I could not save Alyse. That should be enough.

So why do I feel this need to linger? Why this reluctance to part?

If I were anyone else feeling this, I would name it love, but I—I am far too smart to ever give away my heart again. Especially when to do so is as good as a death sentence for those I care about.

The old, familiar swirl of panic tries to surface. Instead of fighting it, I try to open myself to it, to let it come.

I remember the screaming. And the blood.

And that is as far as I get before the memory dissolves into pain.

Frustrated, I turn and follow the high walls surrounding the nunnery, looking for a low section or a back gate with a lock I can pick.

That is when I spy the lone branch. It is thin, too thin to bear a man's weight, which is most likely why the nuns have not cut it down. But it is not too thin for me.

I toss my cloak over my shoulder, then look for a sturdy burl I can use as a

foothold. It is a long stretch to the next branch, which hovers just out of my reach, so I must shimmy up the trunk, most likely ruining Ismae's habit.

Since it belongs to the convent, I do not mind overmuch.

My hand closes around the branch, and victory surges through me as I pull myself up. The limb creaks and bows, but does not break. Lying flat to distribute my weight evenly, I begin inching across, hoping the limb will not snap and send me plummeting to the ground, breaking my neck. Mortain cannot have brought me this far for such an ignoble end.

At last the wall is below me. I swing my feet down onto it and let go of the branch, which springs back up. I stop to survey my surroundings. This convent is laid out much like the convent of Saint Mortain. I can make out the long low building that is the nuns' dormitory, and the larger refectory. And, of course, the chapel itself. But where would they keep the sick and wounded?

A building set aside from the others has a faint light coming from one of the windows. That is as likely a place to begin my search as any. Perhaps a lone candle or oil lamp burns so the nuns can oversee their sleeping patients.

I lower myself from the wall into a garden filled with greenery. My boots crush the plants, releasing the pungent odor of herbs—the ones the sisters of Brigantia use for the famous healing potions and tinctures.

The very same ones we at the convent of Saint Mortain use to mix our equally infamous poisons.

I make my way to the path, trying to crush as few of the plants as possible, then follow the flat, round paving stones to what I hope is the infirmary. Near the door, I stop and press myself up against the building, using the shadows to conceal my presence. I close my eyes and try to feel how many are in the building.

I immediately sense a strong, booming pulse and nearly smile at how easily recognizable Beast is. There are other pulses that are thin and weak—patients', perhaps. The second slow and steady pulse is most likely that of the sister who tends them.

It is my hope that I can slip in undetected, see how Beast fares, then simply slip out again. My plan is foiled, however, by the old nun who sits near the door quietly mixing something with her mortar and pestle. I am certain I make no noise and equally certain that the thick pool of shadows near the wall conceals my presence. But something alerts her, for she starts and looks up. Since there is no point in pretending, I step away from the wall, prepared to explain why I am here.

Her eyes widen as she takes in the habit I wear, and the hand gripping the pestle turns white. "Who?" she whispers. "Who have you come for?"

I cannot decide which annoys me most, her fear or her assumption that I have been sent to kill one of her patients. “No one, old woman. I merely come to see how the one called Beast fares. I escorted him here from Nantes and would like to see with my own eyes that I did not do so only for him to perish in your care.”

She bristles, her fear forgotten. “Of course he will not perish in our care.” Her face softens. “Are you the one named Alyse? For he calls that name in his sleep.”

“No, that is his beloved sister, dead these past three years.” The depth of my disappointment that it is not my name he calls takes me completely by surprise.

“Ah,” the old nun says sympathetically, as if she somehow knows what I am feeling. “Then perhaps you are Sybella. That is the name he asks for when he is awake.”

A flutter of joy quickens my pulse. I scowl so that she will not see it.

“However, he is asleep now,” she continues. “Indeed, we had to give him a tincture of opium and valerian in order to calm him. He was most insistent that he could walk out of here and be of use to the duchess, even though his body said otherwise and he could barely keep his eyes open, let alone sit up.”

“I will not wake him,” I promise. “I only wish to assure myself that he is well.”

The nun nods her permission, and I start to move away, but she stops me. “By the way, whoever tended his wounds on the road did an excellent job. The man owes that person not only his life, but also his leg.”

Her words please me far more than they should, this knowledge that my hands can heal as well as kill, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have to keep my pleasure hidden. I turn and begin making my way to where Beast lies.

One-third of the beds here in the infirmary are occupied, mostly with the elderly and frail. It is eerily still. No fretting or moaning or frail cries for help. Perhaps she has sedated them all.

It is easy enough to pick out Beast’s hulking form, even when it is draped in white linen bedsheets, for he is easily twice the size of any other patient here. I am pleased to see the beds on either side of him are empty. That should afford me some small measure of privacy.

He lies as still as if he had been carved from marble, the high color he normally boasts leached from his face by the dim light and fatigue. His face is made even uglier by the harsh planes and shadows revealed by the flickering light from the few oil lamps in the room. His eyelashes—thick and spiky as they rest against his cheeks—are possibly the only beautiful things about him.

I marvel at this man who carried me away from my waking nightmare, determined that I not fall victim to d’Albret’s terrible retribution. Even after I

had done nothing but spew vile accusations at him to light his temper, he would not leave me behind. What does he see when he looks at me? A harridan? A shrew? Some spoiled noblewoman playing at helping her country?

I glance back toward the attending nun and see that she has dimmed the oil lamp and now lies on her cot, resting until one of her patients needs her. With no one to see, I plunk myself down on the floor and lean back against the bed frame. It is quiet. So quiet. I can hear the breath move in and out of Beast's lungs, hear the blood move through his veins, hear his pulse, strong and steady and alive. Slowly, some of the terror of d'Albret's pursuit begins to seep out of me. Beast stirs in his sleep just then, his good hand slipping out from under his covers to hang over the side of the bed.

I stare at his hand, its thick, blunt fingers and multitude of scars and nicks. Unable to resist, I slide toward it, wondering what that hand would feel like resting on my shoulder.

"I knew that you would miss me."

It is only a lifetime of training that keeps me from leaping to my feet at the sound of Beast's voice. I snort to mask the small noise of surprise that escapes my throat. "I did not miss you. Merely wanted to be sure my effort in getting you here wasn't wasted."

"They drugged me," he says with mild outrage.

"Because you were too stupid to lie still and let your body heal."

"You didn't drug me," he points out.

"Because I had to get your maggoty carcass from one end of the country to the other. Once we arrived, trust me, I would have drugged you too."

"Humph." We are both quiet a moment, and then he asks, "What of the duchess?"

"She will no doubt come visit you herself. As will Duval and the entire small council, most like."

He shifts uneasily and plucks at the covers on his bed. "I do not wish to receive them like this. Trussed up like a babe in swaddling."

"To them you are a hero, and they wish to thank you for your sacrifice."

He makes another rude noise.

"Are you certain you are not an ox in disguise?" I ask.

In answer, he just grunts again. "I am surprised they have not sent you off to rescue some other fool knight while I slept."

"Not yet."

"If they are not careful, soon they will have men locking themselves in dungeons so that you can rescue them."

"Then they shall undoubtedly perish, for I would not go through *that* again."

“Where is Yannic?”

“Camped just outside the convent walls. Except for patients, no men are allowed inside.” I wait to see what his next question will be, then hear a faint rumble from his chest. He has fallen asleep. I allow myself a tiny smile, for if he is well enough to spar with me, then he is well enough to live. I settle myself more comfortably on the floor and promise I will stay only a few more moments.

I awake some time later from a dreamless sleep. As I blink, I see that the flames in the lamps are sputtering as the oil grows dangerously low. Not quite morning yet. I feel the heavy weight of Beast’s hand still on my shoulder, then slowly inch myself out from under it, not wanting to wake him.

Not wanting him to know precisely where and how I spent the night.

I pause outside the convent and turn toward the city gate. I could leave now. I could simply walk down this street to the city gate, go across the bridge, and be gone from this place forever. No more abbess. No more threats of d’Albret.

But the stark truth is, I have nowhere to go. No home to return to, no kin to offer me shelter, and the convent will no doubt be closed to me now.

I could work as a tavern maid—if they would hire me. In troubled times such as these, people are reluctant to trust strangers.

I could even seek out Erwan and throw my lot in with the charcoal-burners. Or return to Bette and marry one of her sweet, eager sons. I could control either of them well enough.

Except they have sworn to fight at Beast’s side in the coming war.

The grim reality of my situation nearly makes me laugh. I am beautiful and educated and have all manner of useful—and deadly—skills, but all of that together is worth less than a bucket of slops.

I pull my cloak close around me against the chill breeze and continue across the bridge. As I draw near the gatehouse, I quickly rearrange my weapons, making sure that the dagger at my waist is clear and visible and that my wrist sheaths peek out from under my sleeves. Better that they think I was out on an assignment for Mortain than suspect I spent the night curled at the feet of the Beast like a mournful dog.

The guard on duty nods, his eyes taking in my habit and my weapons, and waves me through. The convents of the old saints seem to receive proper respect here in Rennes.

I reach my chambers and am relieved to find them empty. Too tired to remove my gown, I simply loosen the laces, climb into bed, and draw the bed curtains closed to block out the morning light. I pray that no one will have need of me for the next few hours, for I will be useless until I can get some sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

A SHORT TIME LATER, I am awakened by a knock on the door. A little serving maid enters, carrying fresh water for washing and the news that I am expected to attend the duchess's council meeting.

That summons prods me from my bed and into my clothes like few other requests could, for the truth is, I am sorely anxious to discharge all I know and be rid of it.

When a second knock sounds at the door, I hurry to open it and find both Ismae and Lord Duval waiting outside. I cannot decide whether to be flattered or worried at the nature of this escort, but Ismae gives me a warm greeting, and Duval's eyes are friendly enough, which eases my mind somewhat.

Duval bows formally to me. "We would like to hear a full report of all that transpired in Nantes, if you can bear to tell it."

"But of course, my lord," I say, then step into the hall. Ismae gives me a reassuring wink.

Duval leads us to a more formal chamber than the one I was in last night. The two sentries nod in greeting when they see him, and step forward to open the door.

Even though I have bathed and now wear clean clothes, I still feel dirty in some way I cannot name, as if the taint of being a d'Albret will never leave. The maps have been put away, and instead there are flagons of wine set upon the table, as well as fine silver goblets.

My eyes are drawn immediately to a corner of the room near the head of the council table. Beast is here. They have brought him over on a litter and have rigged some sort of chair and stool for him so he can sit with his leg elevated. He is none too pleased about it and keeps trying to stand up. "I should not be sitting in the presence of the duchess," he grumbles.

The nun in the blue habit of Saint Brigantia patiently points out that all the other councilors and advisors do.

"But I am a mere knight, not a councilor."

"Well," the duchess herself says, putting the matter to rest, "you are now. I appoint you, Sir Benebic Waroch, to my high council so you may advise me on how best to win this war. What say you?"

The look of surprise on his face is near comical. "I humbly accept, Your Grace." He moves to stand and bow, but the nun pushes him back in the chair.

The duchess turns to me. "I trust you are more comfortable now," she says kindly.

"Yes, Your Grace. Thank you for your consideration."

"It is the least I can do for one who has served me so well." She motions to Duval, who shows me to a chair of my own and hands me a goblet of wine. I take it, glad to have something to hold, and glance uneasily at the others in the rooms, some of whose names I do not even know.

Catching the drift of my thoughts, Duval says, "Perhaps some introductions are in order." His mouth quirks charmingly. "The abbess and Beast you already know. This is Chancellor Montauban, who fought at my father's side in many battles. Jean de Chalon, the duchess's cousin, just recently released from his arrest by the French regent. Captain Dunois, whom I believe you saw carry the duchess to safety on his horse, and the bishop of Rennes, who placed the crown of office on her head with his own hands. The rest, I believe, are known to you. So now we would hear of d'Albret's plans, my lady."

I take a deep breath. "D'Albret has not given up his plan to marry the duchess, and will do so by force, if necessary."

Captain Dunois snorts. "He made that clear when he sprung the trap outside Nantes. He cannot think we are foolish enough to give him a second chance to trick us."

His dismissal pricks at me, but Ismae rushes in. "It was Sybella who warned us of that trap," she gently points out.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the abbess's eyebrows lift in surprise.

Captain Dunois bows his head to me. "Then it seems we owe you more thanks, my lady, for you saved us all from certain disaster. But surely she is safe from him now."

I shake my head. "No. She is not. For that is not the end of it. Even now, he makes plans to march on Rennes."

A moment of silence fills the room, and then Captain Dunois scowls. "He would not be so foolish."

"Not to mention that it is impossible," Chancellor Montauban points out. "The walls are twelve feet thick, more than enough protection against any attack he could bring."

I lean forward. "Provided the attack come from within."

Another stunned silence fills the room. I have their full attention now. "Count d'Albret is not only ruthless, but cunning as well. He has already begun sending small groups of his own men to infiltrate the city. Then, when he is ready, he will march on Rennes and send the word for them to open the gates and allow his troops to break the siege."

“But knowing this, we can stop him. We have over eight thousand troops stationed here in Rennes, more than a match for a handful of his,” Dunois says.

“Are you certain? Do you know every one of your men by sight, Captain? Is it not within those very numbers than many of d’Albret’s saboteurs can hide unnoticed?”

The captain clenches his jaw but says nothing, so I continue. “I do not think you understand the true nature of his ruthlessness. He will show no mercy. The war he will wage is intended to sap the courage from men’s hearts. He will take no prisoners, grant no quarter, collect no ransom.”

“That goes against all rules of war and honorable conduct, demoiselle, and is a most grave accusation,” Chancellor Montauban says. “I assume you have good reason to make it.”

Disappointment as bitter as acid rises in my gut. Why did I think they would believe me?

“She does.” It is the duchess who has spoken, and all in the room turn to look at her. “Do not forget, this man tried to entrap me when we parleyed in good faith with Marshal Rieux. That is not the mark of a man who respects the rules of engagement. Further, he did try to accost me in the halls of Guérande—would have succeeded if Ismae had not stopped him.”

This shocks nearly everyone in the room—everyone except Ismae, Duval, and Beast.

“Are you certain you did not misunderstand his intention, Your Grace?” the bishop asks, and I want to slap his soft, white jowls.

“I am certain,” she says shortly.

While everyone is reeling from this revelation, I decide to try a new approach. “May I tell you of how they took Nantes?” I ask, my voice deceptively sweet.

“By all means, demoiselle,” Captain Dunois says. “I would very much like to hear it.”

“Very well.” I take a fortifying sip of the wine, then begin. “With Marshal Rieux at the head of our column, we were welcomed by the city with open arms. At first they thought the duchess had returned, and while they were disappointed she was not among the party, they did not understand the full treachery that was taking place.

“Once d’Albret and Rieux gained the castle, they bolted the doors and gave the retainers a choice. At the point of a sword. They could renounce the duchess and live. That was their only choice.”

I stare into the flames burning in the fireplace. “Lords Roscoff and Vitre died that night. Lords Mathurin, Julliers, Vienne, and Blaine renounced the duchess and swore loyalty to d’Albret and Marshal Rieux.” I glance up and meet the

duchess's stricken eyes. "Your humbler servants were more loyal, Your Grace. A full half of them lost their lives that day.

"When a contingent of burghers arrived from the city demanding to know what was going on, troops were sent into town to rape their wives and daughters, thus ensuring their cooperation. It did not take long for d'Albret to exert his will and his own special brand of terror over the entire city."

The duchess has gone white as a corpse. When she lifts her hand to her temple, I see that it is trembling. "My poor people," she whispers. "All those deaths are on my conscience."

"No," snaps Duval. "They are on d'Albret's conscience, not yours."

Jean de Chalon speaks for the first time. "Such ruthlessness can be a great asset when it is wielded for one's own side. Given his ruthlessness and how much the French fear an alliance between you and the count, perhaps that alliance is your best hope for keeping the duchy independent."

The duchess appears to shrink in on herself, looking smaller and younger. "How wrong is it of me to expect my people to suffer so that I will not have to? I cannot let such violence and death spill over into the entire kingdom just so I can avoid an unpleasant marriage."

"No!" Duval, Beast, and I all shout at once. There is a moment of awkward silence and I stare at my hands while Duval continues. "You will not marry that brute."

"You are speaking as a loving brother, Duval, not as a clear-eyed councilor," the bishop points out. "Perhaps that is our best course of action."

I want to grab all these men by the shoulders, shake them until their teeth rattle, then ask them how they can be so cursedly *blind*. A rumbling begins building deep inside me, outrage that these men would so willingly consign this girl to a man such as d'Albret. It is just as it ever was: men of power are unwilling to believe anything ill of their own kind.

Suddenly, the weight of my own secrets nearly chokes me. If ever there was a reason to break the long years of silence, this is it—to prevent this innocent girl from becoming one of d'Albret's newest victims. To prevent such a monster from becoming ruler of the entire kingdom.

I am so desperate for them to understand the evil nature of this man that I do the unthinkable: I open my mouth and spill the secrets that I have kept for years. "Have you ever asked yourselves what became of the count's wives?" My throat tightens, as if my body is refusing to utter the words it has kept guarded and locked all this time. The knowledge I share will also raise questions, questions I'd rather not answer in front of Beast. But I cannot keep my secrets if the cost is the young woman before me.

“D’Albret is not just ruthless in battle and merciless in victory. He is a true monster.” I must reach deep for the next words, for they are buried far beneath the surface of daily thought. Indeed, some of the memories remain locked away even from me. “D’Albret murdered all six of his former wives. Surely you would not consign your own duchess to such a fate.”

In the long moment of silence that follows, the shock of what I have just done runs through my body. I am hot, then cold, then hot again. I half believe that d’Albret will somehow know what I have said, and I must remind myself that he is twenty leagues away.

By the grim look on Duval’s face, I see that he at least believes me. But not the others. Their faces are full of incredulity. Chancellor Montauban speaks. “It could be that his actions have been misinterpreted or misunderstood and these are but disgruntled rumors started by those who have suffered defeat at d’Albret’s hands.”

When I answer, my voice is colder than the winter sea. “I am an assassin trained, my lord Chancellor. Not a simpering maid who quails at talk of war.” I consider having them ask Beast, for he will verify the truth of what I say, but it is not my secret to tell. I risk a glance at him and see that he is staring down at his clenched fists.

“I believe what she says is true,” he says at last. “The count no doubt intends grave personal harm to the duchess—if not immediately, then soon after they are wed.”

Dunois rises to his feet and begins to pace. “It is hard for me to believe such despicable accusations of a man who has guarded my back and fought bravely at my side. He has always fought with honor.”

Chalon nods in agreement. “What you are accusing him of goes against every code of honor and chivalry we hold dear.”

“That *you* hold dear, not d’Albret,” I point out. “Besides, are you so very certain of his honor in battle? Have you never questioned why he and his troops arrived too late at the battle of Saint-Aubin-du-Cormier? Because that was not an accident, I assure you.”

“I knew it!” Duval mutters under his breath. The duchess reaches out and places a small hand on his arm to calm him. Or perhaps she is clutching him for support. I cannot be certain.

But it is the bishop whom I have offended the most with my accusations. “If this is true, why have we not heard of it? Why should we believe you? Do you have any proof? In the name of Christ, girl, his brother is a cardinal!”

I glance briefly at the abbess then. “I have long been in his household and know far too well the nature of the man.”

The bishop presses. "Then why have you not come forward sooner?"

A wave of helplessness and futility washes over me, but before I can begin a new round of arguments, the abbess's cool voice falls into the room like grace.

"Gentlemen, you may rest assured that Lady Sybella has spoken the truth."

I am both surprised and grateful at this unexpected defense. Just as relief begins to unfurl inside me, she addresses them all again.

"Sybella is d'Albret's own daughter and knows whereof she speaks."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I AM SO STUNNED THAT I can barely breathe. I could not be more surprised—or stricken—if the abbess had reached out and ripped the skin from my bones.

I would certainly feel just as raw and exposed. Indeed, it is all I can do to keep from leaping to my feet and running from the room as every eye turns on me. Is that a new glint of caution I see in Captain Dunois's gaze? A faint look of revulsion in Chancellor Montauban's? The bishop merely looks outraged, as if someone has disordered his carefully constructed world simply to spite him. Chalon's face is also interesting, for it is a carefully shuttered mask, and it is clear his interest has sharpened.

But it is Beast's gaze that feels the most like a blow.

Don't look, don't look, don't look. If I do not look, I will not have to see the disgust and loathing that now rises from him like steam from a boiling kettle.

And Ismae. What is she feeling right now? For I have known her the longest and have never breathed a word of my lineage. I stare straight ahead and tap my foot, as if I am bored.

The first to speak is Ismae. "Excuse me, Reverend Mother, but is Sybella not Mortain's daughter, rather than d'Albret's?"

It is all I can do to keep from leaping from my chair and hugging her.

"But of course, child. She was sired by Mortain, which is how she comes to serve the convent. But she was raised by d'Albret in his household for the first fourteen years of her life. For a certainty, d'Albret considers her his daughter."

Duval shifts in his chair and sends the abbess an unreadable look. That is when I realize he does not trust her. "I would think the more important question would be whose daughter Sybella considers herself to be. My lady?"

I look up and meet his kind gray eyes. He is giving me a chance to answer this accusation, and I begin to understand why Ismae is so fond of him. "The happiest moment of my life was when I learned I had not been sired by d'Albret, my lord. For as dark as Mortain is, He is a beacon of holy light compared to the baron. So yes, I consider myself Mortain's daughter."

Beast shifts in his chair, and every particle of my being screams at me not to be such a coward and *look* at him. But still I do not, certain that what I will see will break even my hard, shriveled heart.

"Then the matter is settled," the duchess says. "And it seems to me that if what the lady Sybella says is even remotely feasible, then we have nothing to

lose by including that possibility in our plans. Much as when we expect an attack from the north, we still arrange for a strategy in the south, should we be proven wrong.”

Captain Dunois strokes his chin and slowly nods his assent. “That seems wise to me.”

“It cannot hurt,” the chancellor concedes.

But the bishop is still reluctant. “I fear it will draw our energy and resources away from more dire needs.”

“Even so,” the duchess says. “We will act as if every word she says is true.” She turns from the bishop to me. “Tell me, demoiselle, do you have any suggestions for us to consider?”

“We have secured a betrothal agreement with the Holy Roman emperor,” Duval adds. “We could make that public if you think that will deter d’Albret at all. But if we announce it, the French will use it as an excuse to launch a full attack.”

I shake my head. “I fear that news would only make d’Albret move more quickly—to prevent the marriage—rather than stay his hand. But I do agree that the duchess will only be safe once she is married. You must find a way to make the marriage happen now.”

Duval smiles wryly. “That will be difficult with the Holy Roman emperor off fighting in Hungary.”

Without troops, without a strong husband by her side, she is lost.

“Demoiselle.”

At the duchess’s gentle voice, I raise my head to meet her gaze. “You look utterly exhausted and we would command that you go find rest so we may speak again tomorrow. Thank you again for the great service you have done on our behalf.”

I stand and sink into a curtsy. “It was an honor, Your Grace.” And to my surprise, I find the words are true. I relish having something to lay before her besides more deaths. Even if that something now stares at me with hot, furious eyes.

With the meeting adjourned, I follow the abbess out into the hall, my jaw clenched tightly. When we are out of earshot of the others, I surprise both of us by reaching out and grabbing her arm. She stops immediately and looks down at my fingers resting on her sleeve. Even though my heart is pounding at my own daring, I wait a beat before removing my hand. When I do, the abbess lifts her cool blue gaze to my face and raises her eyebrows.

“Why?” I ask. “Why did you tell them who I am?”

She frowns slightly. “So they would know to believe you.”

I study her closely. Is it that simple? Was she only trying to support my claim? “While it is true that their knowing my lineage chased away their doubts, I cannot help but think you could simply have confirmed my statements without revealing my true identity.” Without revealing that I come from a family renowned for its cruelty and depravity—never mind that I have now just betrayed that same family, which is all many will see in my actions.

She moves her hand in an impatient gesture. “It does not matter that they know. Indeed, it is good for them to realize what powerful tools the convent has at its disposal and how long its reach is.” She gives a curt nod, then removes herself from the hall, and I am left standing there, a lamb sacrificed for the elevation of the convent.

Without thinking, I head toward the castle door. I have no desire to go to my chamber and wait for Ismae to search me out, with a hurt and puzzled look in her eyes.

The cool night air does little to soothe my fury. My entire body itches with rage, as if it will burst out of my skin. I do the only thing I can think of, which is begin walking. Away from the palace, away from the abbess, away from Beast, whom my secrets have betrayed. Even with my talent for breaking things, I am astounded at the speed with which I have destroyed this budding friendship.

He knows. He *knows* I am the daughter of the man who killed his beloved sister. He knows that I have hardly opened my mouth without lying to him. Even now, he is likely going over every question he has ever asked and remembering all the lies I have told him.

He knows I have been shaped in the same dark stuff, with as little redemptive value. It would have been easier if I had been branded a whore or cast out as a leper.

My breath catches in my throat, and I press the heels of my hands against my eyes. It feels as if I’ve ruined one of the few things that has ever truly mattered.

At first, I was simply unwilling to admit to anyone—especially a prisoner d’Albret had treated so poorly—that I was a d’Albret. Then later, when I learned of Beast’s connection to the family, nothing on earth could have compelled me to tell him the truth of who I was.

What else *could* I have told him but lies? The first time he asked we were but half a league from Nantes with no reason to trust each other. How would I have gotten him to safety?

My one true opportunity came at Guion’s farm, when Beast asked me to tell him of his sister. But while I am strong enough to kill a man in cold blood, play Julian’s razor-edged games, and rebel against the abbess, I was not strong

enough to kill that mysterious, tender *something* that had sprung up between us in that moment.

And that weakness has cost me everything with Beast.

No. There could never have been anything between us. I was given a chance to tilt the scales of justice—just a bit—and that was all. As nice as it was to have someone view me in a flattering light, I was never worthy of his true regard. And now, now he will know that the person he saw when he looked at me was not real.

As if some small part of me seeks to cool my temper, my feet carry me through the darkened streets of the city toward the river. I storm past the elegant stone and timber houses, past the town square, to where the streets are smaller and the houses lean together like drunken soldiers. The streets are busier here, as the scum of the city goes about its business under the cover of night. Small bands of beggars, dividing the day's spoils; drunken soldiers avoiding the night watch; thieves lurking in the shadows, waiting to take advantage of those too weak or drunk to notice the silent removal of their valuables.

The taverns here do a brisk business, and voices spill out onto the streets. There is a wild, frantic energy in this part of town that fits my mood perfectly. I raise my head and dare any of the dangers lurking in the shadows to try to match its skill against mine. I even slow my steps so that I appear hesitant, fearful—but it does not draw anyone. Perhaps those who prey on others can sense my desire to prey on them.

Frustrated, I continue all the way to the river, where the very dregs of the city lurk. As I stand on the bridge and look into the dark water, the truth I've been running from for days rises up like a rotten log from the bottom of a pond. It was not just Beast's good opinion or respect that I craved, but his affection. The shriveled, withered bit of gristle that lives where my heart used to be has managed to fall in love with him.

The pain and humiliation of that is like a fist to my gut. I grip the stone railing of the bridge and stare down at the river. How deep it is? I wonder. I know how to swim, but my gown and cloak are heavy and would drag me to the bottom in no time.

"My lady."

Annoyed at the intrusion, I snap my head up.

A drunken soldier saunters toward me. Here is the release I seek. He is a hard-faced fellow, a mercenary, I think, for his jerkin is of boiled leather, and neither his cloak nor his brooch bear any insignia. He is wine soaked enough to be friendly, but not so much that he is impaired. I turn to face him.

“Is my lady lost?” he asks. “For this is no part of town for someone as fair as yourself to be wandering.”

“Do you think I am not safe?”

“No, I think you are at grave risk, my lady. There are any number of louts and ruffians who would take advantage of you.”

“But not you.”

He smiles then, a wolfish grin. “I have only your pleasure in mind.”

“Indeed?” At first, I am not sure if I want to fight him or bed him, but when he places his large, gloved hand on my arm to pull me close and I smell his sour wine breath, I realize it is not his lust I hunger for, but his blood. I want to bury my fury and betrayal in his thick, meaty neck and watch his blood spurt back at me in a red-hot rage that will meet my own.

I could even call it an offering to Mortain. Or the Dark Matrona. Whichever god will listen to my prayers and deliver me from this nightmare I inhabit.

He leans in to kiss me but gives a yelp of surprise when he nearly kisses the tip of my knife instead. He grows still and watches me carefully. I feel his pulse beating in his throat, can see his artery throbbing with the blood that flows through it. Slowly I move my knife nearer. I am tempted—so sorely tempted—but he has done nothing wrong and bears no marque. He has not invaded our country, nor does he serve d’Albret. He has not even tried to harm an innocent, for I am no innocent. Of all the lines I have been willing to cross in my life, this is not one of them.

Just as the point of my knife touches the tender skin at his throat, a scream rings out. At first, I think someone has seen me and cried a warning, but the scream is followed by the sound of blows. My heart quickens at the thought of a true fight, and I content myself with simply nicking the chin of the fellow in front of me.

One fat red drop of blood wells up, then falls to the filthy cobbles beneath our feet. “Be gone from here,” I tell him.

Anger flashes in his eyes, and for one moment I think he will reach for his sword. “Be careful of the games you play, my lady,” he says. “Not all will be as forgiving as I.”

I say nothing. When he turns and walks back the way he came, I hurry in the direction of the scream.

It came from downriver, near one of the stone bridges. As I draw closer, the sounds of a struggle reach my ears, and grip my knife more firmly. Cautious now, I move forward. In the shadow of a bridge’s stone footings, two soldiers struggle with a man and a woman. The man’s thin mouth is split and swollen,

and his long, sharp nose is bloody. The woman is backed up against the bridge, and one of the soldiers is unlacing his breeches.

It takes but a second for me to recognize that the victims are charbonnerie, which only serves to stoke my fury. Moving on quiet feet, I creep closer. Something feels familiar about the two soldiers, and when the one restraining the man turns to watch his friend, I feel a jolt of recognition. It is Berthelot the Monk, so called because he never touches a woman. Which means the second man must be Gallmau the Wolf, named thus because he cannot leave them alone. Both are d'Albret's men, and I feel in my bones it cannot be an accident that I have found them.

Killing two of d'Albret's own will do much to lessen the pain of my breaking heart.

Gallmau is still leering at the woman and taking his time, so I decide to strike Berthelot first. Clinging to the shadows, I move around the bridge's piling until I am behind the monk. It will be tricky, cutting his throat while he holds the charbonnerie, but the charbonnerie can take a quick dunk in the river to wash away the blood if he must.

Faster than a striking snake, I step forward, grab the man's hair and yank his head back, then run my knife across his throat, cutting his vocal cords as well as the main arteries. As Berthelot falls to the ground, the charbonnerie stumbles back, managing to pull his arms free just in time so that he does not go down as well. I feel him glance at me, feel the moment that he recognizes me, but I am transfixed by the marque I see on Berthelot's forehead. I smile then, and turn to Gallmau, who is so engrossed in his lustful activities he has no idea that death is reaching for him. When I am close enough to embrace him, the woman looks over his shoulder and sees me, and her eyes widen. I hold my finger to my lips, then shove my knife into the base of Gallmau's skull. In truth, this is not the best knife for this sort of job. A thinner knife would slip more easily between the bones of his neck, but I am able to make this work. And keep the blood from ruining the woman's dress.

To the girl's credit, she bites back her scream as Gallmau collapses into her arms, and then she shoves the body away so that he falls onto the ground. I peer down, happier than I can say when I see a second marque appear, for that must mean I have not stepped so far outside Mortain's grace that He no longer reveals His will to me.

I wipe my blade on Gallmau's cloak, then return it to its sheath and stand up. "Are you all right?" I recognize the thin, dark-haired man as Lazare, the angriest of the charbonnerie. I doubt that this incident has improved his temper any.

"I should have been the one to kill the pigs," he spits out.

“You can be the one to kill them next time,” I assure him, and then I ask the woman if she is all right. She shakily nods her head. I turn back to Lazare. “Go, wash the blood off in the river before anyone sees. If you come across any other soldiers or the night watch, simply tell them you had too much wine and fell in.”

He stares at me a long moment. Unspoken things move in his eyes. Rage at being preyed on, discomfort at being saved by a mere woman, frustration that he was not the one to avenge their honor. But there is gratitude as well, even if it is begrudging. He gives me a terse nod and does as I instruct. While he is cleaning himself, I ask the woman, “What happened?”

“We were returning from one last delivery, as Erwan wanted to leave at first light, when these two attacked us. They took our money and were going to . . . going to . . . and when Lazare tried to stop them, they beat him. Thank you, my lady. Thank you for arriving just when you did. The Dark Mother was looking out for us.”

“Or Mortain,” I say. “For that is the god I serve, and it was He who led me here to these two.”

The excitement of the hunt has begun to leave and I realize I am tired. So very, very tired. Even so, I take the time to kneel beside the bodies, search for whatever coin they have on them, and give what I find to the woman. “Now go. Collect Lazare and get yourselves back to the others.”

Once I see them on their way, I begin the long walk back to the palace, empty and hollow, nothing but a burned-out ember now that my rage has passed.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

WHEN I REACH MY CHAMBER door, I can feel someone waiting inside. A spurt of panic shoots through me. Is it Beast wanting to confront me? Furious that I even care, I draw a blade from my wrist and open the door.

It is only Ismae, slumped in a chair by the dying fire, and I cannot tell if it is relief or disappointment I feel. At the faint snick of the door closing behind me, she stirs, then blinks awake. “Sybella!” She comes to her feet and takes two steps toward me. “Where have you been?”

I cannot tell her I have been moping over a broken heart when I have worked so hard to convince her I do not have a heart at all, so instead I cock an eyebrow at her. “Are you going to rail at me for not having told you sooner?”

“No! I’m not surprised the abbess bade you to hold your tongue.” The love and compassion I see on Ismae’s face nearly undoes me.

“It was not the abbess,” I say. The truth begins bubbling out of me like vile humors from a wound. “She never forbade me to tell you. I just . . . could not bring myself to do so. Especially once you’d met d’Albret in Guérande.”

Ismae crosses the distance between us and takes one of my hands in each of her own and gives them a squeeze. I cannot tell if it is meant to show reassurance or exasperation. Mayhap both. “We all have our secrets. And our scars. Annith told me that my first morning at the convent. I have not told you everything about my past either.”

“You haven’t?”

Ismae shakes her head, and I study her to see if this is but a ploy to comfort me.

“I know you were married, and that your father beat you.”

She winces slightly. “Both of those are true, but there is more to my story. I never told you of the poison my mother sought from the herbwitch in order to expel me from her womb. Nor of the long, ugly scar along my back where it burned my flesh. I never spoke of my sister, who feared me, or the village boys who taunted me and called me cruel names. Like you, I was so glad to have escaped, I had no wish to speak of them and taint my new life at the convent with those memories.”

And just like that, she has granted me absolution, declared my crimes against our friendship no crimes at all. I have no words that will let her know how much this means to me. Instead, I smile. “What sort of taunts did they hurl at you?”

Ismae wrinkles her nose and lets go of my hands. “None that I care to repeat.”

“So, then,” I say, changing the subject, “why are you here waiting for me?”

“I was afraid for you.”

“Afraid? What did you fear?”

She shrugs, embarrassed. “That the abbess had sent you somewhere again. That you had run away. The possibilities seemed endless as I sat here all night.”

Something in my heart softens. “You’ve waited for me all night?”

“Once I was here, it seemed pointless to leave until I knew what had become of you.” She turns and grabs a poker to stir up the embers in the hearth. “Where have you been?”

“I needed to get out of the palace, away from the abbess and all her manipulations.”

“It does not help that you are exhausted. Here. Come to bed. You need to sleep. Knowing you, you have not slept more than six hours in the last six days.”

That she has guessed so accurately makes me smile. “Even so, I will not be able to sleep. Not here, not now.”

“Yes, you will. That is another reason I came to your room. To bring you a sleeping draft.”

I feel tears prick at my eyes—*merde*, but I am becoming some soft, weepy thing! So she will not see, I turn my back and motion for her to help unlace me.

“But what of the duchess? Do you not need to attend her?”

“Not for a few hours yet.”

Some of the tension leaves me and I allow Ismae to help me undress, as if I am a small child, after which she puts me into the bed and draws up the covers. I wait while she pours the sleeping draft into a goblet, then drain it. Our eyes meet. I do not even know how to begin to thank her. And because it is Ismae, she simply smiles and says, “You’re welcome.”

I smile back, then study her while she finishes putting away my things. Once we begin going on assignments for the convent, we are forbidden to talk about them with others. But Ismae is no longer beholden to the convent as she was, and I am half starved to hear about her experiences so I can see if she has the same doubts and questions I do. I begin plucking at a loose thread on the bedcovers. “Tell me,” I say casually, “do you know if the Tears of Mortain wear off?”

She stops smoothing the gown she is holding. “I do not know. Mine haven’t.”

“So you still see the marque?”

“I have been able to see the marque since I was a child. I just didn’t know what it was.”

“Then why did they even give the Tears to you?”

“It heightened my other senses. I was suddenly able to—this will sound mad—feel people’s life sparks. I am more aware of their living, breathing bodies, even if I cannot see them.”

“That is a gift *I* have had since I was a child,” I tell her. And more than once did it save me. I realize how useless Ismae’s gift of seeing marques would have been in my circumstances; I had no need to spot the dying, but every need to avoid the living, which sensing their pulses allowed me to do. “I suppose you let that blind old woman nearly put your eyes out with her wicked crystal stopper?”

“Didn’t you?”

“No, I took it from her and did it myself.”

Ismae gapes in shock. For a moment it is as if the old Ismae, the one who worshiped everything about the convent and followed every rule, is back. Then she laughs. “Oh, Sybella! I would have loved to be a spider on the wall and seen *that*.”

“She was most affronted.”

“Why did you want to know if the Tears wear off?” she asks gently.

I take a deep breath. “Because there have been men who I know are guilty of treachery—for I have seen it with my own eyes—and yet they are not marqued.” I look up and meet her gaze. “If Mortain grants mercy to d’Albret and Marshal Rieux, then I find it hard to want to serve Him.” I did not mean to confess that to her, but the words spill out of me.

She studies me a moment, then comes to kneel beside my bed. “Sybella,” she says, her eyes shining with some mysterious light. “I have met Mortain face to face, and the abbess, maybe even the convent, is wrong about so very many things.”

I stare at her dumbly, and my heart begins to race. “You have seen Him? He is real?” I ask.

“I have, and He is more kind and merciful than you can imagine. And He has given us such gifts!” She looks at her hands. “Not only am I immune to poison’s effects, but I can use my own skin to draw it from others.”

“Truly?”

There is not a whiff of hesitation or doubt. “Yes.”

I turn my face toward the wall and pretend I am snuggling into sleep so she will not see the hunger in my eyes. “Tell me,” I whisper. “Tell me of this father of ours.”

“Gladly.” She pauses, as if she must collect her thoughts. When she speaks again, it is as if her voice is filled with light. “There is so much kindness in Him. And mercy. All the judgment and retribution we have been trained to expect of

Him was not there. In His presence, I felt whole and complete in a way I have never felt before.”

There is such certainty in her voice that I find myself filled with envy.

“We are not just His handmaidens, spawned to do His bidding. He loves us,” she says.

The idea is so foreign to me that I snort.

“He does! For He is trapped in the realm of Death, and it gives Him great joy to know that we who were born of His seed are able to embrace life.”

“If that is so, then why has He consigned us to lurk in the shadows and cloak ourselves in His darkness?”

She does not answer right away. I sneak a look over my shoulder and see that she is frowning at the window, as if she seeks the answer to this question there. “I believe those are not His wishes, but the convent’s.”

Those words are like a shower of winter hail down my back. I sit up and turn to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean”—she chooses her words as if picking her way across a stream—“that I believe the convent misunderstands both Mortain and His wishes for us. Whether through ignorance or intent, I do not know.”

The magnitude of this makes my heart clutch in my chest. “Explain,” I say, shoving my hair out of my eyes so I may use every sense I possess to try to understand this huge revelation she has just shared.

“First, He does not insist we act with vengeance or judgment in our hearts. To Him, bringing Death is an act of great mercy and grace, for without it all people would be forced to struggle on in frail and broken bodies, riddled with pain, weakened. That is why He has given us the misericorde.”

“The what?”

Ismae looks at me, puzzled. “You do not have one?”

“I have never even heard of such a thing.”

Ismae reaches into the folds of her skirt and withdraws an ancient-looking knife, its handle of bone with chased silver. “It is an instrument of mercy,” she says softly. “Just one nick causes the soul to leave the body, quick and sure and painless. But I do not understand why the abbess did not give you one.”

“It could be she knew no one in d’Albret’s household was deserving of mercy.” Of a certainty, she knew I would not be interested in dispensing it.

She puts that aside for now. “But Sybella, what I learned is that He does not love us *because* of the acts we perform in His name—He loves us because we are *His*. What we choose to do or not do, how we choose to serve Him or not serve Him, will never alter that love.”

“He told you this?”

“Not in words such as you and I speak, but I felt it. I felt this grace and love of His surround and engulf me like a river, and it stripped the ignorance from my eyes.”

“Much like the Tears of Mortain allow us to see His will better.”

“Precisely like that. Only a hundredfold more.”

I reach out and grab her arm. “So have we been wrong all this time? Committing murder by striking when we see His *marque*?”

“Not wrong, exactly,” she says slowly. “But I would say instead it is not *required* of us. Those who are to meet Death bear a *marque*, whether they are to die by our hands or by some other means.”

“How do you know this?” Have I been killing men all this time, thinking I was doing His will when I was actually following some dark impulse of my own?

“After we were attacked at Nantes, I returned to the field to search for survivors among the fallen.”

“There were none,” I say tightly. “D’Albret does not leave survivors.”

“No, but each of the dying soldiers bore some form of the *marque*. And the men I saw *marqued* when I was a child—none was killed by another’s hand. I believe the *marque* appears when a man’s death is in sight, and that includes a death at our hands. The mistake I think the convent has made is about the nature of those *marques*. They are merely *reflections* of what will happen, not *commands* to act.”

“Does the abbess know this?”

“I do not know,” Ismae says slowly. “I cannot tell. Although she was most angry when I suggested such an idea to her. Now sleep. Morning will come soon enough.” She comes over to the bed, leans down, and presses a kiss on my brow. “Everything I have told you about Mortain is true. Do not doubt it.” And then she is gone, and I am left with my entire world turned upside down.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

EVEN WITH THE DRAFT ISMAE prepared, my sleep is fitful and restless. I am too consumed with reciting all that she has just told me, my mind scrambling to recast the world—and my role in it.

I am not certain I believe her, for Ismae was always wont to see Mortain and the convent in the best possible light. Even so, it has given my mind much to gnaw on.

When I wake, my head is so thick and woolly that it takes a moment for me to realize that someone is knocking. I fight my way out of the tangle of covers, get to my feet, and stumble to the door. I open it an inch and peek out. A liveried page awaits. To his credit, his eyes drift to my disheveled appearance only once before returning to my face and staying there. “The duchess cordially invites you to join her at your earliest convenience in her solar, demoiselle.”

“Very well. Tell her I will be there shortly.”

The lad gives a sprightly bow. Before he can scamper off, I ask him to send a maidservant to attend me.

The summons has chased the last cobwebs of sleep from my mind as I worry what the duchess wishes of me. Will she ban me from her court, now that she knows of my heritage? Or will she try to draw more of my secrets from me?

And if so, what will I tell her? For she, more than anyone, has a full right to know both the doings of her most traitorous subject and the nature of this man some would have her marry.

Whatever she wishes, it will most likely be just she and her ladies in waiting in the solar, so I will not have to face Beast just yet. While Ismae was most forgiving, my family has not harmed her or those she loved in any way. Beast’s betrayal at my hand goes much deeper than a secret not shared between childhood friends.

By the time the maid arrives, I have already washed with the water remaining in the ewer, the coldness of it helping to restore my wits. I slip into the second of the gowns Ismae has lent me, a stark, simple black silk with severe lines. I settle my heavy garnet and gold crucifix on the thick chain around my waist and consider myself ready. At least, as ready as I’ll ever be.

The maid herself leads me to the duchess’s solar, which is two floors up from my own chamber. She murmurs my name to the sentry on duty, who nods and opens the door, announcing me.

“Come in!” the duchess’s young voice calls out. Cautiously, I step into the room, blinking at all the golden sunlight spilling in through the mullioned windows.

The duchess is sitting near a couch, surrounded by three ladies in waiting. As they eye me furtively, I cannot help but wonder if news of my parentage has traveled to their delicate ears. Or is the council treating it as a secret to be guarded?

A young girl, no more than ten years of age, reclines on the couch, looking fragile and wan.

“Lady Sybella!” The duchess waves her hand at me. I step farther into the room, pleased that she has not used my last name. As I sink into a deep curtsy, I comfort myself that she has most likely not brought me here to censure me in front of her younger sister.

“Come. Sit with us.” She pats the empty chair between herself and the couch, and I realize that this summons is an invitation. An open declaration of acceptance, and I am humbled by this great kindness she is showing me.

“But of course, Your Grace.”

I ignore the glances of her ladies and cross to the chair the duchess indicates. As I sit down, the duchess gives me another smile. “I had thought to invite you to stitch with us, then realized you probably did not think to pack your embroidery silks when you left Nantes.”

I smile at her gentle joke. “No, Your Grace. I did not.”

One of the ladies leans forward, her brow creased. “How did you find Nantes, my lady?”

The duchess looks at her attendant and shakes her head with a glance in the young girl’s direction. The woman nods in understanding.

“It is as magnificent as ever, a true testament to the house of Montfort,” I say, and the duchess relaxes slightly.

“Demoiselle, I do not think you have met my sister before. Isabeau, dear, this is the Lady Sybella, a great ally of ours.”

Her words cause a blush to rise to my cheeks—I, who never blush—and I turn to properly greet her sister. The child’s skin looks nearly translucent, and her large eyes peer out of her pale, drawn face. And her heart—ah, her heart is beating slowly, weakly, as if it may give up at any moment. She reminds me wholly of my younger sister Louise, who also battles fragile health. Once again I am grateful that both my sisters are tucked away in one of our father’s most remote holdings, far from his political scheming and influence.

Not welcoming all the painful memories that the young princess stirs, I harden my heart against her, but in the end, she is so small and weak and charming, I

cannot keep myself from liking her. Her embroidery sits forgotten in her lap, and she plucks at her bodice, as if she finds it difficult to breathe. To distract her, I beg a length of scarlet embroidery silk from the duchess, then busy my fingers.

My action immediately catches Isabeau's attention. "What are you doing, my lady?" She pokes her nose forward to see better.

"I am making a cat's cradle, a puzzle of thread." A few more twists of my fingers and the red thread is shaped like a trestle bridge. The princess's face brightens and her mouth forms a small O of delight.

"Take your hands and pinch where the threads cross on each side," I tell her.

She glances at the duchess, who nods her head in permission, then reaches out with two slim fingers and hesitatingly pinches the crossed threads. "Ready now?" I ask.

She glances up at me, then back down at the threads. She nods. "Pinch hard," I say, "pull your hands out to the side, then bring them slowly back in and under my own."

Biting her lip in concentration, Isabeau does as I instruct. It is clumsy and awkward, but when she is finished, she has transferred the cat's cradle to her own small hands, and her face flushes with triumph and delight.

"Oh, well done," murmurs the duchess.

I smile at Isabeau, who smiles back. She is no longer plucking at her bodice, and her heart is beating a little more steadily. Thus it was with Louise as well. Her own illness made her anxious, which in turn made her feel worse. It comes over me with the force of a blacksmith's hammer that I may very well never see Louise or Charlotte again. Not after betraying d'Albret.

"Demoiselle?" the duchess asks, leaning forward with her brows pinched in concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Just trying to remember another trick with the string." I force all thoughts of my sisters back into the small, cramped box deep in my heart, bind it once again with chains, and lock it tight.

I spend the next hour teaching Isabeau how to do the trick while the duchess talks softly with her ladies. Unobserved, I try to note each of them and take her measure. How long has the duchess known them? How loyal to her are they? I do not recognize any of them from Guérande, which suggests they have been culled from Rennes's noble families. Let us hope they are more loyal than her other attendants and retainers have been.

They in turn watch me, their glances like small, biting insects. I cannot tell if it is mere curiosity or if there is knowledge and censure in their gaze.

When it is time for dinner, the ladies put away their embroidery. Isabeau is being allowed to attend tonight, for the duchess has agreed to a performance by

minstrels that she thinks her young sister will enjoy.

We leave the solar, and the duchess has one of the other ladies escort Isabeau while she herself walks next to me. Her steps slow somewhat, and I must alter my pace so I do not run ahead and leave her trailing behind. When no one is close enough to hear, she leans toward me slightly. “Demoiselle, I want you to know that I thank you for your sacrifice, for to go against your family, no matter how justified, is no easy thing. I also want you to know that I do not doubt a single word you have told us. Indeed, it aligns precisely with what my lord brother and I have long felt. I am only sorry that you have had to learn this knowledge firsthand.” With that, she squeezes my arm gently, then turns the talk to the minstrels and what she has heard of their talents. I hear nothing she says; I am too busy holding tight this small nugget of trust she has granted me.

While the great hall in Rennes is smaller than that of Nantes, it is every bit as opulent. The rich carved paneling is decorated heavily with thick, brilliant tapestries, and the room is alight with the glow of scores of candles. The mingled scent of rose, civet, cloves, and ambergris hangs heavy in the air, and I feel the beating of a dozen hearts. It is, in every sense of the word, an assault upon my senses. Even worse, everyone in the room is infected with high spirits, and the guests’ jubilant manner makes me uneasy. It is unwise for them to be so very happy, for the gods will feel the need to humble us.

The first thing I do is look for Beast, but the ugly oaf is not here. My entire body sags in relief, for I did not look forward to an entire evening spent trying to ignore his wrath. Not to mention I’m fairly certain his continuing fury would blister my skin.

The rest of the council is here, however. The abbess and the bishop have their heads together, whispering. As if feeling my gaze, the abbess glances up and gives me a cool nod. I dip a curtsy but do not go to her.

The earnest Captain Dunois is deep in conversation with the chancellor, his heavy, furrowed brow making him look even more like a bear. Wanting to test his reaction to me now that he knows who I am, I drift closer.

When he sees me, he nods a distracted greeting. Or perhaps it is a cool greeting, like the abbess’s, a way to discourage my approach. I do not know him well enough to say. While I do not know Chancellor Montauban any better, there is no mistaking the distaste in his gaze. He makes no effort to hide it.

As I turn away from them, I see a small, hunched figure hovering just outside the doorway. It is Yannic, whom Beast has no doubt sent to spy on my movements.

Furious, I turn and search the hall, looking for someone I can attach myself to and prove that I am not moping over him. Nor am I the pariah he no doubts wishes me to be.

The duchess's cousin Jean de Chalon is but a few paces from me. When our eyes meet, he smiles, which surprises me somewhat, as the last time we were together he appeared most distant and guarded. But he is handsome and titled and will make a good story for Yannic to carry back to his master. I smile at Chalon, a smile filled with more mystery than sparkle, for he is not a man to be lured with simple wiles.

He draws closer and bows. "You look lonely, demoiselle."

"Ah, not lonely, my lord. Simply discerning in the company I keep."

"A lady after my own heart, then." He snags a goblet of wine from a passing page and hands it to me. As I take it, I let my fingers brush against his, and I feel his pulse flare with interest.

I pray that Yannic is watching all this, for it is far too much effort if he is not.

Chalon eyes me hungrily, and he is not an unattractive man. Tall, lithely muscled, and with a graceful arrogance that one expects from a prince. But looking at him, flirting with him, I feel . . . nothing. It is cruel of me to use him this way, for I do not desire his affection, simply his attention, and that only long enough to make an impression on Yannic. I murmur inanities a moment longer, then check to be certain Beast's little squire is watching. But he is gone, and at last I can bring this game to a close, for Chalon is too smooth and tame and far too pretty a creature to hold my interest.

The only other pleasure to be had from the evening is watching young Isabeau and her sweet, uncomplicated joy in the music. Her hands are clasped, her eyes bright. But as I watch her, I am again reminded of Louise and Charlotte and how very much I miss them. I have not seen them in nearly a year, not since my terror over their safety forced me to thrust them from my heart, from my mind.

Isabeau is a painful reminder of everything I have had to give up, all that I have lost. Even though the room is full of people, I feel suddenly surrounded by a moat of loneliness. I cast about, looking for Ismae, the one friend I have in this accursed place, but she has left the duchess's side and is grabbing a quiet moment with Duval. And while I do not begrudge her the love she has found, I am also filled with envy, for I know such a chance is lost to me.

Chapter Thirty

THE NEXT MORNING I AM summoned to yet another council meeting, which makes me uneasy, for the only business the council has with me is to grill me further on my time in d'Albret's household. Not to mention I am still filled with dread at having to see Beast. I would rather do anything else than face the accusations in his eyes: suffer one of the abbess's tongue lashings, play one of Julian's sordid games, even subject myself to one of d'Albret's punishments. But although I am many things, a coward is not one of them. My heart beating wildly in my chest, I square my shoulders, lift my chin, and enter the room with my head held high. Leaping from the barbicans back in Nantes would have taken less courage.

Beast's face is calm, and a polite smile hovers on his lips, but his eyes burn with the light blue of a fire's hottest flame, and the look he gives me has all the force of a physical blow. I smile vaguely at him, then turn to the others.

It is the same advisors as before. They even sit in the same places, except for the abbess, who is now seated at the table rather than lurking in the corner of the room.

"And here is Lady Sybella." The duchess's voice is warm and welcoming and gives me some small measure of courage as I take my seat.

"I'm afraid the latest news is dire," Duval says. "The French are on the march. They have taken Guingamp and Moncontour."

The duchess grips the arms of her chair, her fingers turning white. "And the casualties?"

"From all I can determine, the French did not meet with much organized resistance. The local burghers, worried about the town, quickly handed it over, and the small pockets of protest were easily dealt with."

The duchess stares unseeing into the distance. "They are so close!" she says. "What of the English troops? Are they close as well?"

"More bad news, I'm afraid." Duval's voice is grim. "A series of storms off the coast of Morlaix has kept the English ships from landing. Those six thousand troops will be delayed."

"How long will it take the British troops to arrive in Rennes once they have reached the coast?"

"At least a week, Your Grace."

"Is there any sign the French will attack before then?"

Duval answers with a shrug. "It is hard to say. They seem to be holding just

inside our border and are sending out sorties and small scouting parties, nothing more. Except for their attack on Ancenis and the occasional pillaging for food, there have been no reports of fighting.”

Captain Dunois taps his finger on his chin. “What are they waiting for? I wonder.”

“For us to break the Treaty of Verger, is all I can surmise,” Duval says. “We have had much acrimony between the French regent and our own politics, but we have honored the dictates of the treaty. At least openly,” he adds with a rakish grin.

“Do you think they know of our negotiations with the Holy Roman emperor?” The duchess’s brow is furrowed with concern.

Duval considers. “Suspect it, yes. But do they *know*? I do not think that they do. If they had actual knowledge of the betrothal agreement, they would have used that to justify an attack by now.”

“True enough,” Captain Dunois agrees. “I suppose it is too much to hope for that if Count d’Albret decides to march on Rennes, he will run into the French and they will eliminate each other.”

Duval gives a rueful smile. “Would that we were so lucky.” He pauses to look at his hands, then meets his sister’s gaze full on. “It is said that bad news arrives in threes, Your Grace.” Looking as if he could happily commit murder, Duval delivers the final blow. “We have received a letter from Count d’Albret.”

All eyes in the room turn to me. I ignore the sharp sting of their regard and concentrate wholly on Duval and the duchess, as if we are having a private conversation. “Does he know Beast is here?” I ask.

“Not that he indicates. The purpose of the letter was to ask that the duchess reconsider honoring their marriage agreement, else he will be forced to do something she will not like.”

“Besiege the city,” I whisper.

Duval nods. “He does not come out and say so, but that is my assumption as well.”

The duchess, who has gone pale at this news, visibly gathers herself. “What of the Holy Roman emperor? Has he received word of how dire our plight?”

“He has. He will send two auxiliaries to aid us.” Duval’s voice is drier than high summer.

“Two auxiliaries?” Captain Dunois says. “Is he serious? So few, and not even professional soldiers?”

“I’m afraid so. He is also suggesting that we perform the marriage ceremony by proxy in order to get the thing done.”

Jean de Chalon shifts uneasily in his chair; it is his overlord they are speaking of, and perhaps he feels his loyalties are being stretched thin. "I am sure he is doing all that he can. He is much besieged by his war with Hungary."

Duval does not deign to answer this. The duchess's mouth tightens in disapproval, but she does not contradict her cousin, although I feel certain she wishes to. "Does a marriage by proxy even count in the eyes of the Church?" she asks the bishop.

"Yes, it can, if done properly."

"But we still won't have his troops to defend the alliance," Captain Dunois points out.

"What of mercenaries? How difficult would it be to get companies of mercenaries here?"

"Not too difficult." Duval's voice is gentle, as if he wishes to take the sting from the words that now follow. "What presents a problem, Your Grace, is that we have no money to pay them."

She looks at him blankly for a moment. "None?" she whispers, then looks to her chancellor.

He confirms Duval's assessment. "I'm afraid not, Your Grace. The duchy's coffers were greatly strained by the wars with the French over the last two years. The treasury is empty."

The duchess rises from her chair and begins pacing in front of the fire. She is very nearly out of options, and she must know it. "What of my family's jewels? The silver plate? The crown—"

The bishop gasps in horror. "Not your crown, Your Grace!"

"Will that bring enough coin to pay them?"

"Your Grace! Some of your jewelry has been in your family for generations," Chalon says. I cannot help but wonder if he is keeping track of what he would inherit if anything were to happen to the duchess.

"Jewels can be replaced, my cousin. Independence, once lost, cannot."

The room is silent as the company digests her words, then Beast leans forward to speak for the first time. "There are some who would fight at our side for free," he tells them.

"Who?" Captain Dunois and Chancellor Montauban ask at the same time.

"The charbonnerie."

"This is no time for jests," the chancellor says with reproach.

Beast meets his eyes levelly. "I am not jesting. Furthermore, they have already agreed to fight by our side."

"They are nothing but outcasts, ruffians who must scabble in the forest to get by. Do they even know how to hold a sword?" Montauban asks.

“They do not fight by conventional tactics, but with the art of ambush and surprise.”

Chancellor Montauban opens his mouth to argue some more, but Duval interrupts him. “I do not think we are in a position to turn down any offers,” he says. “Beast and I will talk of this later.”

The abbess of Saint Mortain breaks the awkward silence that follows. “What of d’Albret’s men?” It is only years of practice that keeps me from flinching at her words, for while she directs her question to Captain Dunois, I know in my bones it is intended for me. “Have you been able to locate any of the saboteurs?” she asks.

The captain shakes his head. “No, there are so many men-at-arms in the city, all from such scattered parts of the country, and not all are known to me. I have begun to put word out to the garrison commanders to be wary, but there are over eight thousand men-at-arms, and two dozen places where they could help d’Albret’s main force breach our defenses. It will take time.”

Once again, I can feel the immense weight of Beast’s gaze upon me. I do not know if it is that gaze, the abbess’s veiled barbs, or my desire to erase some of d’Albret’s taint from myself, but before thinking it through, I speak. “I could identify them.”

All eyes turn toward me. One gaze in particular feels sharper than broken glass. “You?” the abbess asks.

“Who better?”

The duchess leans forward, her eyes serious. “You do not need to do this. You have already put yourself in far too much danger.”

“My sister is right. Besides, in practical terms, if they saw you, it might tip our hand,” Duval says.

I nod my head in agreement. “But they do not need to see me in order for me to identify them. It is no hard thing to don a disguise.”

Beast speaks for the first time, his voice rumbling into the small room. “I am not certain that is advisable,” he says.

My head snaps up. His dissent is like a kick to my gut, for while I know he is angry with me, I had not realized his newfound distrust would run this deep. “I do not see how we have a choice if we wish to gain the upper hand in this.”

“There is always a choice.” Beast turns from me and addresses the others. “I think this is a bad idea.”

“Do you not think I am capable, my lord?”

His hands grip the arms of his chair so hard that it is a wonder the wood does not splinter. “I know full well you are most capable, my lady. What I do not know is whether the costs would be worth the risks.”

“And what risks would those be, my lord?” My words drip with honeyed sweetness that is as false as it is polite.

He says nothing, but he glowers at me from across the table. The loathing he shows toward me is every bit as painful as I feared. “If you do not trust me—”

“Of course he trusts you, my lady! If not for you, he would still be rotting in some dungeon, or worse.”

“I am so glad that someone remembers,” I mutter. I take a steadying breath, and when I speak again, my voice is calm. “If you do not trust me, or are too worried about the *risks*, the captain can send whatever men he likes to accompany me. Indeed, the plan will only work if he does, for a man can stay close to the traitors and mark their movements, while I cannot.” Beast and I hold each other’s gazes for a long moment.

Captain Dunois begins stroking his chin again, a sure sign he is deep in thought. “I do not see how it could do any harm. And while I hate to ask this of you, it is unnerving knowing his agents are lurking about in the city, waiting for orders from him. We could start with the free companies and hangers-on. That would be the easiest place for someone to slip in unremarked.”

“I concur, Captain. It is decided, then. How shall we do it?” We spend the better part of an hour hammering out a plan. The entire time, I can feel the abbess watching me. Her displeasure puzzles me somewhat, for have I not done the very thing she wishes, showing how helpful the convent can be in such times? But it may be that only she is allowed to offer such help.

By the time we finally have our plan in place, Beast is pale, whether from his injuries or his fury, I cannot tell. As we rise to leave, the abbess takes two steps toward me, her lips pressed into a flat line. Before she can say anything, the duchess calls out. “Lady Sybella?”

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“Will you attend upon me this afternoon? I have some things I would speak with you on.”

My heart skips lightly at this reprieve she has granted me. “But of course, Your Grace.” Without glancing back at the abbess, I follow the duchess out of the room.

Chapter Thirty-One

“METHINKS YOUR ABBESS WAS NOT pleased with the service you offered us in the meeting.”

“She did seem most unhappy. Forgive me if I overstepped, Your Grace. I only wished to help in some way. It is my family, after all, that is plaguing you so.”

Much to my surprise, the duchess stops walking and grabs my wrist. “No,” she says fiercely. “I do not hold you responsible for Count d’Albret’s actions. If I held you responsible for those, then would I not be responsible for what he has done in my name?”

I stare mutely, as I have no answer to give her.

“Tell me,” she whispers, her hands twisting together in a knot. “Tell me of those who died at Nantes. Tell me so that I may honor their memory and the sacrifice that they made.”

In that moment, my budding admiration coalesces into respect. She accepts not only the power and privilege of ruling, but also the painful responsibility.

“The nobles went first. Your seneschal, Jean Blanchet, tried to organize a true defense of the ducal palace, but he was betrayed by Sir Ives Mathurin. Sir Robert Drouet fell in that battle, as well as two dozen men whose names I do not know. The townspeople were confused. They were inclined to trust Marshal Rieux when he said that he spoke on your behalf. It was not until the nobles moved against him that the townspeople realized their error, but it was too late, for they had opened the gate to the city and allowed them in. D’Albret had his troops harry and terrorize the burghers first, in order to weaken any resolve they might have held and to squelch any desire to rise up against him. It worked.

“The servants were the most loyal. They had known and served you since you were a babe. Allixis Baron, your comptroller; Guillaume Moulner, the silversmith; Jehane le Troisne, the apothecary; Pierre the porter; Thomas the doorkeeper; a laundress; a full dozen archers of the guard; your master of the pantry; the cook; two cupbearers; and a full half of the palace guard. They all died with your name on their lips and honor in their hearts.”

Her eyes are bright with tears and I am struck again that she is but thirteen years old. Younger than I was when I first arrived at the convent.

No, I was never that young.

I say the only thing I can think of to comfort her, and in the end, it is not much comfort at all. “The traitors Julliers, Vienne, and Mathurin are dead, Your Grace.

They have paid the ultimate price for their crimes.”

She looks up, her eyes gleaming fiercely. “Good,” she says. “If Mortain would bid you kill all the traitors in such a way, I would be most pleased.”

She thinks I killed them all at Mortain’s command. I do not explain that one was done in by my own twisted brother’s jealousy.

The abbess suggests I masquerade as a whore to look for the saboteurs, but Captain Dunois, for all his gruffness, has a chivalrous heart. He will not hear of it. He suggests I disguise myself as a laundress instead and points out, reasonably enough, that a laundress has an equally legitimate excuse for mingling with the soldiers. Besides, many of them traffic in both laundry and favors, so if needs must, I can play the whore in a pinch.

The abbess counts it one more mark against me that Captain Dunois opposes her plan, but it was not my doing.

I lean in close to the silvered mirror and apply small, thin strokes of charcoal to my eyebrows, making them thick and shapeless. Next I take an even smaller piece and create lines of fatigue on my face, after which I put a faint smudge of coal dust under my eyes so I will look exhausted from my toil. I finish the transformation with a smear of black wax on my teeth. In truth, I cannot wait to be someone else for a while, even a poor, drab laundress. Someone who does not leave pain and betrayal and heartache in her wake. Of course, the opportunity to thwart d’Albret is equally welcome.

I take a handful of ashes from the fire and rub them into my hair, making it a shade or two lighter and much coarser-looking. It was my hands that presented the biggest challenge, for even with my recent work with the poultices, they were smoother and softer than a laundress’s should be. To correct that, I soaked them in a strong lye soap solution for nearly two hours. Now they are red and raw and chapped, and they sting accordingly. I am most pleased with my disguise.

“No one will ever recognize you,” Ismae says from where she sits on the bed.

“That is the point,” I say wryly.

“Even so, the transformation is more thorough than anyone could have hoped.” She rises and brings me the linen coif for my hair. It is old and worn out, but far too clean, so I make her dirty it in ashes from the hearth. When that is done, she places it on my head and helps me tuck my hair up under it. “There.” She steps away to see the full effect. Worry creases her brow. “You will be careful, won’t you?”

“I have nearly a half a dozen blades under my washerwoman gown.” Two strapped at my waist, one on each thigh, and yet another hidden along my back. I

feel nearly naked without knives at my wrist, but soldiers can be a grabby lot and I cannot risk them discovering thick, solid steel. "I am ready," I tell her.

She takes a step toward me, hands clasped in front of her. "Have a care for yourself," she pleads.

Touched by her concern, for she is one of the few who genuinely care about me, I give her a quick hug. "I will be, but remember, these are but d'Albret's men, not d'Albret himself. They will be no match for me."

Somewhat reassured, she smiles. "Very well, then. Let us go find Captain Dunois."

We find the captain waiting for me in the main hallway. Duval and the abbess are with him. I am torn between pride at showing the abbess how well I can do this task and not wishing to expose myself or my talents to any more of her plots and intrigues.

"Sweet Jésus," the good captain mutters. "I would never have recognized you."

Dunois had wanted to escort me on the search himself, but it would have called far too much attention to my presence. Instead, he has handed the assignment off to the commander of Rennes, Michault Thabor, and a few of his most trusted men.

I place perhaps less trust in them than he does, but it is the best we can do under the circumstances.

And then it is time to go. My heart beats with anticipation, and the thrill of a new adventure tingles through my limbs. Feeling saucy, I turn to the abbess. "Will you not invoke Mortain's blessings on our venture, Reverend Mother?" While I ask it of her out of spite, I realize I *would* like His blessing, for all that He and I are at odds with each other right now.

Her nostrils flare in irritation, but she bows her head and places a hand on my coifed hair. "May Mortain guide you and keep you in His dark embrace," she intones, then removes her hand quickly. Even so, I feel somewhat calmer, as if Mortain has somehow heard her in spite of her ill grace.

We leave the palace through the servants' quarters, but since it is late and most are abed, our passing goes unnoticed.

Outside, a disreputable-looking donkey awaits with two baskets, one on either side. They are even filled with laundry.

Commander Thabor speaks to me in a low voice. "We have identified all the vulnerable spots in the city: the gate towers, the sally ports, the bridges, the cistern, and the gates along the river."

"Excellent. What of the patrols?"

"We have doubled the watch along the city walls and increased the number of patrols at their base."

“Where do you suggest we begin?” I ask.

“The east gate, then we will work our way around to the other gates.”

“Very well. Lead on.”

Thabor nods and walks purposefully ahead while his men scatter out so that it will not appear as if we are together. It would not do for me to be seen with them, for what business would the captain of the city guard have with a laundress? I know it is supposed to give me comfort, being followed by the guards, but it makes the skin between my shoulders twitch, which I force myself to ignore.

The city streets are quiet, as all smart or respectable citizens closed their doors and shutters and took to their beds long ago. As we move through streets full of houses leaning drunkenly against one another, the clop-clopping of the donkeys' hooves echoes off the cobblestones and sounds loud to my ears. However, if people hear us, they just snuggle deeper in their beds or ensure their doors are latched.

The buildings become smaller and seedier as we move farther away from the palace area. Meager shops and small taverns are interspersed among these smaller houses, and the streets are louder. At last we reach the military road that runs along the city wall. No one but soldiers should be on this road at this time of night. We pass three small watchtowers before we finally come to the east gatehouse. Commander Thabor walks past as if hurrying on some business of his own, but he will find some shadow in which to wait for me.

Still leading the donkey, I walk up to the gatehouse and halt just outside the door. The sound of murmuring voices reaches me, as the men on watch amuse themselves by telling stories. I hoist one of the baskets from the donkey's back, settle it on my hip, then head for the door. The guard on duty watches my approach with lazy eyes. “What do you want?” he asks.

“I am looking for Pierre de Foix.” It is the name of a soldier who has taken ill with the flux and is even now abed in the infirmary. He will most definitely not be on duty.

“He is not here, so you may be on your way.”

My eyes snap with irritation—I do not even have to pretend—and I swat the basket of laundry in annoyance. “He owes me four sous for his laundry. I do not do this backbreaking work out of pity.” I take a step closer to him, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. “Ah, perhaps that is it. Perhaps Pierre has lost all his money dicing. How do I know you are not hiding him, eh? I think he has spent all his money on gambling and will not pay me for my honest work.”

“Honest work,” the guard scoffs.

Like a fishwife, I am merciless. “He told me he was to be on duty this night at this post. Why would he lie to me unless he was trying to cheat me? I will report him to your captain.”

Before I can continue, the guard reaches out, grabs my free arm, and pulls me close. “Do not call me a liar, wench, else I will have to punish you. Here. Look.” With that he pushes me through the gatehouse door and holds me there. “See with your own eyes that the man you seek is not here, then be gone.”

Praying that Thabor’s men will remain in their positions and not do something foolish, I quickly glance at the small group of men. There are five of them, and none are familiar to me. A sixth man turns from the small brazier in the room and grabs his crotch in a rude gesture. “I have something you can wash for me, eh?”

For a brief moment, everything inside me stills. The hair on the man’s head is as brown as a walnut, but his beard is red, and I recognize him as Reynaud, one of my father’s men. Quickly, I toss my head and turn for the door so that he will not be able to see my face. “I do not do small pieces, only large,” I call over my shoulder. That sets the room to guffawing, and I use the opportunity to step beyond the sentry’s reach and back into the night where the cover of darkness will further obscure my features. “He is probably hiding somewhere,” I mutter with ill grace.

The sentry puts a hand to his sword, but I move quickly away. As I do, I see two dark shapes—my guards—step back into the shadows.

I return to the donkey—grumbling just loud enough that the posted guard can hear me—and replace the basket on the donkey’s back. It is not until we have moved into the next street that Commander Thabor appears at my side. “What happened there? Why did he grab you?”

“He thought I was calling him a liar. Which I was,” I say with a smile. “But he let me in to see, so it was worth it.”

“Have a care,” he growls at me, “as I am personally responsible for your safety.”

“Reynaud. I do not know if that is the name he is using here in Rennes, but one of d’Albret’s men is on guard in that gatehouse. The one with the brown hair and the red beard.” Thabor assigns one of his men to stay behind and attach himself to him, then we move on. I am thrilled with this first victory, and the night suddenly holds much promise.

The water tower has a smaller garrison inside. Only four soldiers this time, one of whom offers to buy Pierre’s abandoned laundry, but none of them are d’Albret’s men.

And thus the night goes, with me moving from one gatehouse to the next. Some with a dozen men, others with only four. But none of them with any more potential saboteurs. Bleak discouragement fills me, for if there is one man, I know in my bones there must be others. And I need to find them so we will not feel like sitting ducks waiting for d'Albret to spring his accursed trap.

We have patrolled only the towers on the east side of the city, but already the sky has begun to lighten. My disguise will not hold in broad daylight. With reluctance, I allow Commander Thabor to turn us around so we may begin heading back to the palace. "Do not look so discouraged," he tells me. "We found one. We will find the others."

"Yes, but I would prefer to find them sooner rather than later." Just then a man bursts out of a nearby door, startling my donkey and causing the soldiers to reach for their swords. But it is just a drunken stoneworker, stumbling his way home. I stop. But of course. "I wish to go inside," I tell Thabor. "For if the men I seek are not on duty, they will most likely be found in a tavern or wine shop."

"Those were not my orders," he says tightly.

"Your orders were to accompany me while I flushed out the traitors in our midst. I am not asking your permission, Commander, but telling you what I intend to do." Our gazes hold for a long tense moment, and I cannot help but remember how easily Beast accepted the risks I took. Despair raises its dark head and I let the pain of it fuel my impatience. "Well?"

Finally, he nods. "But one of us will accompany you."

I long to argue, but I am running out of time. "Very well. You." I point to the one named Venois. "Come here. You will be my companion for the night." He glances at his commander, who nods his assent, then comes to stand before me. I reach up and loosen the lacings at his throat. Even as the protest starts to form on his lips, I tousle his hair, then tug his sword belt so that it hangs askew. "You have been on a drunken revel with me through the taverns of Rennes tonight. You must look the part."

He glances at his commander again, and the mute appeal in his gaze makes me want to slap him. Does he not realize how many men have begged me for just such an opportunity as he is being handed? I grab his arm, tuck it into mine, and begin steering us sloppily toward the tavern door.

The tavern is nearly empty at this hour; only the dregs of its customers remain. Three men slump on tables, barely holding themselves up as they sip the last of the wine from their cups. Another man sits in a corner fondling a serving maid, who is dozing in his lap. A half dozen men squat by the light of the dying fire, dicing.

I take all this in as I lean heavily on Venois and stumble us both toward a bench. Venois is stiff, and I can only hope anyone sober enough to notice will assume it is his military bearing rather than unease. A harsh shout goes up among the dicing men, and I softly jab him in the ribs. “Slouch a bit,” I whisper out of the side of my mouth. “And shuffle your feet, then call loudly for wine.”

He does as I command, and an annoyed-looking serving maid nods in our direction. I gently steer Venois to a seat where I can better see the dicing men. I do not recognize any of the men at the tables, and while I do not know all of d’Albret’s men by sight, there is a certain sameness of manner that they possess—an ill-tempered, belligerent way of looking at the world—and none of those men have it.

The dicing men are my last hope to make something of the evening. I wait for the serving maid to set our wine down before us, then take a big gulp. It is watered and sour and it is all I can do not to spit it out. Instead, I force myself to swallow, then lean toward Venois. “Do you dice?”

The soldier shrugs, then downs half his wine. “Upon occasion. But mostly, I try not to.”

I wait half a beat, but he does not volunteer. Just as I open my mouth to tell him he must join the men in front of the fire, another shout goes up among them, this time accompanied by the ring of steel.

A quarrel has broken out, and my heart soars when I recognize Huon le Grande, who is nearly as large as d’Albret himself and possibly just as unpleasant. The man waving his sword at the other two, the one with the wispy beard and a large nose and only three fingers on his left hand, is Ypres. Next to him is Gilot, short and squat and mean as a wounded badger. I nearly laugh with pleasure that they are too stupid to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

I drape myself over Venois and pretend I am nuzzling his ear. “Three of the dicers are the men we seek.”

That seems to perk him up somewhat, and he plays his part with more gusto, if not more skill, as I point out which of the men are d’Albret’s.

But the night is nearly over, and the tavern keeper’s a large, hard-fisted man who kicks all of d’Albret’s men out before they can ruin his establishment. He kicks the rest of us out too, just for good measure. I am in infinite danger as I stumble out the tavern door practically on d’Albret’s men’s heels, but my disguise holds, and their gazes are bleary with drink. Venois keeps one firm hand on my elbow and the other on his own sword, giving the rowdy men no chance for an advantage. It is with a light heart that I describe them to Thabor and then watch as three of the captain’s men slink off into the darkness to keep watch over the saboteurs.

Chapter Thirty-Two

HAVING FOUND A WAY TO turn my d'Albret heritage to a good purpose, I am riding high on the thrill of the night's success, for there is no one else in the entire city that could ferret out these men. Only me.

It is hard to trust that Captain Dunois's and Commander Thabor's men will watch these traitors closely now that they've been identified, but I cannot post myself in the garrison alongside them, so I have no choice.

I reach my chamber and am surprised but pleased to find Ismae waiting for me. I am less thrilled to see that the abbess is also waiting, her proud profile limned in light from the chamber's hearth. As I come fully into the room, her head turns, like a hawk that has sighted prey. "Well?" she asks sharply.

I refuse to let her rob me of this night's victory. "Good evening to you too, Reverend Mother."

Her nostrils flare, but she ignores my gibe. "How did it go?"

"Very well. We found four of d'Albret's men. Commander Thabor put a guard on each of them so that they will be closely followed and watched, their every movement reported, but none the wiser that we are on to them."

The abbess nods her head but does not give me the word of praise that I crave, and it galls me mightily that I crave it. Instead, she says, "Best get some sleep so you will have your wits about you at tomorrow's council meeting."

Not trusting my voice, I dip my head and curtsy. Sensing the irony in my gesture, she sniffs then strides out of the room, closing the door behind her.

When Ismae and I are alone, she turns to me with a look of mixed annoyance and amusement on her face. "Why must you taunt her so?"

"Me? It is she who taunts me. Not even a word of praise or thanks does she send my way."

Ismae frowns and shakes her head. "It is true that she has always withheld any such praise or commendation of you. I wonder why."

"Because she is a sow at heart?" I suggest, lifting my hands to take the dirty linen coif from my head.

Ismae's mouth twitches in humor. "That must be it. Here. Let me help you." She hurries to my side and removes the headdress, then unlaces the gown. As I step out of the rough homespun dress, I am surprised to hear myself say, "Truly, Ismae. Why does the abbess hate me?" My voice sounds young and vulnerable to my ears, so I laugh mockingly. "It has always been so and I have yet to

understand it.” We clashed at the convent, but I had simply thought that was because I was her most difficult pupil and tried her patience. However, here in Rennes, after I had carried out so many of my duties in accordance with her exact wishes and still received no recognition, I realized it must be more than that.

Ismae shakes her head. “I do not know. Annith tried and tried to see if she could learn what lies at the heart of the abbess’s dislike, but to no avail. Whatever the reason was, it was not written down on anything Annith could find.”

“It is probably in that accursed little book she carries with her always.”

“It is probably not even written down, merely some dislike that has nothing to do with anything but her own prejudices.”

“Have you heard from Annith? Is there any news of her or Sister Vereda?” It is a most hideous time for the convent’s seeress to take ill, leaving only a reluctant, untried seeress to guide us through these treacherous times.

“Yes! I received a letter from her this morning.” Ismae takes a step closer to me and lowers her voice. “Sybella, she is planning to escape from the convent.”

“Escape?” I echo, not sure I’ve heard correctly. The Annith I know would never consider something so rebellious. But more than that, I do not think it is safe for her to be alone outside the convent walls.

“Escape.” Ismae nods firmly. “She has decided she would rather leave than be locked up in the convent for the rest of her life.”

“They will go after her, you know. They will not just let her leave when they have invested so much in her training. Plus, who will they get to take her place? The next oldest novitiate is eleven-year-old Aveline.”

Ismae cocks her head, reminding me very much of Annith in that moment. “With all the skills they have given her, she should be able to evade them easily enough. Remember, most of the nuns have not been outside the convent in years.”

“True enough. But where will she go? And who will see Mortain’s wishes and report them to us?”

Ismae opens her mouth, then closes it. “I had not thought about that,” she admits. “It is possible she will join us here in Rennes and serve among the duchess’s court.”

“And run smack into the abbess herself?”

Ismae scowls. “I wish the reverend mother would go back to the convent already. I am tired of living under her critical gaze.”

“You do not have to tell *me* how tiresome she is.”

Ismae smiles, but there is little humor in it. “No, I do not. Now, come, let me wash the ashes out of your hair, else you’ll ruin the linens.”

I spend the next two nights scouring the city with Thabor’s men, searching in every nook and cranny to find each and every one of d’Albret’s saboteurs. I find seventeen in all, and each one of them is now closely watched and guarded by Commander Thabor’s men.

My nighttime activities have the added benefit of keeping me away from Beast and the abbess’s politics, for I must sleep during the day in order to perform this task that is so critical to the city’s—to the duchess’s—safety.

There is also great pleasure in being viewed as the hero of the quest—a role with which I am wholly unfamiliar.

On the third morning, my sauciness toward the abbess is repaid with a summons to her chamber that comes far too early. I stumble out of bed, bleary-eyed and thick-headed, and make myself ready as quickly as I can.

When I am washed and dressed and certain that no hair is out of place, I make my way to her chamber. Outside her door, I pause to take a deep breath and smooth my gown. I remind myself that I am not a green novice in the convent being called into the office for some minor innocent rebellion.

For they *were* innocent rebellions, I recognize that now. I had been plucked from my home—however dark and oppressive it was, it was the only place I’d known for fourteen years—and plopped down on an isolated rocky island that I feared was the destination of the mysterious Night Rowers, rumored ferrymen to the Underworld itself. I was in a frenzy with near madness.

That realization—that I was damaged and broken when I first met her and deserving of her sympathy, rather than her harsh judgment—fills me with a righteous anger that is completely strange to me. I raise my hand and knock on the door.

“Come in,” the abbess calls out.

I lift my chin, plant a mocking smile on my lips, then enter the room.

The abbess is retrieving a note from a crow that has just arrived. She does not look up as I enter or acknowledge my presence in any way. It is a tactic I remember well from the convent, one calculated to increase the visitor’s unease. However, her small torments are nothing compared to all I have been through in the last several months, and my mocking smile turns into one of genuine amusement.

Instead of waiting patiently—or nervously—I cross to the lone window that overlooks the inner courtyard. I do not particularly care what is out there; I know only that I do not want her to think her games have intimidated me. I glance over

my shoulder in time to see her eyebrow twitch in annoyance—just once—as she continues to read the note. My objective achieved, I go back to looking out the window.

Seconds later there is an impatient rustle of paper, then the abbess speaks. “Sybella.”

Slowly I turn around and face her, the bright light coming in from the window behind me forcing her to blink. “Yes, Reverend Mother?”

“Come over here so I do not have to put a crick in my neck to speak to you.”

“But of course.” I cross the room and stand before her as she settles the crow on one of the two empty perches behind the desk.

“It is good that your thoughts have turned toward protecting the duchess. That speaks well of your training.”

Not of me. Never of me. Only of the training that she and the convent are responsible for.

“Which is why I have called you here. I wish to discuss your next assignment.”

My heart skips a beat. “I had not realized I was finished with this one yet.”

She turns from the crow she’s been tending and looks me square in the eye. “You must return to Nantes. To d’Albret’s household.”

For a moment, I am not certain I have heard her correctly. Then, foolishly, I say the first thing that comes to my mind. “Surely you jest.”

Her face tightens in anger. “I do not jest. We must learn more details of d’Albret’s plans, and you are best suited to the task.”

“You realize that my ability to pose as his docile prodigal daughter disappeared the same time his prisoner did?”

“Something you did not receive orders to do,” she points out.

“Something I was unable to avoid,” I remind her, barely able to hold on to my temper. “In any case, d’Albret will never allow me back into his household. And certainly not in a position of trust where I might overhear important information. He will most likely kill me on sight.” It would not be a quick or pleasant death, of that I am certain.

“Of course you will not go back as yourself. You have proven to be a master of disguises. We will dress you as a servant, which will give you an excuse for lingering at doors.”

I long to shake her by her slender shoulders and then slap her cold, calm face. “Have you heard nothing I’ve said? D’Albret watches everyone and has others watch them as well. He has already killed over half the servants at the palace simply because he suspected they were loyal to the duchess. He would never let an unknown servant into his household.”

The abbess inhales sharply, her nostrils flaring. That she is so visibly annoyed gives me hope that she is taking my words to heart.

She shoves her hands into her sleeves and crosses to look out the window. I stay where I am and try to mask the fact that I am seething inside.

“Very well, then,” she says. “I will send you back with but one purpose: to get close enough to kill d’Albret.”

Sweet Mortain. Does she truly think I will fall for that twice? “While I have longed to do that very thing, Reverend Mother, does it not go against every precept you have ever taught me? For he is not marqued. Unless”—I pause as a thought occurs to me—“has Annith seen it?”

The abbess’s lips thin, and she removes her hands from her sleeves. For a moment, I think she will strike me. “What do you know of Annith? Have you been corresponding with her while in Nantes? That was strictly forbidden.”

I am so surprised by this outburst that I do not even think to say anything but the truth. “No, Reverend Mother! I have not spoken with her—even by note—since I left the convent.”

Slowly, with visible difficulty, the abbess reins in her temper and turns back to the window.

“How can d’Albret not be marqued after all that he has done?” she asks, as if Annith’s name was never mentioned. “Perhaps you simply cannot see it. Or perhaps you have not looked hard enough. Perhaps your fear has made you weak and overcautious.”

Anger spurts through me and I fight hard to tamp it back down. It will not do to lose my temper in front of her. “He is not marqued. Believe me, I checked often. I saw him in all his naked glory just two days before I left Nantes.”

“It seems to me there is a good chance it has appeared since then,” she says stubbornly.

That is when I realize she will not take no for an answer. She is doing everything in her power to force me back into the little box of her making. The moment has come in which I must choose between the convent’s little box, or stepping fully away from everything I have ever known. I try one last approach. “If I do as you ask, I might be able to get into the palace, and I might even get to d’Albret himself, but I will never get out alive. Those loyal to him will see to that.”

Even as I speak the words, I can see in her eyes that she already knows this. That is when it hits me: all I have ever been to her is a tool, a tool so damaged that she does not mind if it gets utterly destroyed.

“We are all asked to make sacrifices in our service to Mortain. And you in particular have wished for death ever since you first arrived at the convent.

Perhaps this is Mortain's way of answering your prayers."

Her words pierce my heart like sharp black thorns, and the familiar darkness and despair threatens to overwhelm me. Has she ever been so willing to sacrifice any other novitiate for Mortain's cause? No, for *her* cause, for this is about bringing glory and recognition to the convent—to her.

But, I realize, there is a freedom in having so many of my secrets exposed—it gives her far less power over me. "Perhaps I am no longer fit for Mortain's service, Reverend Mother, for I will not go back."

Her head rears as if I have slapped her. Odd that as little as she thinks of me, she did not see this defiance coming. Her pulse beats angrily in her neck, and she turns again to stare out the window. Already I am feeling lighter, wondering just where I will go and who I will be once I am free of both the convent and d'Albret.

She draws a deep breath, then turns back to face me. I do not understand the faint gloat of victory I see in her eyes. Until she speaks. "Very well. Then I will send Ismae."

Sweet Jésus, not Ismae! D'Albret's anger that Ismae thwarted his attack on the duchess in the hallway at Guérande still burns hot and bright.

D'Albret does not know of my hand in that or I would not still be alive. "You cannot send Ismae." I keep my voice calm and unconcerned, as if I am merely pointing out a flaw in her plan rather than trying to save the life of my best friend. "For one, d'Albret has seen her. Her face is permanently etched in his mind after she foiled his plans in Guérande. The man is unearthly in his ability to see through disguises and subterfuge."

The abbess is not fooled by my calm demeanor. She has well and truly snared me in her trap and knows it. "We have many ways of creating a disguise. We can cut her hair, change its color, stain her skin. We can have her looking old and haggard in a matter of hours."

"D'Albret would never allow anyone into his presence, even a servant, who offended his eye so greatly."

Even if they did not recognize her and kill her outright, they would use her most poorly, simply for the sport of it. "I still think he would recognize her. And do not forget, many of his retainers have seen her at Duval's side. If by some small chance d'Albret himself were to miss her, one of his retainers would be all too eager to point her out to him, to gain favor."

The abbess folds her hands and rests her chin upon her fingers. "Ah, that is too bad, for it would be a most excellent solution." Her words chill me, for I do not expect a capitulation so soon. However, her next words turn the blood in my veins to ice. "Perhaps it is time to send Annith on her first mission. D'Albret has

never seen her; no one outside the convent has ever seen her, and she is our most highly skilled novitiate ever.”

She may as well send a lamb into a wolves’ den, for while Annith’s skill is great, she is also wholly good and could not even begin to guess what tricks and deceit they would use upon her. Is the abbess so ruthless that she would consign Ismae or Annith to certain death? She must be bluffing.

She must.

But am I certain enough to stake my friends’ lives on it?

A cool calmness settles over me, and I meet the abbess’s impersonal gaze. “That will not be necessary, Reverend Mother. I will go.”

Her face relaxes slightly. “Excellent. I am pleased to see you know where your duty lies.”

“When do I leave?”

“Within the next day or two. I will know more after this afternoon’s council meeting.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

DIZZY AND NUMB, I STUMBLE toward my chamber, desperate for solitude.

It appears all roads lead to d'Albret in the end. Whether I run at him in anger or run away from him in fear, the road will always curve back to him.

Why did I think I could escape? When I first realized I would need to travel with Beast, I knew there was no escape, merely a postponement of the inevitable. But then, once here, I was stupid enough to let hope slip in, even knowing it was merely the gods mocking me.

I had forgotten a lifetime of hard-won lessons in a matter of days.

Clearly I am fated to meet my death at d'Albret's hands. The real question is, will he meet his at mine?

For that is all that is left to me: to strike quick and sure and true and make utterly certain he dies before me.

Or is it? What would happen if I simply walked away? Surely Duval could protect Ismae. My thoughts are interrupted by a knock on the chamber door. Afraid Ismae has heard of my meeting with the abbess, I hurry to open it, dismayed to find Beast glowering in the hall, arm still raised to knock.

Every word I have ever known flees my head and I stare open-mouthed. He is no longer tinged with gray or green, and his hair has been trimmed. He leans on a cane, but other than that, he appears to have gotten here under his own power.

He lowers his arm. "So you *are* here. I thought you might be hiding from me."

Even though I have been doing precisely that for the past week, I scoff. "Why should I hide from you?"

His eyebrows lower ominously, and the look he gives me nearly singes the hair from my head. "I have sent Yannic every night to fetch you so that we may talk. Why have you avoided him?"

That is why he had the little gargoyle following me? I shrug. "I thought you didn't trust me to identify d'Albret's men and sent him to check up on me. You made your objections clear enough in the council meeting."

With visible effort, he unclenches his teeth. "I was objecting because it was too dangerous."

"Oh? Then you are not angry with me for being d'Albret's daughter?" I do not know what madness compels me to toss salt in the wounds I have made, but I cannot stop myself.

"I thought you established that you were Mortain's daughter?"

“Yes, well, that is a mere technicality, as the abbess made clear in that same meeting.”

He shakes his great head. “I do not trust that woman, not wholly. Nor should you.”

That he is right does nothing to warm me to him.

His face softens then, and his eyes lose their angry light. “Sybella, we must talk.”

It is the softness that has me catching my breath, for not in any of my dreams did I imagine I would see him look that way at me. But *merde*, I cannot afford his sympathy or understanding. Not now, for it will crumble all my resolve faster than I can muster it. “What is there to say? I am the daughter of the man who killed your sister, and, what’s worse, I lied to you about it again and again.”

“Stop it,” he growls. “There is far more to it than that.”

His seeing that fills me with great joy, which I ruthlessly tamp down. “What I *know* is that I was supposed to stay and kill d’Albret that night, and you stopped me. You ruined the plans I had made and forced me to leave the city with my task undone, and now I must return to finish it.” Saying the words aloud causes my throat to constrict so that I must pause a moment before continuing. “It would have been so much easier then, before I knew—” I stop again, unsure what I mean to say.

The fierce glower is back on his face and he takes a step into the room. “What do you mean, you are returning? On whose orders?”

“The convent’s, for, like you, I am sworn to serve my god, and that is where He wishes me to go.” But even as I say this, I know it is the abbess who wishes me to face d’Albret. I do not know if Mortain is in agreement with her or not. Perhaps this is my punishment for turning my back on Him and the teachings of the convent.

Before we can argue further, a page approaches. He glances from Beast to me, then back to Beast again, unsure as to what is going on. “Do you have a message for one of us?” I prompt.

He clears his throat. “Yes, my lady. Both you and Sir Waroch are requested to attend the council meeting in the duchess’s chambers. I am to escort you there now.”

“But of course,” I say, for this interruption suits me perfectly. I do not wish to be having this conversation at all. “Lead the way.” I step out of my room, forcing Beast to back up so that I do not shut his nose in the door, then I turn and let the page lead me down the hall. I hear the thump of Beast’s cane as he follows.

We are the last to arrive in the council chambers. Seeing us enter the room, the abbess narrows her eyes in disapproval, and I do not know if it is for me alone or because Beast and I are together. Duval motions us to take seats as he continues speaking.

“. . . have taken Lady Sybella’s counsel to heart and have moved up the marriage between Anne and the Holy Roman emperor. It will be taking place this afternoon, by proxy. Hopefully the marriage will afford the duchess some measure of protection, especially since I have received reports that d’Albret and his forces are preparing to leave Nantes and march on Rennes. They may even have left by now, as the last message was hours old.”

Even though I have been expecting the announcement, it sends a spasm of fear down my spine. He will sniff me out just as he did when I was but eight years old and hiding one of the mongrel pups his favorite hunting bitch had given birth to.

Except I will not be here. I will be heading straight for him. Under his own nose may be the one place he might not think to look for me.

Captain Dunois is the next to speak. “Thanks to the Lady Sybella, we have rooted out what we hope to be the last of the saboteurs, so d’Albret will receive no aid once he arrives.”

How can he be so certain? I wonder. We have found seventeen men, but what if there are more? What if I missed some?

“What of the Spanish troops?” the duchess asks, her face drawn and shadowed. “Will they be here before d’Albret?”

“They arrived early this morning, Your Grace,” Captain Dunois says. “My second in command is seeing to their quartering.”

While that is good news, we all know that the one thousand Spanish troops is nearly insignificant against d’Albret’s numbers.

“And the free companies?”

“They have been contracted, Your Grace,” the chancellor tells her. “They should be here in a fortnight.”

Not soon enough.

The duchess turns back to Captain Dunois. “Has the weather cleared enough to let the British troops land?” Those six thousand troops are our one hope of breaking d’Albret’s siege of the city.

Dunois and Duval exchange a grim look. “We have just received word, Your Grace,” he says gently. “The French have taken Morlaix.” A gasp of distress goes up around the room.

“But the English troops!”

“Precisely. They will have to fight their way through the French to reach us —”

“Or be slaughtered where they stand,” Captain Dunois finishes.

There is quiet while we all ponder this latest disaster. It is as if a noose is being tightened around our poor kingdom’s neck. Duval bites back an oath and stands to pace.

Beast, who has been sitting like a simmering pot for the past few moments, finally speaks. “I will leave tomorrow and make all due haste to Morlaix, taking the charbonnerie with me.” He looks at each of the councilors in turn, as if daring any of them to object.

Chancellor Montauban frowns. “You cannot take on a thousand French troops with a handful of charcoal-burners,” he says, and I cannot help but wonder if he truly knows Beast at all.

“No, but we can provide a painful diversion that will allow the British a chance to land.”

“It is possible,” Duval says, sounding hopeful for the first time in days.

“As we travel, I will raise the countryside against these intruders who would pluck our very land out from under our noses. Perhaps some of them can join us in Morlaix.”

“I still say we cannot put our trust in the charbonnerie,” Chancellor Montauban says. “They are too unpredictable, too rebellious. I fear they will run when we need them the most.”

Beast’s eyes when they meet the chancellor’s are as frigid as ice on a pond. “They have given their word, Chancellor. And I, for one, am inclined to believe it.”

“But they are not well versed in the art of warfare,” Chalon points out. “We do not have time to train them for battle.”

Beast leans forward. “That is the beauty of the charbonnerie. They do not fight with conventional tactics. Rather, they use stealth, cunning, and surprise. Deception and ambush are their most effective weapons.”

“But there is no honor in that,” Chalon protests.

“There is no honor in defeat either,” Duval points out. “I cannot help but wonder if d’Albret’s move is timed to coincide with this latest French attack. Did he know our aid from the English would be delayed, and is that why he marches now?”

“We will know soon enough.” The abbess speaks into the quiet room. “The Lady Sybella will be returning to her post with d’Albret’s household, so we will have access to his plans, hopefully before he acts on them.”

The duchess turns to me with stricken eyes, and Ismae's face goes white as snow. "But it is no longer safe for her there! He must know—or at least suspect—that she aided Beast in his escape."

"It is not a question of safety, Your Grace, but of how we can best serve you, and, through you, Mortain."

"Your loyal and dedicated service is duly noted, Reverend Mother." The wry note in Duval's voice reassures me that he does not wholly trust her either.

There is a long moment of silence, then the duchess speaks again. "I fear I must agree with Beast and the chamberlain, my lords," she says. "We have few options available to us. I believe we will give these charbonnerie a chance to prove themselves."

I will not be the only one riding to a likely death on the morrow—Beast will be as well.

Chapter Thirty-Four

WHEN THE MEETING FINALLY BREAKS up, I rise to my feet and make my way to the door. I can feel Ismae watching me, begging me to turn and look at her, but I do not. I cannot. Not now. Beast, too, is boring holes in my back with the intensity of his stare, but I ignore him as well. What I need most right now is the privacy and sanctity of my bedchamber.

I reach my room and bolt the door behind me, vowing to open it for no one. Think. I must think.

This latest news makes walking away infinitely more possible.

The reverend mother would not know for days. Weeks, even. And by then, d'Albret will either have won or been defeated, the direction of the war and our country determined. Duval would protect Ismae and keep her from being sent in my place when the abbess learns that I did not go. And at that point it will be too late for Annith to be of any use.

It is a good plan. A solid plan. Just thinking about it causes the tightness in my chest to ease somewhat.

I begin packing. I will take only those things that will make the reverend mother believe my deception, so only those items a camp follower would own. The laundress gown, and my weapons, of course. All my knives, but not the fancy garrote bracelets, as they are too fine for a mere camp follower to possess. Besides, I can strangle a man just as easily using his own belt.

As I carefully pack the knives I will carry, I marvel at how my desire to kill d'Albret once shaped my life and gave it meaning. But that was before . . . before what? When did my heart turn away from its willingness to die if need be in order to kill d'Albret?

Perhaps once I escaped, once I was no longer in his orbit or infected with the bleak despair that enveloped me while I was in his household. Or mayhap my short time away from him has reminded me that there are things worth living for. There are good people in this world, in this duchy. Those who mean to do all they can to stop d'Albret. Living inside his walls, it was all too easy to forget that.

There is the thrill of a fast horse, and the sun and wind in your face. The rare—and all the more precious for it—moments of laughter to be had. The excitement of seeing Mortain's marque and knowing the hunt is about to begin.

The look in someone's eye when he truly sees you—not just your face and hair, but the very essence of your soul.

It is a raw and uncomfortable realization that Beast is partly behind this newfound will to live. Not *for* him, but because he reminded me of what life has to offer. He lives life so joyously—it is impossible not to want that joy for oneself.

My fingers drift to the ring I wear on my right hand, my last resort should my situation ever become unbearable.

Suddenly, my lungs cannot take in enough air and my head grows light. No matter how I wish it to be different, in spite of all our efforts, in spite of every saboteur I have rooted out, I still fear in my heart that d'Albret will win in the end. That he will seize the city and bring it to its knees.

And everyone in it.

Oh, they will fight. All of Anne's nobles and advisors and men-at-arms will do their best to protect her. And they will die trying, for d'Albret's ability to inflict death is unsurpassed.

I can see it unfold so clearly in my mind's eye.

He will fight his way to Anne personally, his long sword slicing through her guard as if they were soft cheese. It is possible my brothers will be at his side, attempting once again to earn his favor.

Ismae and Duval will guard the duchess with their lives—and that is precisely what it will cost them. Once they have paid with those, d'Albret will turn his vengeance upon Anne.

He might not hurt her at first. He will most likely hold Isabeau as hostage, knowing only too well that is where Anne's heart lies.

I stare down at the small bundle on my bed. What if I were able to stop him, but didn't? What will my freedom have cost in blood? Will not the very things I hope to live for be lost?

In that moment, I know that I must do as I have been ordered. Not for the abbess, or the convent, or even Mortain.

But for those I have grown to love.

It is late when I leave my chamber to seek out Ismae, but there is still much activity about as the palace prepares for Beast's departure and the coming siege. Ismae is not in her bedchamber so I head to Duval's apartments within the palace. It is the only place I can think to look, short of the abbess's chambers or the duchess's. It appears I am in luck, for when I reach his door, I sense two pulses beating within. I knock softly.

Duval opens the door. A brief flash of surprise crosses his face when he sees that it is me. “My lady?”

I give him a wry smile. “I have actually come in search of Ismae,” I tell him.

It is hard to be sure in this dim light, but I think a faint tinge of pink spreads across his cheeks. You would think he and Ismae but thirteen years old and experiencing their first bout of puppy love. “She is here.” He opens the door to let me in, then bows. “I will leave you to speak in private.”

“No.” I reach out and grab his arm. “You need to hear what I must say.”

“Very well.” He turns and leads me into his chamber, where I find Ismae curled up in front of the fire, sipping a goblet of wine.

When she sees me, she sets the wine down and leaps to her feet. “Sybella! Where have you been? None of the pages we sent could find you.”

With a guilty start, I remember the series of knocks on my chamber door. “I was packing.”

“You are going?” she whispers.

Unable to speak, I nod.

She takes a step closer. “It is not right,” she says fiercely. “It must be someone else’s turn. I will go.”

Duval looks at her in alarm. “No one will go. We do not need the information at the cost of your lives.”

“I am not here to whine about my fate. I am here to extract a promise from you.” I slip the ring from my finger and hold it out to Duval. “Give this to your lady sister. Make her wear it. Should your last line of defense fail, it will be her best way out.”

Duval stares down at the ring. “I cannot do what you suggest.”

I grab his hand, shove the ring into it, then close his fingers around it. “You *must*. Trust me. Death will be preferable to d’Albret getting his hands on your sister. He has had far too long to plan all the ways he can break and humiliate her and bring her as much pain as he thinks she’s brought him. Whatever else happens, you must not let him get his hands on her. Her death will be long and unpleasant.”

He looks faintly sick but accepts the ring. “Do you promise?” I ask.

He looks into my eyes. Whatever he sees there convinces him. “I promise.”

Something inside my chest relaxes somewhat. “Thank you.”

“No—thank you. And for what horrors you have suffered, and what further horrors you will be subjected to, I am genuinely sorry. Know that my sister, that all of us hold this sacrifice of yours close to our hearts.”

His words bring tears to my eyes, but I blink them away and get down to business. “Ismae, I came to see if I could borrow your rondelles.”

“My offer was a serious one. I wish to go in your place.”

“I know you do.” I reach out and take her hands in mine. “Which is why you are so very dear to me. But you have duties you must see to here. I fully expect you and Duval to be the last ones standing between the duchess and d’Albret should the city not hold.”

She throws her arms around me and I savor the feel of her holding me close, treasuring me. Then I pull away. “Now. About those weapons . . .”

After some discussion, Ismae gives me her rondelles and half of her poison supply. Now all I must do is wait until daybreak to be on my way. As I leave Duval’s chamber, the urge to seek out Beast is nearly overwhelming. I promise myself I will face him in the morning, and I will tell him everything. Once I have made my confession to him, I can meet death with a clean conscience.

Before the sun has cleared the horizon I am dressed and heading toward the stable. It is not lost on me that of all the things in my life I have dreaded, telling Beast this simple truth is one of the most terrifying.

I find him in the stables, supervising the preparation of the mounts. Instead of using the thick staff they have given him as an aid to walking, he is waving it around, pointing and ordering the others with it. Yannic is with him, and more charbonnerie than I can count. My heart beats so loud I am surprised they do not all turn and stare at the sound, but they are so absorbed in their work that they do not even see me at first.

I try to call out to Beast, but I open my mouth and no words come. I must have made some small sound, however, for Beast turns around, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight of me, and he limps his way over to where I stand.

“I was hoping you’d come to see us off, else I’d have to come looking for you.”

That heartens me, that he planned to say goodbye.

“I have something I would talk to you of in private.”

Beast raises his eyebrows and follows me out into the stable yard. Afraid I will lose my nerve, I look down at my hands, which are clutched together so tightly that my fingers have turned white. I relax my grip. “There is something I must explain to you. I have meant to tell you many times, but there was never a good moment.”

He does not so much as flinch, although his eyes become as unreadable as polished steel.

“At first I did not tell you because I was afraid you would not trust me, and I needed your trust so I could get you to Rennes safely. I had hoped that once we

were here, no one would have to know my identity. It is not something I am proud of. But that did not—”

“Sybella?”

“Yes?”

“Please know if there were any other way to accomplish this, I would use it.”

“Accomplish what?” I ask, puzzled.

The look in his eyes is tender, and he moves closer so that I wonder if he plans to kiss me. Then his hand flashes, sure and quick, and the world grows black.

Chapter Thirty-Five

THE NEXT THING I KNOW, all the devils of hell are hammering at my jaw, just under my chin, but I do not care nearly as much as I might, for I feel safe. I appear to be in a cave. A warm cave of stone that completely surrounds me, pressing firmly into my back, sheltering me.

I hear a soft whicker—a horse?—then a man’s low voice. “You didn’t tell us we could bring a bit of skirt along.”

A second voice. “It’s not a bit o’ skirt, dolt. The captain would never bestir himself for a trollop.”

“Well, what is she, then?”

“Damned if I know.”

“Enough,” a familiar voice growls.

A throat clears. “If you don’t mind my asking, what’s wrong with her, Captain?” The tone is much more respectful now.

There is a pause, and then the cave wall behind my back rumbles. “She fainted.”

I wrench my eyes open, then clamp them shut as harsh bright sunlight pierces my brain and a wave of nausea washes over me. Slowly, my mind sharpens enough to understand that I am not in a cave but clamped between thick, strong arms. The firmness at my back is not a wall of stone, but an armored breastplate. We are moving with a gentle rolling gait.

I struggle to sit up, but the arms are like a vise and hold me firm. “Shhh,” the familiar voice says. “Do not flail about so, you’ll spook the horse.”

Beast.

The bastard has done it again!

The world spins as I try to sit up and put as much distance between us as possible, which is not so very much when we are sharing a saddle. Furious, I jam my elbow down into his thigh, pleased when he grunts in pain. “If you *ever* do that to me again, I will kill you. I mean it.” And while I do mean it, the words do not sound nearly as threatening as they should.

The other horsemen draw away, giving us the illusion of privacy, for I’ve no doubt that their ears are all straining to hear every word.

There is another rumble from his chest and I cannot tell if it is words or laughter, and my head aches too much to turn around to see. Besides, even though anger and annoyance rumble in my gut like bad fish, I bask in the

strength of these arms, relieved to have them between me and the rest of the world. Between me and d'Albret.

Merde! "Where are we?"

"On the road to Morlaix."

The jolt of alarm and dismay brings a fresh wave of nausea, but I grit my teeth and ignore it as I try to clamber down from the horse. Beast's arms tighten painfully. "Are you mad?" he says. "Hold still else you'll fall."

"I have someplace I must be."

He says nothing, but his arms tighten even more until I can scarcely draw breath. It would be easy—so easy—to surrender to the strength in those arms. Because I want to do just that, scornful laughter erupts from my throat. "My father will not pay a ransom for me, nor the abbess, if that is what you hope to gain."

When he speaks, there is an odd note in his voice. "Is that what you think I want? Ransom?"

"Why else would you abduct me? Ransom or vengeance are the only reasons I can think of."

"I didn't abduct you; I rescued you!" He sounds affronted by my lack of appreciation.

"I did not ask to be rescued!"

His gauntleted hand reaches out and oh so gently turns my face toward his. "Sybella." My name sounds lovely and musical on his tongue. "I will not let you go back to d'Albret."

The tenderness in his eyes undoes me. It is stupid, I tell myself. It means nothing. He rescues everyone he passes on the road.

But my false heart will not listen. Just like he came back for his sister, he has come for me.

Fearing he will see the naked longing of my heart, I turn my face away from his and search for the outrage I felt only moments before, but it is a mere echo of what it once was.

"I must go back," I say, as much to convince myself as him. "If I do not, the abbess will send Ismae, or perhaps even Annith, who has never even left the convent before. Neither will stand a chance against d'Albret." I was so ready to accept my fate—this time for the right reasons. Out of love, rather than vengeance. And once again this . . . man, this . . . *mountain* . . . has destroyed my hard-won resolve with a careless flick of his wrist. And even though none of the desperate reasons that compelled me to commit to that course of action have changed, I fear I will not be able to rekindle my determination.

“The abbess is no fool. Ruthless, perhaps, and unscrupulous, but no fool. She will not send one of her prized handmaidens to certain death. She is using them both to threaten you.”

“I am not willing to risk my friends’ lives on that,” I say quietly. “Besides, what if it is my fate, my destiny, to stop d’Albret, and I do not?”

He is silent a long moment, his cheerfulness disappearing like last winter’s snow. “Can we ever know our own destiny?” he asks. “I believed it was mine to rescue Alyse, but I failed, so clearly it was not. It is possible our fates cannot be known until we are cold in the ground, our lives over.”

Even though I fear he is right, I am not willing to give up. “What if your mission in Morlaix fails?”

“We will just have to be certain it does not.”

“It is a foolish commander who puts all his hope for victory in one basket.”

“Sybella. You cannot stop him. Not alone.”

His words are so seductive, I fear I will have to place my hands over my ears to keep them from tempting me. “But I must,” I whisper.

“Ah, but you have no choice, for you have been kidnapped by someone far stronger than you and there is no escape. Best set your mind to that and be done with it. Besides, I have collected your belongings, so the abbess will think you have left for Nantes, just as you were scheduled to do.”

I cannot help but admire his thoroughness, and some small part of me hopes it might work. To be free of not just d’Albret but the abbess as well? So must Amourna have felt the first time she was allowed to leave hell.

Beast places his big hand on my head and pushes it toward his chest. “Sleep now,” he says. “Else I will have to clout you again.”

Annoyingly, I do what he tells me. I assure myself it is only because I wanted to do it anyway.

When next I open my eyes, the horse has stopped moving, and the sun is angled low in the sky. We are halting for the night.

I blink as Winnog gangles over toward us and Beast prepares to hand me down from the saddle. At Winnog’s approach, the horse prances and paws the air until Beast does something with his heels and mutters a command, and then the horse stills long enough for me to slip from the saddle into the charbonnerie’s waiting hands. “What is wrong with your horse?” I ask once I am safely on the ground.

“That is no natural horse, my lady,” Winnog mutters, “but some foul creature straight from the Underworld itself.”

Beast flashes one of his lunatic grins then steers the creature to the edge of camp where the horses are being tethered.

“My lady? Do you need to rest?” Winnog asks, and I realize I am still clutching his arm.

I let go immediately. “No, thank you. I prefer to stretch my legs.”

He bobs his head. “Then, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go help with the horses.”

I stand for a moment, watching the swarm of activity as the party rein in their horses and begin to dismount. A dozen men from the duchess’s army are on fine coursers and stallions, and they jostle for position, trying to steer around an equal number of charbonnerie on their sturdy rouncies and ponies. None of them appears willing to give way before the others, and within minutes it is a chaotic jumble of cursing men and prancing horseflesh. *Merde*. If this is the sort of cooperation Beast can look forward to, he was beyond stupid to keep me from being the contingency plan. We will be lucky to even reach Morlaix, let alone run off the French so the British troops can land.

A slow realization creeps over me. Rennes is only a day’s ride away, and d’Albret himself will not arrive until late tomorrow at the earliest. If I leave now, I can be there in plenty of time to slip unnoticed into the throng of camp followers that are sure to travel with him.

I glance around the clearing. Yannic is wrestling Beast’s demonic horse to a tether. Beast himself has already fetched his maps and is rolling them out in order to discuss tactics and strategies with his commanders. The charbonnerie are busy casting sullen glances at the soldiers, and the soldiers are busy making their disdain for the charbonnerie plain as day.

No one is watching me. The resolve I feared lost for good rises once more.

I begin sauntering toward the line of horses. As I draw closer, there is a whisper of movement from the trees, and a half a dozen bodies emerge. I freeze, as do the soldiers, their hands going to their swords until Erwan tells them to hold. It is only the charbonnerie women, come to cook for the camp.

During the confusion that the new arrivals bring, I choose a dappled gray gelding tethered the farthest from camp and quickly put his great girth between me and the others, hoping he will hide me somewhat.

I reach out to pet the creature’s silky nose and let him smell me, as if I am merely saying hello. As I do, I glance around, looking for saddle and tack. I will need a bridle if I am to steer this creature back to Rennes. A saddle would be nice, although I can ride without one if need be. “I’ll be right back,” I whisper to the gray, but before I have taken two steps, a hand closes around my arm. A big hand as hard as iron. “Must I hobble you as Yannic has hobbled the horses?”

Damn him. Will the infernal oaf just tend to his business so I can tend to mine? I huff out a breath of annoyance, but there is some relief as well. Furious at myself for being relieved, I pull my arm out of Beast's grip. "No. You do not need to hobble me; you need only to let me go so I may complete my assignment."

His normally open face is hard and ruthless. It is the first time I have seen his ferocity focused on me, and I force myself to smile so he will not see how unnerving it is.

"We have discussed this already. You are staying here. Camulos knows this mission can use your skills."

"There must be a contingency plan in case this half-cooked scheme does not bear fruit. And as much as I loathe the abbess and do not trust her, she is correct in that the more opportunities we have to strike at d'Albret, the better our chances of success."

He reaches out with his other hand and grabs my shoulder. "I will not let you put yourself in that much danger." For the briefest of seconds, the anger gives way to a look of stark despair, and then it is gone.

His grip on my arms loosens, and slowly, he leans toward me. My own temper forgotten, I hold very, very still. "If you hit me again, I *will* kill you," I whisper.

"It is not hitting I have in mind." And then his hands move up to cradle my head, making me feel small and fragile—no, not fragile, but cherished. As if I am some precious treasure.

As he leans in closer, I do not move—I do not so much as breathe. I watch his lips as they draw nearer to mine, marveling at the shape of them, how there is the tiniest of dimples in the left corner of his mouth, so small you would not see it unless you were close enough to—his lips find mine. Warm, and softer than they've any right to be. I am awash in sensations that have nothing to do with relief or fury. I simply want. I want him, his strength, his honor, and his be-damned lightness of heart. I want to drink all those things up like honeyed wine from a goblet and have them fill me.

Unable to resist, I close my eyes and lean into him and let myself imagine that something between us is possible.

But it is not, not with all the secrets that exist between us still.

Slowly, with regret leaking through every pore in my body, I pull away. His eyes open, and they are filled with warmth. "How can you not be angry with me?" I whisper. "I deceived you repeatedly; nearly every word that passed through my lips was a lie." I am desperate to put some sort of barrier between us or I fear I will throw myself at him like some simpering maid.

He heaves a great sigh, then steps away to lean on a nearby tree and take the weight off his bad leg. “At first, I was. Furious at being deceived and lied to. And by a d’Albret. It seemed as if the gods themselves were mocking me. Intending to stoke that anger, I went over everything you had said, everything you had done. And while your words may have lied, your actions never did. I have seen you in the harshest of circumstances, escorting a wounded man across the countryside while dodging enemy soldiers and hostile scouts with little thought to your own comfort or safety. You gave more thought to the miller’s daughter and the charbonnerie’s plight than your own well-being. And you killed d’Albret’s own men with a smile on your face and joy in your heart.”

I gape at him, unable to speak, as he lays out this new Sybella I hardly recognize.

He runs his hand over his head. “Once I got past being angry, I was outraged that you hadn’t trusted me enough to tell me the truth. But since I reacted precisely as you had feared, clearly I did not warrant that trust.” He grows serious once more. “But Sybella, I have seen you when there are hard choices before you, not these false choices of memory, and every time, you have chosen well. Chosen the path that helps the most people and hurts others the least. And that is why I bear you no grudge.”

Unable to help myself, I put my hand to his cheek, needing to be certain he is real and not some vision my overwrought brain has concocted. His skin is warm, and his whiskers rough beneath my fingers. “How did your heart grow so very big?” I ask.

A flash of something—pain and perhaps a touch of bitterness—shines briefly in his eyes, then is gone. “Because I have had no one to share it with since Alyse left.”

A shout goes up just then, followed by a ring of steel. A woman screams.

Beast pushes away from the tree and hurries back to the clearing as fast as his injured leg will allow. I lift my skirts and follow.

There is a fight brewing near one of the cook fires. Two charbonnerie women stand warily. I recognize Malina, but not the younger one. Erwan, Lazare, and Graelon have planted themselves in front of the women, like a shield. Facing them all are two of Beast’s soldiers, one with a shaved head, cold eyes, and a drawn sword. “God’s teeth,” Beast mutters as he limps forward. “What is going on?”

The soldier with the drawn sword never takes his eyes from the charbonnerie. “These men have insulted us by drawing their knives. I am only urging them to use their weapons.” His chest is thrust forward, like an angry rooster’s.

“We offered insult? It was you who slandered our wives and sisters by trying to drag them off to the bushes to slake your lust.”

The second soldier—Sir de Brosse—gives a lazy shrug. “Thought she was a camp follower. Didn’t mean any harm.”

Beast reaches out and thwacks him across the back of his very thick skull. “Keep your dagger sheathed, you idiot. There are no camp followers here.”

De Brosse’s eyes slide in my direction, and Beast takes a step closer. “That is the Lady Sybella. She serves Mortain, and unless you wish to be gutted like a fish, I suggest you show her—and all the women in this camp—the utmost respect.”

De Brosse grins sheepishly and bows an apology first in my direction, and then toward the charbonnerie women.

“Gaultier!” Beast snaps at the other soldier. “Put your sword away and see to the setting up of the tents.”

The man’s eyes linger on the charbonnerie until Beast grabs him by the scruff of the neck and shakes him. “My apologies. Sir Gaultier is hot-tempered, and Sir de Brosse has a weakness for women. It will not happen again. Not if they wish to remain in my command.”

Once Beast has escorted his errant soldiers away, there is an awkward silence. “Go on,” Erwan shouts to the onlookers. “You all have work to do. Get to it.”

I retreat to one of the trees and sit down at the base of its trunk to think, still unable to decide what I should do: stay, or return to Rennes and make my way to d’Albret.

I cannot help worrying that I have not earned this boon. But I am only human and not sure I can turn away from such a gift. Besides, if it were my destiny to bring down d’Albret, would I not have already done so in those long months in his household? Why should now be any different?

I long ago ceased believing that prayers did any good, but now it feels as if they have been answered. As if the hand of Mortain Himself has reached into my life, plucked me from my nightmares, and placed me where I most wish to be: at Beast’s side.

I decide to accept this gift the gods have offered me.

In the distance, a wolf howls. Let it come, I think. Beast will most likely simply howl back, and the creature will either turn tail and run or fall into line behind him, like the rest of us have.

Chapter Thirty-Six

THE RISING SUN HAS NOT yet shown its face when we get on the road, but at least it is no longer full dark. Even so, we walk the horses until the sun breaks over the horizon, then Beast gives the command to gallop, the urgency of our mission pressing at our backs.

Beast himself rides up and down the line, being sure to greet each man warmly or share some private joke with him. As he does, the men sit up straighter or square their shoulders, their hearts feeding on that encouragement as much as their bodies feed upon bread.

I think of my father, my brothers, and how they command men. They use fear and cruelty to whip them forward and bend them to their will. But Beast leads not only by example but by making the men hungry to see themselves as Beast sees them.

Just as I am hungry to believe I am the person he sees when he looks at me.

I am terrified of whatever is springing up between us.

Of just how badly I want it.

My own feelings for him began well before we reached Rennes, when he first told me he went back for his sister. But my belief that he wouldn't—couldn't—care for me in return created a moat of safety around my heart, and I had nothing to fear because the entire situation was impossible.

But now—now I look in his eyes and I see that he believes it is possible. Surely that is only because he does not truly know me. There are still things—momentous things—that I have kept from him. And while Beast is strong and his heart generous, I am not certain he is strong enough to love me and all my secrets.

I cannot decide if I should bury the rest of those secrets so deeply that they will never resurface or throw them in his face like a gauntlet. Better he hate me now rather than later when I have grown used to his love.

But haven't the gods already proved how futile it is for me to try to keep my past hidden? Which leaves me with one clear choice—one that has me wishing I had decided to obey the abbess and make for d'Albret's camp.

“Why so grim, my lady?”

I glance up, surprised to see Beast riding next to me. How can someone so large move so quietly? I open my mouth to ask him that very question but

surprise myself by asking a different one. “Do you know that I have killed more than thirty men?”

His eyebrows shoot up, whether at my confession or the number of kills, I cannot say. “And of those, only sixteen were sanctioned by Mortain.”

When he says nothing, I add somewhat impatiently, “I do not kill simply because Mortain ordains it, but because I enjoy it.”

“So I have seen,” he says. “I, too, take great pleasure in my work.” He looks around us. “Is there someone here you wish to kill?”

Uncertain if he is teasing or serious, I resist the urge to reach across the space between us and punch him. Clearly, to a man who is rumored to have killed hundreds upon hundreds in battle, my puny body count does not hold much sway. Perhaps something that he has had less personal experience with. “I am wicked and carnal and have slept with lots of men. Possibly even dozens.” Although in truth, it is only five.

Beast does not look at me but instead surveys the line of horses and carts stretched out behind us. “You hold yourself too lightly, my lady, for I cannot think of even a single man who deserves such a gift as you claim you have given.”

His words prick at something achingly tender, something I don’t wish to acknowledge, so I snort in derision. “What do you know of such things? I am likely one of the few maids who have not run from your ugly face.”

He turns back to look at me, amusement sparkling in his eyes like sunlight on water. “True enough, my lady.” Then he is gone, riding down the length of our party to make sure there are no stragglers, and I am left with the conviction that an avalanche would be easier to dissuade than that man.

Toward late afternoon, we reach a small forested area—a secluded place the charbonnerie scouts have picked out for us. The soldiers do not like it and grumble, for it is a dark, primordial tangle of trees and underbrush. Indeed, the trees here are so very large, their roots have burst from the ground and run along the surface, like the ancient bones of the earth itself. Although I cannot say why, I feel at ease in this place, as if the presence of Dea Matrona is strong. No. Not Dea Matrona, but the Dark Mother. For even though I do not worship Her, I can feel Her presence in the rich loam and leaf mold beneath our feet, and in the quiet rotting of the fallen logs. Perhaps that is what makes the soldiers uneasy.

Our party has grown throughout our journey, as if Beast is some mad piper whose tune calls eager young men who wish to fight at his side. In addition to the men-at-arms and original charbonnerie, we have been joined by a dozen more of the charcoal-burners, two blacksmiths, a handful of woodcutters and

crofters, and three burly farmers' sons. One of whom is Jacques, Guion and Bette's elder son.

Soon, the clearing is full of the bustle and industry of nearly fifty people making camp ready for the coming night. I feel twitchy in my own skin, as if the very sap that runs through the trees is now running through my veins, bringing me alive after a cold, hard winter.

Wishing for something to do, I offer to help Malina prepare dinner, but she shoos me away. "You are a lady, and an assassin besides. You do not belong with the soup pot."

I turn and survey the camp. Some of the charbonnerie are busily erecting rough tents in the clearing; others are collecting water from a nearby stream so that the tired horses may drink. The soldiers have gone off hunting for our dinner, and even the greenlings have been sent to gather firewood. Since I refuse to sit idly by while others do the work, I snag one of the slings for gathering wood and head into the trees.

Moving among the trees calms me. In that quiet and stillness, I find myself content, a feeling I barely recognize. I like this life—the days full of hard riding and the evenings filled with chores and necessities, with little time left for idle pleasures or twisted games.

Mayhap I can simply ride at Beast's side as he travels throughout the kingdom raising an army to the duchess's cause. That thought has me smiling, for it is a fanciful notion that I would not dare indulge in were I not out here alone with no one to see it.

But am I alone? Voices and some strange cracking noises reach my ears. I move forward cautiously, careful not to step on any dried leaves or twigs that might give me away.

I come upon a clearing and find it is only the boys from the camp who have paused in their wood collecting. They have taken two branches and are playing at sword fighting. They are strong boys, but their movements are clumsy and unskilled. The charbonnerie are right to call them greenlings. I start to smile at their antics, but instead a cold chill slithers down my spine. This is no game we play, and I suddenly despair of our chances—not only of success, but of survival.

I step from between the trees. "Fools!" I scold. "You are not beating the straw from mattresses!"

The boys freeze, their faces filled with both embarrassment and defiance. "What do you know of such things?" the woodcutter's boy asks sullenly. "My lady," he adds as an afterthought.

“More than you, it would seem. You do not whack each other as if chaffing wheat. There is a rhythm of thrust and parry, attack and counterattack that you must know else you’ll be gutted like pigs.”

Resentment flares in the young woodcutter’s eyes. I have pricked their male pride, and rubbed their noses in their lack of privilege, for of course they have had no opportunity to even witness sword fights, let alone practice at them.

“There is not time in the three days before we reach Morlaix to teach you the art of sword fighting. That takes years. Add to that that there are no extra swords to be had, and you are wasting your time.”

“What would you have us do? Collect wood?” One of the blacksmith’s boys kicks at a branch at his feet in disgust.

“No,” I say, stepping closer. “I would have you learn a few quick, deadly ways to kill a man so that you can be of service to the duchess in this mission.”

The greenlings’ faces are mixtures of suspicion and hope. “And who will take the time to teach us these skills? My lady.”

I smile. “I will.” I reach for my wrists and pull my knives from their sheaths. The boys’ interest quickens, except for the blacksmith’s son, who is still skeptical.

“What can we learn of fighting from a maid?” he asks the others, and looks of doubt appear on their faces. Two of them actually snicker. I want to take their fat heads in my hands and knock them together like empty jugs.

Jacques speaks up. “That is no mere maid, you fool. Did you not hear the commander yesterday? She serves Mortain.” He lowers his voice. “She is an assassin.”

The blacksmith boy blinks. “Is this true?”

In answer, I take one of the knives and throw it. He has time only to gape in surprise before his cloak is firmly pinned to the tree behind him, right above his shoulder. “It is true,” I tell him.

Without further discussion, I turn to Jacques. “You will partner with me. The rest of you, pair up according to your size.” With a sheepish glance at the others, Jacques shuffles across the forest floor to stand in front of me, hands hanging limply at his sides.

I remove the two knives I carry in my boots and hand them to two other boys. “Just like an assassin, your greatest strength will be your stealth and cunning. And speed. You will need to get in quickly, strike, then move away before anyone has even realized you are there. That means in addition to what I teach you here tonight, you must begin to learn to move quietly. Right now, you sound like a herd of oxen galumphing through the forest. Pretend you are sneaking up on somebody if you must, but learn to move without making noise.”

“There is no honor in that,” one of the woodcutters snorts.

Quicker than he can blink, I step inside his guard, whip his belt from his waist, and twist it around his throat, just tight enough to get his attention. “There is no honor in throwing your life away either. Not when the duchess needs every man in her kingdom if we are to win the coming war.”

The boy swallows audibly, then nods in understanding. I step away and hand him back his belt. “Besides, if what you say is true, then those who serve Mortain have no honor, and I am certain that is not an accusation you care to make.”

They quickly shake their heads. “Now, the quickest and quietest way to kill a man is by slitting his throat, just here.” I run my finger across my own. “This is not only an excellent killing blow but also a way to silence him so he cannot call out and alert others.” I step into the lessons I was taught at the convent as easily as I step into a new gown. “Here. Put your fingers at your own throat. Feel the hollow at the base of it. The spot you want to strike is three fingers up from that.” I watch as they all grope at their own throats. “Good. Now I will show you the striking motion from behind.”

“On me?” Jacques asks, his voice cracking.

“Yes,” I say, hiding a smile. “But I will use the knife handle, not the blade.”

I spend the next hour teaching the greenlings some of my most basic and crudest skills. How to slit a throat; where to strike from behind so that a single blow will kill a man; where best to place your body when garroting someone so his thrashing will not dislodge your hold. We do not spend nearly as long as I’d like, but our wood is needed to feed the fires if we are to eat. They are all still awkward and clumsy with the movements, but now they have some small skills they can use.

That night, when we finally sit down to eat, I feel as if I have earned my supper.

When the meal is done and the fire burning low, I go in search of my bedroll. Someone—Yannic, I presume—has laid it out carefully between two of the great tree roots so that I am cradled between them. Near stumbling with exhaustion, I reach down to lift the blanket, then blink in surprise at the small clutch of pink flowers that have been laid on my pillow.

It appears that my sins are forgiven. At least, the ones Beast knows about.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

LATER, WHEN EVERYONE HAS RETIRED for the night, a large, hulking shape steps away from the dying fire and moves in my direction. “You look like a babe in a cradle,” Beast says.

I glance to the root on either side of me and decide I like his comparison. “Dea Matrona is holding me close.” I am certain I can feel the roots pulsing as they draw nourishment from the earth.

Being careful of his injured leg, he uses the tree to ease his way down to the ground beside me. “Have you finished confessing all your darkest sins to me?”

I am glad he can accept my earlier confessions with such a light heart, and clearly the gods are handing me this perfect moment for sharing the rest. I am grateful for the darkness that cloaks us, casting everything in shadow, muting life itself somehow. “Sadly, no.” I take a deep breath. “I would warn you that you are courting the very woman responsible for your sister’s death.”

A moment passes, then another, and still he says nothing. I peer through the darkness, trying to see his face, looking for some sign that my confession has addled his wits or left him speechless with revulsion. “Did you not hear me?”

“Yes.” The word comes slowly, as if he must haul it up from some deep well. “But I also know you are quick to paint yourself in the darkest light possible. How old were you?”

“Fourteen,” I whisper.

“Was it your own hand that dealt the killing blow?”

“No.”

Beast nods thoughtfully. “Can you tell me how a lone fourteen-year-old maid could stop one such as d’Albret?”

“I could have told *someone*,” I say in anguish.

“Who?” Beast says fiercely. “Who could you have told who would have had the means and the power to stay his hand? His soldiers, who were sworn to serve him? His vassals or his retainers, who had sworn similar oaths? No one could cross a dangerous, powerful lord such as d’Albret at the say-so of a mere child.”

“But—”

“All those things you did—or didn’t do—were a matter of survival. Telling anyone would only have exposed you as knowing the full scope of what went on in d’Albret’s household and endangered you even further.”

“It is not just that,” I say. “I was unkind and laughed when my brothers teased

Alyse or played cruel jokes on her. I would laugh as loudly as they did.”

Beast’s jaw clenches, and it is clear that I have finally managed to make him see the extent of my cruelty.

“And what would have happened if you hadn’t?”

“Alyse would have had a true friend, someone to stand by her instead of someone who ran at the slightest threat.”

He leans across the distance between us, getting as close to my face as he can. “If you had not laughed at the cruelty, you would have become the next target.” He holds up a hand, stopping my flow of words. “Do not forget, I have seen you dreaming and know how much darkness haunts you. I am also fair certain that very little of it is yours. I say again, all those things you did—or didn’t do—were a matter of survival.”

We stare at each other for a long, hot moment, then my temper flares. “Why do you not have the good sense to see that I am not deserving of such forgiveness?”

He laughs—a harsh, humorless sound. “The god I serve is near as dark as yours, my lady. I am not one to pass judgment on anyone.”

As I stare into his eyes, I see the faint echo of the horrors of the battle lust he has endured, and understanding dawns. He truly knows some of the darkness I struggle with.

We sit in the deepening night for some time. His face is mostly dark angles and planes, with only the faintest glow of the fire reaching this far away. “I would like you to tell me how my sister died,” he says at last.

Even though he has every right to know this, my heart starts to race and it feels as if a great hand has wrapped itself around my chest. But Sweet Mortain, it is the very least of what I owe him. I close my eyes and try to grasp the memory, but it is as if a thick door bars my entrance, and when I struggle to open it, pain shoots through my brow and my heart beats so frantically I fear it will shred itself against my rib cage.

I remember the screaming. And the blood.

And then there is nothing but a black mawing pit that threatens to swallow me whole.

“I cannot,” I whisper.

Something in his face shifts, and his disappointment in me is palpable. “No, no,” I rush to explain. “I am not refusing or playing coy. I truly cannot remember. Not fully. There are just bits and pieces, and when I try too hard to force the memory, only blackness comes.”

“Is there anything you do remember?”

“I remember screaming. And blood. And someone slapping me. That is when I realized the screaming was mine.” The giant hand around my chest squeezes all the air from my lungs. Black spots begin to dance before my eyes. “And that is all.”

He stares at me a long moment and I would give years of my life to be able to see his face clearly, to know what he is thinking. Through the darkness, his big warm hand tenderly takes hold of mine, and I want to weep at the understanding in his touch.

The road to Morlaix takes us uncomfortably close to my family’s home. It sits but a few leagues to the north, and simply knowing how close it is makes my whole body twitch with unease. Beast says nothing, but I see his gaze drift in that direction a time or two and cannot help but wonder what he is feeling. Luckily, it begins to rain, soft fat drops that quickly turn into a torrential downpour, forcing our minds to other things. We cannot afford to stop, however, so we continue on. While no one complains, it is only the charbonnerie who do not seem to mind. By midmorning, the forest floor is muddy, and our progress is reduced to a slow slog. But as long as we can keep moving forward, we do. We must. Even now, d’Albret is likely camped in front of Rennes and giving the signal to his saboteurs. Please Mortain, let us have gotten all of them. And if not, let us hope Duval and Dunois are on their guard.

When the second horse flounders in the mud and it takes us an hour to dig out one cart’s wheels, Beast decides we must wait out the storm and sends scouts ahead to find us shelter.

A short while later, they return. “There is a cave a mile or so north of here,” Lazare tells him. “It is large and can hold all of us and the horses as well.”

De Brosse’s horse shifts uneasily on its feet. “It is an old cave, my lord. With strange markings and old altars. I am not sure the Nine would appreciate us trespassing.”

I laugh—mostly so they will not hear my teeth chattering with the cold. “Between us we serve Death, War, and the Dark Mother. Whom do you think we must fear?”

De Brosse ducks his head sheepishly, and Beast gives the command to head for the cave. I almost hope it is a mouth that opens directly to hell, for of a certainty, we could use the heat.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

EVEN AS HALF THE PARTY is still filing into the cave, the charbonnerie have torches lit and get to work building fires. The cave is indeed enormous. We could easily fit twice our company inside.

There is much stomping of feet, groans of relief, and creaking of leather and harness as fifty mounted men dismount and jostle to create room for themselves and their horses.

Once I have dismounted and handed my horse to Yannic, I pace the perimeter of the cave, trying to get blood flowing in my limbs. I would also like to know in whose abode we will pass the night. The charbonnerie call this place the Dark Mother's womb, and it may well be, but other gods have been worshiped here, and more recently.

There is an old altar at the very back. The torches hardly cast any light that far, but I can see the faint outline of small bones, some offering made long ago. Old drawings flicker on the cave walls: a spear, a hunting horn, and an arrow. It is not until I see the woman riding the giant boar that I am certain we have stumbled into one of Arduinna's lairs, where she and her hunting party would rest from their hunts.

Thus reassured, I return to the front of the cave, where the rest of the party stands, torn between getting comfortable and bolting.

It is the youngest of the men, the sons of farmers and woodcutters and blacksmiths, who are the most unsettled. The charbonnerie have no fear of this place, and the men-at-arms are too disciplined to show such fear, even though I can smell it on them as surely as I can smell their sweat. But the green boys stand huddled together, looking about with wide eyes, their shivers equal parts cold and fear.

"Arduinna," I announce. "The cave belongs to Saint Arduinna. Not Mortain, nor Camulos, nor even the Dark Mother"—I send a quelling glance at Graelon, who looks to correct me—"but the goddess of love. There is nothing to fear." Although that is assuredly a lie, for love terrifies me more than death or battle, but these youths do not need to know that. Indeed, Samson snickers then, and his gaze goes to Gisla, who is helping Malina set up pots for boiling. Now, that is what we need. The goddess of lust moving in all these men with but half a dozen women among them.

"Come," I say sharply. "Grab your weapons and move to the back where there

is room to spread out.”

Samson, Jacques, and the others gape at me. “Here?”

“Do you think your skills are so great that you may set aside your practice?”

“But there’s no room.”

“Oh, but there is. Now, follow me, unless you are afraid. Samson, Bruno, bring the torches.”

Of course, none will admit to such fear, and certainly not in front of me, so I lead the group deeper into the cave and have the boys secure the torches.

I place myself at the very back of the cave, for even though it is clearly one of Arduinna’s, I can feel Mortain’s cold breath upon my neck. I do not know why His presence should be so strong here, and I would not have the boys turn their backs to Him.

After much grumbling and complaining, the boys finally take their positions. “Begin,” I order, and their arms, clumsy with cold, start moving through the exercises we have been practicing. Within half an hour, the cold is forgotten, along with their fear, and they are concentrated on besting their opponents.

My focus on the greenlings is so great as I try to keep them from accidentally killing one another that it takes me a while to realize we have drawn a crowd. Easily a dozen of Beast’s soldiers have gathered round and are watching the boys with narrowed eyes and folded arms.

“My money’s on the smith’s boy,” de Brosse says. “The one with the long hair.”

“I’ll take that wager. I think the boy with the ax will win the bout.”

There is a rustle of purses and jingle of coin as bets are made. Their casual betting raises my hackles; this is no game. The boys’ lives likely depend on what they learn here. Besides, the greenlings do not need the distraction of being surrounded by true soldiers.

Or so I think until I see how the greenlings take the soldiers’ attention to heart. There—Samson has finally started taking the practice seriously, his face creased in concentration. Jacques, too, is no longer so worried about hurting his opponent and finally manages to wrestle him into position so that he can get the leather cord around his neck.

Cheers go up, and Jacques smiles shyly. Then Claude sneaks up from behind him and gets his knife handle around his neck. Another jingle of coin changes hands. I cannot decide if I am amused or annoyed that the soldiers’ opinions seems to carry more weight than mine. “Again,” I say. “And this time, Claude, try not to laugh as you slit your opponent’s throat.”

Dinner that night is a cheerful affair. Half of the soldiers’ purses are heavier from their wagers, and the greenlings’ sense of pride has grown in equal

amounts. Even the charbonnerie seem to have relaxed some.

As men leave the fires to lie down on the cave floor, Beast comes to find me. I have selected a spot for my bedroll toward the back, still wishing to place myself between that faint chill of death that is haunting me and the others.

“We reach Morlaix tomorrow,” he says, easing down onto the ground.

I try to ignore the heat coming off his body, try to pretend he is not close enough for me to touch and that my fingers do not yearn to do just that. “I know.”

Beast reaches across the small space and takes my hand in his. It is a big hand, and hard, the entire palm filled with calluses and scars. “It was well done, you training the greenlings.”

“I know.” My answer startles a laugh out of him, but it is true—I do know that it was a good thing.

He shakes his head. “I fear I have lost my touch for commanding men. It is an assassin who has finally managed to bring them all together, not me.”

“Now you go too far and mock me. I do not have any knack for bringing men together.”

He threads his fingers through mine, then slowly brings my hand up to his lips and kisses it. “I would never mock you. I speak only the truth.”

It is the most comforting thing I have ever felt, that hand on mine, the quiet steadfastness it promises. That he offers me this after all the secrets I have told him humbles me. I want, more than anything, to keep that hand in mine and never let it go.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

NEAR NOON ON THE FOURTH day of our journey, we come in sight of Morlaix. We do not approach the town directly but stay on the far side of the river, where we can just make out the ramparts of the walled city.

Beast turns our party northward. The farther north we go, the more the land changes. The rich fields and forests turn scrubrier with tall rippling grasses, and the sharp tang of salt is in the air. In the distance I can hear the steady crashing of the waves as they throw themselves upon the rocky shore.

Beast directs the main portion of the party to set up camp in the thicket of trees that we can just see off to the east. He orders two of his men and two of the charbonnerie to accompany him, along with myself. We follow a trail that is naught but a deer track and find ourselves winding our way to the coast. When the rocky shore comes into sight, I see an old stone abbey and beside it one of the even more ancient standing stones. I glance at Beast. “Saint Mer?”

Beast nods. “The abbess of Saint Mer has been keeping Duval informed. She and her acolytes have been in communication with the British ships, and have been keeping track of the French movements in the area as well.”

I tamp down a little flutter of—not fear—apprehension. Saint Mer is a watery old hag of a goddess, with a tangle of seaweed for Her hair and bones formed of driftwood. She is wild, uncontrollable, both playful and deadly, beautiful and terrifying. Her appetite for men is insatiable and She often plucks them ripe from the boat, pulls them into Her watery maw, then spits them out when She is done with them.

When I was nine years old, long before I had heard the stories of my own birth and lineage, I adopted Her for my own. Most girls my age worshiped Amourna, but I had no use for Her and Her soft, gentle love that was naught but a lie told to keep girls hopeful and compliant. For a while, I turned to Arduinna, for She was the one goddess who carried a weapon, and that appealed to me greatly, but in the end, She let me down as well. As a protector of virgins, it seemed She failed as often as She succeeded.

And so I turned to Saint Mer. Her wildish nature called to me. I wished to dance with storms, like She did. I wished to pick and choose which men I allowed into my domain, then be done with them once I’d taken my pleasure. Not that I believed there was any pleasure to be had between a man and a

woman, but the stories and poets spoke of it often, and if it existed, I would have my share of it.

Mostly, I wanted to be feared as Saint Mer was feared, to have men treat me with great respect and caution and be afraid of what might await them if they did not.

When we reach the abbey, we rein in our horses. As we dismount, the door opens and a shrunken old woman comes out. In her hand is the sacred trident of Saint Mer, and around her neck are nearly a dozen strands of cockle shells, which mark her as the abbess.

Beast bows low before her, as do Sir Lannion and Sir Lorril. I sink into a deep curtsy. The charbonnerie look uncertainly about them, then bob their knees.

“Come inside and be welcome,” the abbess says. She motions with her trident, and two girls emerge from the abbey door and come forward to tend our horses: the daughters of Saint Mer, born of the goddess and drowning men.

I am filled with curiosity, as I have never met anyone said to be born of another god before. Saint Camulos does not count, for He makes no claim to have sired His dedicants, merely accepts those conceived in His name.

There is a translucent quality to the girls’ skin, as if they spend more time beneath the waves than beneath the sun. Their hair is long and flowing, one light blond and the other dark. As they draw closer, I see that their feet are bare and they have the slightly webbed toes that mark them as one of Saint Mer’s. When I hand one of the girls my reins, she smiles at me. Her teeth are slightly pointed.

I nod in greeting and thanks, then hurry to follow the abbess into the abbey.

Her receiving chamber is sparse, with none of the luxuries the abbess of Saint Mortain enjoys. She offers us cool, clear water to drink, and naught else.

“I bring thanks from the duchess herself for the aid you have given her,” Beast says formally, and I am intrigued by this new side of him.

The abbess nods her head, causing the shells to rattle. “I am committed to doing whatever is in my power to keep our land free.”

“Are there any new reports? Do the British remain anchored off the coast?”

“Yes, but they are running out of supplies. Some of the locals were rowing food and water out to them, but the French soldiers got wind of it and began picking them off with their archers, so that has stopped.”

“And what of Morlaix itself?”

“There are near five hundred French soldiers stationed in the town, with another two hundred positioned along the estuary. Your biggest problem will be the cannon the French have positioned at the mouth of the bay. I do not know if they can reach the ships, but the captains seem to think they can, and they will not draw near.”

Beast glances to the charbonnerie, who smile and nod. He turns back to the abbess. “Their cannon will not be a problem. We will take them out easily enough so the ships can get through. My bigger concern is disabling as many French in the town as possible so the British will not be massacred as they attempt to disembark.”

The abbess moves to a table set up near one of the high windows. “Here is a map of the town,” she says, and we join her.

“Here,” the abbess says, pointing at the map. “This is where I am told the soldiers are being garrisoned.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon plotting and planning, trying to come up with a strategy that has some hope of succeeding. All the while, I can feel time eating away at our chance of success, just as the waves eat away at the shore. D’Albret has likely reached Rennes by now. Hopefully, with no saboteurs to grant d’Albret access, the city will hold.

Chapter Forty

IT IS LATE AFTERNOON WHEN we rejoin the rest of our party. They have been busy during our absence and have the camp set up. It is abustle with activity: the rubbing down of saddles and tack, the sharpening of blades, and the checking of weapons. The air fair hums with the anticipation everyone is feeling, but there is none of the old acrimony that had been haunting us since we first left Rennes. Whether they have called a temporary truce or merely needed some common enemy to focus on, I do not know.

It is not until I dismount and hand my reins to Yannic that I see the marques. There, on that man-at-arm's brow—a man whose name I do not even know. Winnog too is marked, I see, as he walks by and gives me a jaunty wave. Alarm clangs through me like a bell.

My gaze searches among the camp for the greenlings. I find them just beyond the clearing, practicing their skills. Henri and Claude also bear marques. As does Jacques. More than a dozen men bear the marque, and cold understanding creeps along my skin.

Ismae was right. These men cannot all be traitors to our country. Nor does it make sense for Mortain to have marked them all at once if I am to be the one to kill them. It can only mean they are to die. Tonight, or more likely on the morrow, during our assault on Morlaix.

Even though I have eaten nothing all day, I fear I will be sick.

Beast.

Dreading what I will find, but desperate to know, I go in search of Beast. He has already called the captains to him and begun telling them what we have learned. I ignore the others, my eyes devouring the ugly face that has grown so dear to me. While it is not one whit prettier and is covered in dark stubble, it bears no marque.

It is all I can do not to whoop with joy, but the marques I see on de Brosse and Lorril sober me. While I knew that men would die in this battle, it is hard—so very hard—to know who will not be returning.

I join Beast and the others at the small map table that Yannic has set up. I glance once at d'Albret's former jailor and am relieved when I see that he too is unmarked.

"There are three points of attack," Beast is saying. "We will send two parties north, to take out the cannon on either side of the bay. Erwan, I will want at least

half the party to be your charbonnerie.

“The second defense we will hit is the massive chain they have strung across the narrow mouth of the bay. If we can cut that down, some of the smaller British ships will be able to sail directly into the town quay and disembark there.

“Last, the majority of our forces will strike here. Lazare and Graelon have developed a plan to immobilize most of the French troops.”

Lazare’s thin serious face breaks into a rare smile. “We will smoke them out,” he says.

It is a bold and desperate plan, and because of that it just might work. Under the cover of night, the charbonnerie will bolt the sleeping garrison in, then set fires at two of the windows and direct the smoke to fill the room. That will leave one window—the one with a twenty-foot drop outside the city walls—through which they can escape. Many broken bones will ensue, and not nearly enough deaths to make the men happy, but it is the fastest way to free the town of the troops’ presence so the British can land.

“Have your men catch some sleep,” Beast tells them. “We will move at midnight so we are in place well before dawn and can strike while the French are still unsuspecting.”

As the captains leave to give their men their orders, I move to stand beside Beast. “How do you do it?” I ask, my gaze on the departing men. “Send men to their deaths?”

Beast looks at me, surprised. “You know they will die?”

I nod without looking at him. “De Brosse and Lorril are marked. As are a dozen other men, including Winnog and Jacques.”

“They are not all traitors.”

“No,” I agree. “They are not. Which is why I ask you: How do you do it?”

He is silent, then, as he watches the men he will send to their deaths. “I have sworn to support the duchess with my life. I do not ask of anyone that which I am not also willing to do. I believe that this cause is worth fighting for.”

“And is it?” I stare at Jacques, who is laughing with Samson and Bruno, boasting of his hoped-for valor in tomorrow’s mission.

Beast is silent a long moment before he speaks. “That is one of the hardest things, and we will not know until later. Sometimes much later.”

We are both quiet awhile, lost in our own separate thoughts. Finally, I turn to him. “What is my role in tomorrow’s assault?”

At his blank look, I fold my arms and scowl at him. “You cannot think I will sit here quietly and wait with the other women?” But I see that is exactly what he had hoped I would do. So he will not suspect how much his concern touches me, I mock him. “You cannot tell a handmaiden of Death that it is too dangerous.”

He sighs and runs his hand over his head. "I suppose I cannot, although I would like to." He turns to me then, his piercing blue eyes studying me intently. "Could you see a marque on yourself, if there was one?"

"I do not know," I admit, his question filling me with curiosity. "But you can be sure of one thing. I will not die until d'Albret is defeated. "

The two parties headed for the north of the bay are the first to leave, for they have the farthest to go. Sir Lannion is leading one group, Sir Lorril another. There are as many charbonnerie in the parties as soldiers, for the plan is not only to take out the men guarding the cannon, but also to find a way to disable the cannon themselves. We talk briefly about using them against the French, but there is no way to do that without also injuring the townspeople, and that we are not willing to do.

I cannot take my eyes off the cheerful, gangly Winnog and the faint black marque that sits on his forehead. Against my better judgment, I search out Lazare, who has also been placed on the cannon detail.

At my approach, he eyes me suspiciously. "What?" he asks.

"I want you to keep a close watch on Winnog."

"Winnog? You are daft if you suspect him of any trickery or deceit."

"I suspect him of no such thing," I say sharply. "I tell you because he is marked for death."

Lazare's dark eyes widen in both fear and awe. "You can see such a thing?"

"Yes, that is one of the powers my god has given me."

Lazare's gaze drifts upward as if he would look upon his own forehead. I bite back a smile. "You bear no marque," I tell him. "I do not know if we can outsmart Death, but I am willing to try. Watch him carefully and keep him as safe as the mission allows."

Lazare gives me a fierce smile. "If there is anyone who can outsmart Death, it is the Dark Mother. I will watch out for Winnog. And thank you." Our eyes hold for a long moment, then he joins the main party, moving to stand near Winnog.

I cannot save them all, but the innocents, the ones who do not fully understand the duty they have signed up for, those I shall try to save.

My own party is next to leave. We are to travel west to where the river narrows just before reaching the town, where we will wrest control of the chain and lower it into the river so ships can get through. Sir de Brosse will lead our party, and while I hold no great love for him, it is an uncomfortable thing to see him marked for death and say nothing. In the end, I cannot stay silent. Just before we leave, I approach him. He lifts one side of his mouth in a lazy smile. "My lady?"

“I just want to warn you to be careful,” I say.

He lays his hand on his chest. “Have my lady’s feelings for me softened?”

I roll my eyes. “No. Just do not do something stupid and get yourself killed.”

He frowns in puzzlement. “I will try not to, my lady.”

I give a curt nod, then fall back to check my knives and Ismae’s rondelles and make certain the crossbow is secure upon its chain. Before I can join the others, Beast draws near. “Are you certain you will not stay here and wait?”

“I am certain. Besides, I must stick close to Jacques and the others. I do not want to be the one to tell his mother that she has lost her son.”

He nods his understanding, and even though he is not marked, my heart is in my throat, worried for him, for the danger that might find him while I am away from his side. His eyes have begun to burn with some eerie inner light so that they shine like twin blue flames.

He steps closer and places his hands on my arms. “We will meet again on the other side of this, for what is between us is not finished by half.”

“Does your god tell you this?”

He grins. “No—yours does.” Then he leans in and plants a quick, fierce kiss on my lips. A flash of heat and hunger and something so sweet I dare not name it, and then he is gone, striding off to lead the remainder of the men to town.

A quarter moon hangs in the sky, shedding just enough light that we can see where to put our feet but not so much as to expose us utterly, even once we step out of the shelter of the trees. We are most vulnerable while crossing the northbound road, but with the countryside occupied by French soldiers, most of the small folk keep to their beds with their doors and windows locked.

There are only eight of us, but still it feels like far too many. I have only ever fought alone or with Beast and Yannic at my side. I already miss the little jailor’s excellent aim and keen timing.

The night has leached all the color from our surroundings so that everything around us is cast in shades of silver and gray and black. The tall trees are but darker shadows and smudges against the sky. The greenlings blend in well with the others, and I am proud that they make no more noise than do de Brosse and his soldiers. Their nervousness and excitement hangs in a thick cloud around them.

We finally come to a stop on a hillock overlooking the bay. A small copse of trees sits atop it, like a crown. We tie our horses up here and I suggest Claude be set to guard them. He accepts the assignment grudgingly, but up here, out of harm’s way, he will be one less person I must watch after. Careful to stay hidden among the trees, we move to the edge of the hill, the hearty scrub grass

cushioning our footsteps. Looking down, we can see the small, square rock shelter built for the chain winch. Beyond it, the water of the bay is flat and still and silver, like a mirror. The thick heavy chain spans the width of it, and on the other side, the full forest descends all the way to the water line.

De Brosse motions two of his men forward, and they disappear down the hill to learn how many guard the winch and where they are posted. Behind us, one of the horses blows gently, and I hear Claude move to quiet him.

Although we do not wait more than a few minutes, it feels like hours until the scouts return. They speak quietly to de Brosse. There are at least six soldiers and three archers, possibly more inside. I glance at the marqued Jacques and de Brosse and wonder what Mortain would think if He knew I was planning to thwart His will.

We ignore the footpath and, instead, approach slightly from the south, using a deer track through the bracken.

Bruno and Samson are to stay back, as we will need their strong arms to free the chain. Jacques and I are to slip down and take out as many of the sentries as we can before being noticed. Once the alarm goes up, de Brosse and the other soldiers will leap into the fray and engage the soldiers directly.

Luckily, it is near the end of the Frenchmen's watch, and they are tired. Perhaps even a little complacent as they lean against the trees, talking quietly among themselves. I shut my ears to their voices. Hearing them talk of their wine or dicing or women will not make them any easier to kill. I lean into Jacques. "You take the one on the left, I'll take the two on the right."

He nods, his whole body atremble, and begins creeping toward his target. I pull a crossbow bolt from the frame and stick it in my belt for quick access, then draw my knife.

As silent as one of the shadows, I approach my target. He is listening intently to some story the other fellow is telling him. Closer and closer I creep. When the man throws his head back to laugh, I step silently forward, reach around with my knife, and slit his throat. The soul bursts from him nearly as quickly as the blood that hits the other man in a wide arcing spray. While the second man is still staring in stunned amazement at his dying friend, I slap the bolt in place, lift the crossbow, and fire.

The bolt takes him between the eyes, and he falls backwards. There is a scuffling sound behind me, and I turn to find Jacques and his archer clasped together in some sort of lethal dance. Retrieving my knife, I hurry forward. The archer's hands are around Jacques's neck, and the boy's eyes bulge in fear. Bette's and Guion's faces float before me. I brush the vision away, take a step

forward, and stab the archer in the back, then force the knife up as high as it will go to hurry his passing.

As his hands fall away from Jacques's neck and he slumps to the ground, his soul rises from his body like mist from a swamp. I ignore it and focus on Jacques, who is breathing hard and rubbing his neck. Our eyes meet over the dead man, and then Jacques turns and retches into the bushes.

To give him some privacy, I kneel down and clean my knife on the tabard of the Frenchman. Jacques may be embarrassed, but at least he is still alive.

There is a shout from the stone house and then the clang of metal as de Brosse and his men fall upon the guards. "Come," I tell Jacques. "We must—" My words are cut off by a cry of rage as a man—a fourth archer—emerges from the trees. He pauses long enough to unsling his bow from his shoulder, nock an arrow to the string, and aim directly at Jacques.

Luckily, he does not see me squatting in the shadows beside his dead friend. I shove to my feet and use the upward momentum to launch myself at Jacques's attacker.

I catch him completely unawares, the impact of my body knocking his bow from his fingers and his legs out from under him. As we hit the ground, I lever up, adjust my knife, sweep it across his throat, then roll out of the way of the mess that follows.

My pulse racing, I leap to my feet and peer into the shadows in case they should be hiding any other attackers. A long moment passes, then another, and no one else emerges. I turn to Jacques then, who is still on his knees, eyes wide, staring at the fallen archer.

The marque is gone from his brow. "Go." The fear still coursing through me makes my voice harsh. "Join Claude and the horses. The rest of us will be right behind you."

He does not question me but nods once and then goes to do what I ordered. When he is out of harm's way, I go to the winch house, where the clang of sword against sword is accompanied by the heavy, solid pounding of an ax as it chops.

When I reach the doorway, I see that all four guards lie dead, and Samson and Bruno have almost hacked the wooden winch from its mooring. It is not enough to simply lower the chain—we must ensure it cannot be raised again before the British get through.

I lean against the rough stones and catch my breath, keeping my gaze focused carefully on the shadows outside for any more of the French.

There is a great splintering as the winch finally gives way. Like a huge metal serpent, the giant chain slithers and writhes from the broken winch, each

enormous link clanging like an immense bell as it hits the stone floor. Then there is a faint rumble as the chain slithers across the rocky shore and sinks to the bottom of the bay.

We all stare after it for a moment, the silence ringing in our ears. “It is done,” de Brosse says. “Let’s return to town and see if they need our help.”

He pokes his head outside the winch house, then motions the rest of us to follow. Before he has taken two steps there is a hissing sound, followed by a thud, then de Brosse and the soldier behind him are flat on their backs with crossbow bolts rammed through their necks.

“Down,” I shout to the others as I flatten myself on the floor. I belly-crawl to the door and peer out, but see no one. “Samson, give me your cloak,” I order. Wordlessly, he pulls it from his shoulders and hands it to me. I wad it up, then toss it outside.

Before it lands there is another hiss of a crossbow bolt. “They are coming from across the river,” I tell the others. “And we are caught like sitting ducks.” We must find a way to shield ourselves long enough that we can reach the path behind the chain house. Once we do, we will be out of their direct line of sight, but until then we are ripe for the plucking.

I call to two of de Brosse’s men. “Can you fire your arrows to the far side of the river?”

One of them shrugs. “We can, but I don’t know how accurate they’ll be.”

“That’s all right, I am only looking to slow their arrows down somewhat. Bruno and Samson?” The two boys step forward, their faces serious, all traces of adventure or games erased by the death of their comrades. “I want you to get down on your bellies and crawl over to the fallen French, just at the far side of the chain house. When you reach them”—this next part is hard to say, for all that they are our enemies—“I want you to lift the bodies and use them as shields against the arrows. Bring them back here and then we can all move together behind their screen.”

It is a foul thing to do, to use a man’s body thusly, and I will not dishonor our own fallen in such a way.

Bruno’s eyes widen so that the white shows, and he makes the sign to ward off evil. I reach out and grab his thick, meaty arms and give him a shake. “I do not enjoy this one bit more than you, but I have five of us I wish to get out alive. Now, can you do it or must I ask someone else?”

When he finally nods, I relax my grip. “We can all say extra prayers for them later, if you’d like.” I gesture to the two soldiers to take position. When their crossbows are aimed at the far side, I motion to the other two boys to hit the dirt. As they do, de Brosse’s men begin firing their bolts to the far bank.

We all hold our breath as inch by painful inch Samson and Bruno make their way to the dead Frenchmen. Every moment brings the risk of an arrow strike, and I must keep reminding myself that neither of them was marked. It does not make the wait any easier.

At last they return with their grisly burden. The rest of us step out into the night and use our enemies to shield our flight to safety. De Brosse's remaining soldiers drag him and the other fallen with them as we go.

We leave the bodies at the crest of the hillock where Claude and Jacques wait with our horses. It does not matter that we've been spotted—the chain cannot be raised again, not until a new winch is built. But it is possible that the Frenchmen may head for town, and we do not want them to raise a hue and cry before Beast and the charbonnerie have completed their task. The element of surprise is one of the few things we have going for us.

Once we are all mounted, I tell the greenlings to head back to camp with our dead and order de Brosse's remaining soldiers to come with me. If they think it strange to take orders from a woman, they wisely keep it to themselves. We ride hard to reach Morlaix before word of our nighttime activity does.

Chapter Forty-One

THE TOWN IS QUIET, AND the city gates are still closed. There is no sign of increased sentries, nor is there any cry of warning. I rein back hard before we ride into sight of the watchmen. “You stay here and intercept any archers from the far bank who think to warn the city,” I tell the two remaining men-at-arms. “With luck, you at least injured a few with your blind shots.” Hoping they will heed my orders, I leave my horse with them and make my way to the abbey window that was to be left open for us.

The night is quiet, not a whisper of activity or hint of warning. I cannot help but worry that something has gone wrong, that their plans fell through or that they were caught before they could reach the barracks.

At last I see a dark smudge of smoke rising up in a column over the city, and my fists unclench. The column grows thicker and is followed by a faint orange glow. The fires are set. I close my eyes and imagine the thick, choking smoke moving across the sleeping French, filling their mouths and noses as they sleep, the soldiers coming away coughing and choking, struggling for breath. “Fire!” some of them will yell, waking the rest, and a mad, chaotic scramble will ensue as they all try to break free from the hall.

But only one window will be open. All the others blocked or filled with churning smoke so the French will have no choice but to hurl themselves out the one escape route, a long drop to the hard ground below, outside the protection of the city walls.

I draw near the abbey. The abbess of Saint Mer had promised there would be a window left open for us, and there is. I quickly crawl through it and find no one about, so I hurry through the empty corridors to the city beyond.

Outside, the streets seems almost deserted, with only a few pockets of fighting here and there. I stop long enough to pick up a handful of bolts from a fallen soldier. Feeling better thus armed, I continue on my way.

As I draw near the soldiers’ garrison, I hear the sounds of fighting. Hugging the wall, I creep forward. At first, I see no one, but as my eyes adjust to the darkened street, I see a knot of charbonnerie pinned behind an overturned wagon by three French archers.

Luckily, I have five bolts. But I will need to be quick and well hidden. I slip silently from the wall to kneel behind a water pump near the barracks building. I stick two bolts in my mouth, then load a third, take aim, and shoot. The man

gives a surprised cry as he is struck. His two companions look around, but they were so focused on the charbonnerie they did not see where the arrow came from. I quickly load the second bolt and fire it off.

The second archer is down, but before I can load the third bolt, the last remaining archer turns and fires in my direction. I hear a clang as the bolt strikes the metal handle of the pump. Now—while he is reloading—I take my shot.

It catches him in the temple. I wait for a second to be certain there are no more archers, then give an all-clear wave to the charbonnerie.

The closer I draw to the quay, the louder the sound of fighting becomes. The French must have realized that the purpose of our attack was to allow the British through, and they have chosen to make a last stand by the dock.

I have only two quarrels left but take comfort in the weight of the knives.

When I reach the end of the street, I must step over three fallen bodies. Indeed, I follow a trail of fallen French soldiers the rest of the way to the dock. I emerge from the alley and pause midstep. Beast stands alone, hacking and swinging at nearly a dozen men. His bravery—or stupidity—is breathtaking. He has no regard for his own safety as he cuts through his enemies. Indeed, that may be what gives him such advantage over the others, for none would guess the risks he is willing to take with his own life.

Shaking my head in reluctant admiration, I load the last of my bolts and let them fly, taking down two of his opponents.

Beast does not so much as check his stride. I pull one of the knives from my ankle and send it whipping through the night to land in the neck of one of the French soldiers. He stumbles, giving Beast just the opening he needs to finish the man off.

In the moment that follows, I see a flurry of movement out of the corner of my eye. It is the British! The first of the boats has arrived. The pilot has not even secured the rope around the piling before the British soldiers begin spilling onto the dock. After all, they have had two long weeks cooped up aboard their ships to stoke their anger.

As the fresh troops pour into the town, the remaining French soldiers—those who have not already leaped from the city walls—realize they are outnumbered and quickly surrender their arms.

D'Albret will soon have six thousand British troops riding down his back, and he will be caught between them and the soldiers stationed at Rennes. The duchess now has a decent chance at victory.

And we have bought ourselves some time.

Beast finds me back at camp, tending the wounded. He strides out of the night, filthy, bloody, and grinning. Unable to help myself, I smile back, for even though he was not marked, I have been filled with visions of his death. I draw away from the injured men so our greeting will not disturb them. “You did it,” I tell him, but my words are lost as he wraps his thick arms around me, picks me up, and swings me around. “We,” he corrects me. “We did it. Me, you, the charbonnerie, all of us.”

“Put me down,” I say, biting back my laughter.

He places me on the ground but does not remove his arms. Instead, he leans in and sets his mouth to mine. It is a lusty kiss, full of joy and triumph and victory. But after a moment, triumph gives way to something else. Something wondrous and fragile.

Beast’s hands slide up my waist, firm and solid at my back, a buttress that will not give way, no matter what comes.

One hand continues moving, reaching up to cup my face, and the feel of his rough, callused hands so gentle on my skin makes me want to weep. For all that I have kissed before, I have never felt anything like this. It is as if I have swallowed a tiny piece of the sun, its warmth and light reaching into every corner of my soul and chasing away the shadows.

I surrender to that kiss—surrender to the strength and the courage and the sheer goodness of the man.

A short while later, the rest of the men straggle in. I scan them nervously, looking for the thin, gangly figure of Winnog. Instead, I find Lazare. As our eyes meet, he gives a curt shake of his head. Winnog will not be returning, and Lazare’s face is haunted by the unasked-for responsibility I placed on his shoulders. It was unfair of me, for who are we to stop Death? Even I, one of His handmaidens, could only save one of the three in my group.

In spite of our victory, the camp is in somber spirits that night, for it did not come without a cost. In addition to Winnog and de Brosse, we lost Sir Lorril, six soldiers, and seven charbonnerie. De Brosse and Lorril will be returned to their families’ holdings for burial in their crypts. The six soldiers will be buried first thing in the morning, and now lie, carefully covered, sheltered by the trees.

However, it is Winnog’s death that affects us the most—the awkward, gangly youth was always cheerful, blind to any ill will, and quick to smile. But the charbonnerie do not bury their dead. In keeping with their customs, they make an offering of the bodies to the Dark Mother. They select a clearing far away from the trees, close to an ancient standing stone, and begin building a funeral pyre with as much care and precision as they build their charcoal pits. As if by

some silent agreement, one by one the soldiers and men-at-arms rise from their resting places to join the charbonnerie in honoring their dead. Erwan sets the torch to the wood, the fire crackling and hissing as it rushes through the dry kindling and branches.

Within moments, the entire pile is engulfed in flames of red and gold that lick at the bodies of the men. It is an especially hot fire. I do not know if this is some trick of the charbonnerie or simply due to the size of fire a funeral pyre needs. The heat is so intense that we must all step back or risk being roasted ourselves. Thick black smoke churns upward into the night sky, carrying the souls of the charbonnerie to the Dark Mother.

When at last nothing is left of the fire but smoldering ash and embers, we return to the camp. The men do not drift back into their separate groups but instead stay together, talking in quiet voices. Death has brought the fellowship that life could not. I cannot help but think Winnog would be pleased with this outcome. Even the most arrogant of them, Sir Gaultier, is listening attentively to something Erwan is saying. It is as Beast promised them. Or perhaps it was their Dark Mother's promise—out of the ashes of despair, they have found forgiveness and acceptance.

If they can, perhaps so can I.

I find Beast standing apart from the others, watching the smoldering embers from the pyre. He is still filthy, covered in dirt and soot and blood, and his eyes are heavy and red. I cringe now at how I asked him how he could bear ordering men to their deaths, for clearly it weighs heavily on him.

At the sound of my approach, he looks up.

"Where do we go next?" I ask, pretending we have not just recently shared a kiss.

"Guingamp. A French garrison holds the town, and on the heels of this victory, I think we can fan an uprising to take back the city. But we will rest a day or two so we may finish burying our dead. It will also allow more time for the rumors of our victory here to reach the town."

"Would you be willing to ride out with me tomorrow?" I take a deep breath and clasp my hands together to hide their trembling. It has taken me this long to be certain that this final secret of mine is one he can accept unconditionally. "I have one last thing I must share with you. But this is one you must see."

Chapter Forty-Two

AS MUCH AS I LOOK forward to putting aside the last of the secrets between Beast and me, I am also looking forward to seeing my sisters. It has been nearly a year, and I miss them as much as any mother misses her babe, for they are the only bright spots in our family.

Near midday, we stop at a tavern to rest the horses and find a meal. It is a quiet enough place, in a sleepy hamlet of a village, and I am fairly certain no one will recognize me. Even so, I am careful to choose a table near the back.

It is not until we are halfway through our meal that other patrons arrive. Two farmers, by the look of them. I ignore them until their talk turns to recent activity in the area.

“. . . troop of Lord d’Albret’s men rode through here not five days ago . . .”

At these words, I feel as if the ground beneath my feet gives way. I stand up and stride over to their table. “What did you say?” I demand.

The man stares at me as if I am mad. “Around fifty of Lord d’Albret’s men came galloping through here about five days ago. Headed to his holding, they were. At Tonquédec.”

I turn and head for the door. *No, no, no* beats deep in my breast. Not Charlotte. Not Louise.

Beast leaps up from the table and follows me. “What? What is wrong?”

I barely spare him a glance as I take my cloak from the hook and draw it around my shoulders. “D’Albret and his men passed through here five days ago.”

He frowns. “For what reason? Surely he needs all his men at Rennes?”

I shake my head. “I told you it is a foolish commander who puts all his hope in a single plan.” I take a deep breath and turn to meet his eyes. “Tonquédec is where we grew up, but only my two younger sisters are in residence there now.”

“Does he fear the duchess will try to ransom them?”

I laugh, a dry brittle sound that hurts my ears. “No. *He* plans to ransom them. To me.”

I try to hold on to hope for the entire ride to Tonquédec, but the cruelties d’Albret might visit upon the two girls is limited only by my imagination. And my knowledge of him.

I put my horse to a full gallop, not caring if the others cannot keep up. Soon Yannic and the men-at-arms fall behind, but Beast still rides alongside me. The comfort of his presence is all that keeps me from splintering into a hundred broken pieces.

I spare a thought for how he must feel, approaching the place where his sister died, but that brings a fresh wave of despair, so I shove it aside. I pray—beg—Mortain to keep them safe. To let me be wrong. To let him only have sent to Tonquédec for more troops.

But I know in my heart it is a false hope.

When we reach the holding, the long winding road leading up to the castle walls is empty of any traffic. No hunting parties, no departing troops. There are no extra guards posted along the battlements, as there would be if d'Albret were still in residence.

The guard at the gate looks surprised to see me, but lets us pass. As we ride into the empty courtyard, the seneschal comes rushing out, eager to greet me. He takes my horse's rein. "Lady Sybella!"

I dismount, not bothering to wait for a groom. "My sisters, Charlotte and Louise. I must see them."

A look of confusion crosses the seneschal's face. "But they are gone, my lady. They have left for Nantes."

Chapter Forty-Three

THEY ARE GONE.

The truth of that hits my body before my mind can come to terms with it, and I double over. A faint trembling spreads throughout my limbs, making my hands shake and my knees wobble.

They are gone.

It feels as if some monster has just pried my rib cage open and scooped the very heart from my chest, leaving it empty and hollow.

“Demoiselle?” The voice seems to come from far away, and I can barely hear it as the jittery, liquid silver pain courses through me, roaring in my ears as it looks for a way out.

I must get them back.

Without thinking further than that, I turn toward the horses. A large hand clamps down on my arm, restraining me.

I whirl around, reaching for my knife. “Let go.”

Beast ignores my knife and reels me closer, like a fish he has caught, until I am up against his armored chest. “They are many days gone,” he says softly. “We cannot catch up to them on the open road.”

Hiding the knife in the folds of my gown, I glance up at the seneschal. “How long ago did my lord father leave with my sisters?”

“Three days ago, my lady. Only it wasn’t your lord father—it was the young master Julian.”

This second shock sends me reeling, I even stumble back a step or two. “Julian?”

“Aye, my lady. He and fourscore of your father’s men.”

A cold dark seed of panic begins in my gut. My father could have taken my sisters for any number of reasons, but Julian? There is only one reason he would do so, and that is to bait a trap for me. He more than anyone knows of the love I bear Charlotte and Louise.

Or could he simply have collected them on our father’s orders? As if in answer to my question, the seneschal says, “The young master asked me to give you something should you show up here.”

I take a step toward the man. “What? Where is it?”

He sends a page to fetch the box from his office, and I wait impatiently, pacing back and forth. I start to tell the groom to saddle fresh horses, but Beast

stops me. “No,” he says, his voice low. “We cannot leave this minute. You need rest and time to compose yourself. You cannot clatter across the countryside like a poorly cocked arrow.”

And though Beast has but said what I know deep inside to be true, I lash out at him. “How? How can I rest while they are in danger?” The sympathy in his eyes is like another blow, for of course he knows of this misery firsthand. It is precisely what he felt when Alyse went off to marry d’Albret.

And now he will have to endure it a second time.

I press the heels of my palms against my eyes, willing myself to cry, willing the nearly overwhelming pain to find a way out.

But it does not.

How can I tell him now? The last of the secrets between us, the one that I had hoped to lay before him like a gift. But no longer. Now I only have more despair to hand him.

Ignoring my attempt to put space between us, Beast draws close again. “They are not in danger while they are traveling, not with such a large escort,” he says. “Nor by my reckoning are they in any true danger—they are merely being used as a means to compel you to your father’s side. We have nearly foundered our horses trying to get here, and you yourself are swaying on your feet. Besides, we will need some sort of plan.”

I am saved from arguing with him by the seneschal’s return. He carries a small wooden casket, carved of lustrous ebony wood and inlaid with ivory. He hands it to me with a little bow, and I find I am terrified of opening it. I take a deep breath, then lift the lid.

Two locks of hair sit upon the red velvet lining. One is the golden brown of my sister Louise’s hair and the other the much darker color of Charlotte’s. They are braided together with a third lock—the shiny black of Julian’s own hair.

I snap the lid closed and press the box to my stomach, as if to hide it, but the image is burned into my vision. It is a clear echo of our own two locks of hair that he carries in the hilt of his sword, a sign of his devotion to me. I think I will be sick.

“Is everything all right?” the seneschal asks in a worried voice.

It is Beast who answers. “We have ridden hard to reach here and my lady is nigh unto exhausted. That is all. Fetch some wine,” he orders. “And a waiting woman.”

I want to tell him I do not need such coddling, but I can barely breathe, let alone speak. Strong hands press me down so that I am sitting on a low wall. Beast leans over and whispers in my ear, “We have an audience.”

His warning is like a pail of frigid water in my face. Of course, he is right. And even now I have no idea how many are blindly loyal to d'Albret or simply follow him out of fear.

As I straighten, I glance at the seneschal. Is that only concern over my well-being I see in his eyes? Or is there a trace of slyness as well? And the others. I glance around the courtyard at the men-at-arms. There are nearly a dozen of them, and they all appear relaxed enough. If they have been given any orders concerning me, the instructions do not seem to include restraining me on sight.

Avoiding Beast's eyes, I compose my face and stand up. "I am overwhelmed by the dearness of the gift my brother has left me," I tell the seneschal. "And tired besides. I would like to retire to my room, if I may. Oh, and our riders follow behind us. When they arrive, see that they and their horses are cared for."

"But of course, my lady." Just then, a serving woman bearing a tray comes into the courtyard, and I recognize Heloise. She greets me joyfully as she hands me a goblet. I take a sip and act as if it refreshes me. "See to the Baron de Waroch's comfort, if you please. We would both like to rest ourselves after our travels."

At the very least, I need to wash the taint of my brother's message from me, so that I am clean when I set out after my sisters.

For all the staff's faults and questionable loyalties, they are well trained, and the holding is in excellent order. My own room is as if I had never left it. "Put the baron in the south guest chamber," I instruct Heloise. It is one of the finest and will confer a certain amount of prestige upon him, and it is close by mine—a mere two doors away.

Once I'm settled in my chambers, Heloise directs two young maids to prepare a bath before the fire, then comes to help me undress. "How did you find my brother, Heloise? Was he in good spirits? I know my lord father is much distracted of late."

"Oh yes, my lady. Lord Julian was in gay spirits and overjoyed to see his sisters once more. Indeed, his pleasure at their reunion reminded me of how much pleasure he always takes in your company."

Her words are spoken innocently enough, but they cause my stomach to shrivel into a tiny knot. "And Louise? How is her health of late?"

There is a tiny pause, one that sets alarms clanging in my breast. "She has not grown any stronger, my lady, that is for certain. But hopefully, as spring comes, her health will return."

I turn to look at her so I may see the truth of her answer in her face. "Was she well enough to make the trip?" As I stare into her brown eyes, I can see a

shadow of doubt lurking there.

“Of a certainty, Master Julian thought so. I made sure they placed extra blankets and furs around her and instructed him to be certain she had warm bricks at every opportunity. Lady Charlotte promised to look after her as well.”

And she would, of that I had no doubt, but she was only ten years old and a mere child herself.

After I have bathed and dressed, I send my attendants from the room, claiming I need rest. Instead of resting, however, I begin pacing in front of the fire, trying to determine the best way to free my sisters. Will I have any allies on the inside? If Julian is only acting on my father’s wishes, I could most likely coax him into giving me aid, but I fear that he may well have acted on his own, for how else to explain the locks of hair?

And even once I have them free—assuming I do not get us all killed in the process—where will I take them? Where will they be safe?

The convent. The answer comes to me like a whisper on a breeze.

But *will* they be safe there? What of the abbess? I think of Charlotte and Louise, so different from me, and then I think of all the younger girls at the convent and know they will be safe enough. Even I was safe for a few short years.

It is only the most rudimentary beginnings of a plan, but it is something.

I glance out the window, heartened to see that the sun has dropped low in the sky. The sooner night comes, the sooner I can depart. Even so, as the shadows lengthen in my room, old memories awaken. Dark memories. Having no wish to be alone with them, I decide to go in search of Beast. It is time for him to hear the last of the secrets between us. Perhaps it will make him as eager to be off as I.

I rap on his door, then let myself in. Beast is just pulling a clean doublet over his head and is scandalized. “Sybella! You cannot be in here. Your servants—”

“Shhh,” I tell him. “You forget that these are d’Albret servants, much accustomed to all manner of indiscretion and wickedness. They would be more surprised if I did not visit your room.”

He blinks, not sure what to say to that, and I see drops of water still cling to his lashes. He is quiet for a moment, then ask, “With no one else to hear, will you tell me the significance of the locks of hair?”

Just thinking of them is like a fist to my belly. “It is a message. From my brother Julian.” My throat closes around the things I want to tell him. Instead, I say, “He carries a lock of my hair entwined with his in the hilt of his sword. It is

a message . . .” And here I falter, for I cannot bring myself to say out loud what I fear it means.

But Beast is no fool, and when his large hands clench into fists, I know he has puzzled out the meaning. Now. I must tell him now before my courage fails me yet again.

“There is something you must know. My sister Louise—she is Alyse’s daughter.”

Chapter Forty-Four

BEAST STARES MUTELY AT ME, as if he has not heard a word I said. Color begins to rise in his face. “What did you say?” he whispers, his gaze fastening to mine like a starving man to a bone.

“Louise is your sister’s child.”

Beast stares at me a moment longer, his thoughts scudding across his face like storm clouds. Hope, as he realizes some small piece of Alyse still exists, then dismay—nay, anguish—as he realizes that she, too, has been taken from him. By yet another devil-spawned d’Albret. “Why did you not tell me sooner?”

“I had to be certain that you could accept that part of her was d’Albret. Once it was clear you did not hold that against me, I decided it was safe to tell you. I think I had some nascent thought about spiriting them away to safety. Louise, at least. To your own holding, perhaps? But once again, I am too late.” Of a surety, my love is as good as a death sentence.

“You think he means to kill them straightaway?”

“There are other ways to hurt her,” I say softly.

His head jerks around, his face gone white. “Like they hurt you.” It is not a question but a moment of realization. His expression grows thunderous, and his eyes take on that feral light. A low rumble begins deep in his chest, but he chokes it back. Instead, he turns and slams his fist into the casement at the window, causing the leaded glass to rattle.

I wait, holding my breath, uncertain which part of him has control.

When he glances back at me, the fierce light has gone from his eyes, but his face looks as if it were set in gray stone. “I will kill them. All of them.”

“I do not think the girls are in any true danger, not yet.”

Beast’s brows shoot up and he growls his disbelief. I take a deep breath then, for this is not a secret I ever planned to share with him. “Julian—Julian loves me, in his own twisted way. I think he simply sees them as a way to get my attention. Besides, what lies between my brother and me is as much my fault as it is his.”

I move over to the window to stare out into the courtyard. Dusk is falling, and the castle retainers are making ready for the coming night. “It was my brother Pierre’s fault, as most things often were. When I was but eleven years old he began scratching on my bedroom door, wanting to prove he was a man full grown. At first I thought it was ghosts, but then I realized it was Pierre, and his

pinching, probing fingers and hungry mouth frightened me far more than any ghosts.

“The first night, I hid under my covers, wondering how I could keep him away from me. Then I did what I have always done to protect myself. I gave Fortune’s wheel a mighty spin and decided to use his own move against him. The next night when he came scratching at my door—more loudly and insistent—it was Julian who called out, ‘What do you want?’

“Of course, we nearly ruined the effect by bursting into a fit of giggles, but we pressed the pillows against our mouths to stifle them.

“You have to understand, Julian was my dearest friend as well as my brother. My first memory is of skirts—coarse woolen or linsey cloth skirts as I toddled in bare feet on the stone kitchen floor. But my second memory is of Julian. Of his small, four-year-old hand taking hold of mine and pulling me into the family proper. Of his kind eyes and a face that always held a smile for me. Of hours spent hiding and playing our secret games, games that no one else understood, or cared to. It was Julian who risked much to hide me from the harm and cruelty of this household, and has since we were old enough to walk.

“So he was my friend first, before all else. We had always been stronger together; I thought this would be no exception.

“Would that I could swim back through time or somehow pour the sand through the hourglass backwards. To live one brief moment differently, make a different choice, set my life on a different path. Surely if gods or saints truly existed, they would have given me some warning, some inkling that my actions would send my life down a road I had no wish to take.

“Such was the moment when I invited Julian into my room, for I did not reckon on Julian’s own ripening body, or that mine would affect him so. He had always had my best interests at heart, and I never imagined this would be any different.”

Beast is still looking out the window, which makes it easier to continue. “But immediately it went wrong—horribly, deeply wrong. Inside, I felt as if some rot had taken hold of my soul. And yet, it made Julian so happy, and it gave him the courage to face down Pierre in all the challenges d’Albret set them. And I had not realized how beholden I felt to him for all the times he had saved me. So while I did not say yes, neither did I tell him no.

“Julian’s fingers were not poking or prodding, but gentle, teasing—awakening sensations that I had never experienced before. And I had not imagined that I could ever hold such power over a man—I, who had been at their mercy since I was born.

“But I had not foreseen that our relationship would take a twisted turn and come close to erasing all the good that once lay between us.”

I glance up at Beast’s face, which is contorted with—horror? Despair? I cannot guess what he is thinking or feeling. He looks down at his enormous, scarred hands. “How you must hate us all,” he says.

I stare at him, trying to understand what game he is playing. “But it was *my* fault,” I whisper. “*My* weakness and my—”

His head snaps up. “Your need to be loved? Protected? And for that, your brother demanded such a tithe? That is not a price anyone should have to pay for such things. And so I say again, it is a wonder you do not hate us all on sight.”

Marveling at how easily he has absolved me, I step forward and take his big hands into my own. “Not you, for you are as different from them as day is from night.”

Something in my words has struck him as forcefully as his words did me, and I can see that he wants to kiss me. But he does not, and I—I cannot bring myself to kiss him, not while the confession of such wantonness and wickedness still clings to my lips. The moment draws out into a palpable awkwardness, something that has never existed between us.

Unable to bear it, I turn back to the room and begin straightening the bed curtains. “We leave at first light?”

“Yes,” Beast says. “Do you think they are being brought to d’Albret’s encampment in front of Rennes? Or to Nantes for safekeeping until he returns?”

“I suspect Nantes, for even d’Albret does not want the inconvenience of girl children on his battlefield.”

“Very well. We leave for Nantes at daybreak.”

Leaving Beast to his window, I pace the small chamber, forming a mental list of all the preparations we will need to make before we go. There are not many. Provisions and fresh horses. I will not even have to alert the holding that we are leaving; we can simply be gone when they arise in the morning.

“Is Alyse buried here?” Beast asks, still staring out the window.

My skin pulls tight across my bones. “Yes.”

He turns from the window, his eyes bleak. “I would like to see her.”

I can think of a thousand places I would rather go, for the idea of visiting that place fair sets a wild clang of alarm bells ringing inside me, but I cannot refuse him this chance to visit his sister’s final resting place. “Wait here,” I tell him. “I must fetch the key.”

We step out of the castle into the raw spring evening, both of us quiet and lost in our own thoughts as we cross the inner courtyard and then go through the gate to

the outbuildings beyond. Thick gray clouds scuttle across the sky, and I pray they will release their rain tonight rather than tomorrow, as a storm will greatly hamper our progress.

The closer we draw to the castle's cemetery, the more my muscles twitch and spasm, desperate to avoid this place. My knees tremble with the effort to keep walking and not turn and run.

I lift the latch on the old rusty gate and push it open, its rarely used hinges squeaking in protest. My heart begins pounding and my breath comes faster, as if I have just run some great race. Beast looks at me in question. "There," I say, pointing to the large mausoleum set near the back.

It is a grim and frightening place, not meant to bring comfort but to invoke all the demons of hell and damnation; that is what d'Albret is certain his wives deserve for having failed to please him in some way.

The building is made of gray marble, with devils and grotesques decorating its walls. The lintel over the doorway is a parade of cavorting gargoyles formed in darker stone.

"This looks like hell itself," Beast mutters.

"It is meant to." Pressure builds behind my brow as I lean down to fit the key to the rusty lock. I am filled with a violent urge to run away. I clamp down hard on my terror and turn the key. The lock falls open. I set my teeth, lift the latch, and put my shoulder to the door.

It swings open with ease. And then the ghosts are there, cold and lifeless, swirling about me—their whispering voices are no longer coherent, but I know their accusations by heart. There is his first wife, Jeanne, the one who thought to flee to her brother for sanctuary and instead brought death to them all. Next was Françoise, mother of Julian, Pierre, and Gabriel, who died while out riding alone with d'Albret. A fall from her horse broke her neck, some say, but few believe it.

My own mother, Iselle, whose only crime was that she bore him two daughters in a row. The first child was lucky, as she was stillborn. Then the next wife, Jehanne, who dared to take a lover, and then Blanche, whose belly grew great with child—only it was no babe, in the end, but a tumor. Once she was unable to bear children, d'Albret had no further use for her. And after that, Alyse.

One of the ghosts ignores me and floats toward Beast, circling him.

"What is that?" Beast asks as a shiver racks his great body.

"Alyse," I tell him. "It is your sister's ghost. Here." I point to a long white marble coffin. "This is her tomb."

Beast reaches out for my hand. In spite of his size, in spite of all the courage I know he possesses, he looks achingly vulnerable.

I take his offered hand; I cannot do otherwise.

I know I should look away, let him grieve in private, but I cannot. The sweet girl that I knew only briefly is the key to this gentle beast who has captured my heart. Besides, to look away smacks of cowardice, for I must bear witness to the misery my family has wrought.

When he is next to the coffin, he lets go of my hand, bows his great head, and closes his eyes, a spasm of grief distorting his face, his hands clenching into fists. I can feel the surge of his rage pound through his veins. He drops to his knees, and, unable to help myself, I go to him, but tentatively, afraid that after what my family has done to his, he will reject me.

But he does not. He grasps my hand in his and pulls me close until his head rests against my stomach. We stay like that a long time. How long, I do not know. But long enough for his heart to quiet and settle into a slow, steady rhythm, like a funeral drum. When he finally pulls away, I see he has found some measure of peace. But even so, the panic thrumming through my veins does not diminish.

At last he gets to his feet and brushes the dirt from his knees. Then he stops, his gaze falling on the tiny tomb to the right of Alyse's. He turns to me with a stricken look. "Did Alyse have a second babe?"

Slowly, with every muscle in my body screaming at me to stop, I force myself to turn my own gaze to the small tomb. The beating of my heart grows so fast I fear it will burst out of my chest. Fiercely locked-away memories come rushing up from deep inside. Like water through a dam that has broken, they roar in my ears as I read the name engraved on the stone. "No," I say with a voice I hardly recognize as my own. "That babe is mine."

Chapter Forty-Five

I REMEMBER THE SCREAMING . . .

It was as if someone opened her mouth and all the anguish of hell came pouring out. It wasn't until my father clouted me across the face—hard—that the sound stopped and I realized it was me.

And blood. I remember the blood. It was as if the bed had been dipped in a wide swath of dark crimson.

That has been all that I could remember of that day. But now, it all comes rushing back, a great black tide of despair and heartbreak.

My baby. Child of my womb. I have few memories of her, but they too have been locked behind this door.

“She stopped crying the moment they placed her in my arms. I remember her tiny hands, the even tinier fingernails, as she clutched my thumb in a surprisingly strong grip.” Her pink rosebud lips rooted around, eager to suckle and draw the warmth of mother’s milk into her tiny body.

We had but a hand span of moments together, my babe and I.

“I do not know how—from some unearthly power?—d’Albret heard her birthing cry and made his way to my chamber door. I looked up at his glowering form and bristling black beard and knew that if he let me keep this babe, I would do anything he asked of me. But even as I opened my mouth to tell him that, to give him my complete and unconditional surrender, he strode forward and grabbed the babe from my breast.

“She was so small, he could fit her head in one hand and it terrified me how carelessly he held her, but I said nothing for fear of antagonizing him. He carried her to the window, where he examined her small, dainty features in the light. I held my breath, hoping he was as bewitched by her perfect rosebud lips, her tiny little nose, and her dark blue eyes as I was.

“He lifted his eyes from the babe and turned them on me. ‘I had hoped the whelp was Julian’s.’

“In that moment, I saw what he meant to do. I struggled to get out of bed. ‘Stop him!’ I cried, but of course, none of the servants would dare cross him.” I look up into Beast’s stricken face. “Only Alyse. She was the only one who moved to save my baby. She threw herself at him, trying to grab the baby from his hands, but he struck her, knocking her to the ground, where she hit her head

on the leg of the heavy wooden chair. I did not know until days later that she had died from the blow.

“Then he put his thick fingers around my baby’s frail neck and broke it. When he was done, he tossed the baby to the floor, and left the room.”

That was when the screaming started. And the blood, although I did not learn until later that it was my own birthing blood.

“After that, I remember very little. Strong, gentle hands pushing me back upon the bed. A sweet, bitter syrup being spooned down my throat. And then darkness. Blessed, blessed darkness. With not a drop of crimson in sight.

“I learned afterward that my father rode away two days later. That is what most likely saved my life, for old Nonne would never have taken the risks she did if my father were nearby. But he left me to the indifferent care of Madame Dinan, and she was not concerned that I would not rouse myself from my bed, nor eat a bite. But old Nonne was. She clucked and badgered, poked and scolded, trying so hard to coax me back to the land of the living that I thought I would go mad with it.”

Mayhap I did.

“Was it madness that possessed me to slip into the stable one night, take a thick, stout rope from a hook, and knot it firmly around my neck? Was it madness that caused me to jump from the hayloft, hoping to end my life?

“I say it was courage. I said it then and I say it now. I had found the courage to rid the world of at least one of the dark, twisted d’Albrets, for if I was my father’s daughter, then I was every bit the abomination he was, and I deserved death just as much as he did. If I could not kill him, I could at least rid the world of my own tainted presence.

“But it was not a long enough fall to break my neck, and as I lay dangling, wondering how long it would take me to die, old Nonne found me and cut me down.

“‘Go away,’ I told her. She could not stop me. I knew where there was more rope and I would devise a longer drop on my next attempt. There was nothing she could do to stop me, or so I thought. Until she spoke.

“‘He is not your father.’ Her words caused everything inside me to grow still, and for the first time in many days, a small bit of the despair lifted.

“She told me of my birth then, how I was my mother’s last chance to bear a son. Her first child—a daughter—was stillborn. But my mother outsmarted d’Albret, for while giving birth to me, she left with Death, her lover.

“I tried to follow them, and I came from the womb cold and blue, the birth cord wrapped twice around my neck, but Death rejected me. So old Nonne

rubbed my limbs and blew into my mouth, trying to force some spark of life back into my cold, limp body. It eventually worked.”

“Is she the one who took you to the convent of Saint Mortain?” Beast asks. Somehow I am in his arms, standing with my back against his chest.

“Yes,” I say. “That is when I was sent to the convent. I was wild at first; I do not blame the nuns for being exasperated. But eventually, I grew calmer and came to believe that I had found sanctuary there. That I would have a purpose, a place where my dark talents could be put to good use. And they were, at first. I killed several traitors before they could betray us to the French. But then . . .” Here my voice falters, for the truth is, I still cannot believe it happened. “The abbess sent me back into d’Albret’s household. She said his aid—or lack thereof—had the power to turn the tides of the war, and I needed to be in place there to keep them apprised of d’Albret’s intentions.”

Beast says nothing, but his arms tighten around me, as if he would keep me safe even across the strands of time. “I argued with her. I fought. I begged and pleaded, but her mind and her heart were set. And then she dangled the one lure in front of me that she knew I would grasp for: she was certain Mortain would marquee the count so that I could kill him. She even claimed Sister Vereda had Seen it. That is why I went, but it turned out that it was but another lie she told me.”

“Who was the babe’s father?” Beast asks.

“Josse, the blacksmith’s boy. Alyse tried to help us run away. She helped us plan and prepare, even thought up the excuses she would give when I did not show up for days. But d’Albret found out anyway.” I did not love Josse, but loved the freedom he offered me.

It was Julian who betrayed us to d’Albret.

“They rode Josse down like a dog on the road, then pierced him with a lance. They dragged me back tied in ropes because I fought them so.”

I can feel Beast’s anger moving through his limbs, but he says nothing. I focus on the fluttering ghosts who have drawn near as I talked. There is Alyse, who gave me Louise and laughter. And Françoise, who gave me Julian, my first friend, and a true brother before he became my enemy. My own mother, who gave me life, and Jeanne, whose story, I now realize, was no cautionary tale, but one of courage—the courage to face death rather than the horrors life held for her.

For all the atrocities d’Albret has committed—and there have been many—it is these innocents he swore to love and protect that have been betrayed most grievously. These are the ones that deserve to be avenged.

Any doubts that I held about Beast being strong enough to bear all the horrors of my past are gone. The last of my secrets has been spilled, and still he holds me in his arms as if he will never let me go.

Something wakes me. At first I think it is the silvery moonlight streaming in the window and falling across the bed. And then I hear a faint sound, like barren winter branches rustling in the wind. Although I do not hear my name precisely, I know that the sound is calling me, beckoning me closer, and I am afraid. Afraid it is the ghosts of d'Albret's dead wives, calling me to account.

But the sound comes again, and I know I must go. Quietly, I lift the covers, swing my feet onto the floor, and rise from the bed.

The sound comes a third time, and it is as if there is a string tied to my heart that pulls me toward it. I step into my shoes, throw my cloak around my shoulders, and slip from the room.

It is the dead of night and all is quiet. For the first time that I can remember, I do not feel afraid in my father's house. Whether it is because of Beast, who sleeps nearby, or because of the otherworldly voice beckoning me, I do not know. Perhaps I simply have nothing more to lose.

The castle corridors are empty, as is the great hall. There are a few sentries posted at the door, but since I am born of darkness, the shadows are my friend, and I use them to hide my passing.

Outside, the night has turned bitterly cold. Mortain's freeze, the farmers call it, an unexpected cold snap that threatens the emerging spring crops.

And that's when I know who is calling me. I pull my cloak closer and hasten my steps, not surprised when the rustling leads me to the cemetery.

The waning moon casts the graveyard in pale silver light, but I am drawn to the darkest corner where the shadows are the deepest. As I approach, a tall, dark figure emerges. He is dressed all in black and smells of the earth in early spring, when the fields have just been tilled. With a jolt that pierces my heart, I recognize my true father. Every doubt I have had that He existed, every fear that I have possessed that I am tainted by d'Albret's dark blood, falls away from me in that moment. Like a lamb in a field that trots unerringly to its own mother, I know that I am His. At first, the wave of gratitude and humility this brings makes me want to fall on my knees before Him and bow my head. But as I look upon Him, the years of anguish and terror unfurl inside me, and a great whip of anger lashes out. "Now? You come to me now? Where were You all those times when I was small and terrified and truly needed You? Where were You when d'Albret cut down the innocent time and time again?"

Then, just as suddenly as it came, the anger is gone. “And why did You abandon me? When You came for my mother, why did You not take me with You?” The last question comes out in a whisper.

“It was your own mother’s wish, that you live.” When He speaks, His voice is like a cold wind from the north, bringing snow and frost. “She prayed not only to be delivered from her husband but that other women be spared her fate. That prayer brought Me to her so that I was there when you were born, to see you safely into this world as well as to carry your mother away, as I had promised.”

“So You did not reject me?”

His voice, like the rustle of dying leaves, fills my head. “Never.”

“But I have sinned against You and acted on my will alone, rather than Yours. Do I not deserve Your retribution?”

“No, for you are My daughter and I would no more punish you for plucking flowers from My garden than I would for your drawing breath. Besides, the men you killed had earned their deaths. If they had not, the knife would have missed, the quarrel gone wide, or the cup laced with poison remained untouched.”

“Are the marques not meant for us to act upon?”

I realize I do not so much as hear Him speak as feel Him inside my mind, as if He is unfurling some great tapestry before me, filling me with understanding.

As a person’s death draws near, his soul ripens and readies itself for plucking. That ripening can be seen by some. As souls ripen, they begin to loosen from their bodies, much as fruit makes ready to leave the branch. But even the same fruits on the same tree fall at different times—occasionally defying all odds and clinging throughout the entire winter.

And just like one who toils in the orchards, He does not control everything. Not the wind, nor the rain, nor the sun. And just as those elements shape the fruit on the tree, so do many factors shape a man’s life, and therefore his death.

Then He reaches out and lays His cold hand on my head, and His grace and understanding fill me, burning away all vestiges of d’Albret’s evil darkness weighing on my soul until the only darkness that remains is that of beauty. The darkness of mystery, and questions, and the endless night sky, and the deep caverns of the earth. I know then that what Beast said was true: I am a survivor, and the taint of the d’Albrets was but a disguise I wore so that I could pass among them. It is no more a true part of me than the cloak on my back or the jewels I wear. And just as love has two sides, so too does Death. While Ismae will serve as His mercy, I will not, for that is not how He fashioned me.

Every death I have witnessed, every horror I have endured, has forged me to be who I am—Death’s justice. If I had not experienced these things firsthand, then the desire to protect the innocent would not burn so brightly within me.

There in the darkness, shielded by my father's grace, I bow my head and weep. I weep for all that I have lost, but also for what I have found, for there are tears of joy mixed in with those of sorrow. I let the light of His great love fill me, burning away all the tendrils and traces of d'Albret's darkness, until I am clean, and whole, and new.

Beast finds me just before daybreak. Asking no questions, he helps me to my feet. The small circle of frost on the ground is all that remains of Mortain's presence.

No. That is not true. For I am utterly transformed by His presence. All the fear and doubt and shame has been stripped away, like dead leaves in a winter storm. Only the clean, strong branches remain.

I know now why d'Albret bore no marque, and I also know why he has not yet died. Even better, I now possess something I never had before: faith. Faith in myself, faith in Mortain. But most of all, faith in love. Hate cannot be fought with hate. Evil cannot be conquered by darkness. Only love has the power to conquer them both.

With the strength of that love flowing strong within me, we make ready to go rescue my sisters.

Chapter Forty-Six

WE RIDE HARD FOR NANTES, stopping only when it is so dark we cannot see the road in front of us, then start again as soon as there is light enough to continue. Beast brings Yannic and Lazare and two of his men-at-arms. There is little time for talking, and we collapse bone tired into our bedrolls each night and fall into a dreamless sleep.

When we draw near Rennes, Beast dispatches the two men-at-arms with messages for Duval and the duchess. As we turn and head south, I wonder if this was my destiny all along, to face d'Albret with Beast at my side, for surely it will take the power of our two gods to bring him down. Or—I glance at the silent Lazare, whose rouncey struggles to keep up with our stronger horses—two gods and the Dark Mother Herself.

By the time we draw near Nantes, we have a plan firmly in place. The desire to ride off straightaway and storm through the gates of the city to the palace is nearly overwhelming. But we will have no prayer of success if we face d'Albret in our current exhausted state. Indeed, we barely have a prayer of success if we are rested and fully prepared, so we stop at the abandoned hunting lodge, the very one where this journey first began, hoping that it is still abandoned.

“Empty,” Beast says when he returns. “It does not look like anyone has been here since we left.”

That is all the rest of us need to hear. We put our heels to our horses' flanks and head for the stable. They hardly need any steering, for they are as exhausted as we and go eagerly to the scent of hay and the promise of rest.

For all my exhaustion, I cannot sleep. I toss and turn, causing the bed ropes to creak in protest. I can think only of the morrow and getting my sisters to safety. I wonder where they are being kept and who is guarding them. Hopefully, they are in one of the palace's many chambers rather than in the dungeon, for Louise's health will quickly fail if she is kept in such a foul, damp place. And while d'Albret might not care for her, he would not want to lose a bargaining piece in this game he plays.

The desire to leave now is so overpowering I fear I will have to tie myself to the bed. To wait here all alone for morning when I can finally act is agony.

But you are not alone, a small voice whispers inside my heart. A great, giant-sized love waits in the next room.

Suddenly, I wish to drown myself in that love, don it like a shield or a suit of armor to keep my doubts at bay. Without stopping to think, I throw aside the covers, get to my feet, and step out into the hall.

When I pause at the door, my doubts catch up to me. Will he think me wanton or depraved? Surely not, for he has learned every horrible secret I possess and has not flinched. It is impossible not to be humbled by the sheer immensity of that gift.

I knock once on the door, then open it.

The room is dark but for a trickle of moonlight coming in from the window onto the bed. At my entrance, Beast starts to reach for his sword, then stops. "Sybella?"

I shut the door softly behind me. "I have slept with five men, not dozens. Three because I had to, one because I thought he could save me, and the fifth so I could get close enough to kill him."

He says nothing, but watches my fingers as they unlace my chemise.

"I have never lain with a man out of love." I meet his gaze steadily. "I would like to do so at least once before I die."

"You love me?"

"Yes, you great lummoX. I love you."

He lets out a sigh. "Sweet Camulos! It's about time."

I cannot help it. I laugh. "What do you mean?"

"I have loved you since you first slapped that vile mud on my leg and ordered me to heal."

"As far back as that?"

"I was too stupid to know it, but yes."

"When did you realize you felt that way?" I am embarrassed to ask such a pitiable question, but I yearn to know.

He tilts his head in thought. "When the abbess announced you were d'Albret's daughter."

I gape. "*That* is when you decided you loved me?"

He lifts his hands, as if in surrender. "There was no *deciding* about it. It was just *there*. A great, unlooked-for complication. It is why I grew so angry, thinking the gods were having a rich jape at my expense." He shakes his head in disbelief.

"So does that mean you will lie with me?" My voice sounds far more vulnerable than seductive.

He swings his legs over the side of the bed, his face growing serious. “Sybella, with all that you have endured at the hands of men, you do not have to do this. You do not have to give your body to earn my love. It is already yours.”

“I know,” I whisper. “But I would go to my death having truly loved at least once.”

He rises to his feet and crosses the short distance between us. I always forget how much he towers over me. Most likely because I never look upon him with fear. His hand comes up to smooth the hair back from my face, as if he would see it—*me*—more clearly. That simple gesture makes me feel more exposed than standing here in naught but my shift.

“I want you to be with me for the right reasons. Not because you feel you must or because you fear we will die, but because you want it with your heart and your body.”

I stare into his eyes—eyes that are only part human, just as I feel only partly human. If ever there was a man who could understand—and accept—the darkness in me, it is Beast. “Who better to entrust both to than the mighty Beast of Waroch?”

He pulls me closer, his gaze drifting down to my lips. I am surrounded by the heat from his body, can feel his heart thundering in his chest. He lowers his head until our lips are almost touching. When he hesitates, I rise up on my toes to close the distance between us and press my lips to his. Our kiss is sweet and raw and full of hunger. My hunger. His hunger. A hunger born of two lifetimes.

It is also full of rightness. Such blessed *rightness*. No dark ribbon of shame unfurls inside me. No voice screams *No* inside my head. I do not have to close my eyes and pretend I am a hundred leagues away.

His hand moves downward, his fingers trailing along my neck, and I savor the rough feel of his callused hand, marvel that a hand that has such a capacity for killing can also be so gentle. His other hand encircles my waist, then slowly skims up my ribs, stopping just before he reaches my breast. He rests his forehead against mine, breathing hard. “Are you certain?” he whispers.

That is when I hear it, the faint note of disbelief in his voice. “I have rarely been more certain than I am in this moment,” I say.

Then his mouth is back on mine and the carefully banked heat that has smoldered between us for so long erupts. Still, no darkness threatens to claim me. Instead, true desire, as uncertain and ungainly as a newborn colt, awakens in my body. My own limbs become unfamiliar, my movements uncertain. I, who have only ever been practiced and skilled. But I do not care, for all that has come before is but a distant memory. All that matters is us. Only us. This moment. His

hand on my body. The mingling of our breath. Our hearts that are so close they now beat as one.

With a dizzying swoop, he picks me up and cradles me in his arms, surprising a laugh out of me. “What are you doing?”

He grins. “I’ve always wanted to carry a fair maid away and ravish her.”

“Methinks you should reconsider who is ravishing whom,” I murmur, surprised at how much I enjoy the sensation of his arms around me, of being carried.

When we reach the bed, he gently lays me down, his eyes drinking me in. And even though it is his trick, to see into my soul, in this moment I see into his—his doubts and uncertainties—and see that I want this. That I want *him*. I reach up and take his hand, pulling him down beside me. “If you do not know how to ravish, I will gladly teach you.”

He laughs then, and once again I place my mouth on his, letting his laughter fill all the dark places inside me.

And then the laughter fades, and for a brief moment, I am reminded of the charbonnerie’s stories and feel certain that it is not Amourna, or even Arduinna, who blesses our night together, but the Dark Mother Herself, with Her gift for new beginnings.

I awake in the morning with Beast’s thick arm wrapped tightly around me. It reminds me for a moment of one of the roots of the great trees in the forest that anchor them to the earth.

I know I should wake him, that we have an urgent, impossible task before us, but I am hungry for one more moment, wanting to savor the magic that has taken place between us. Oh, it is not the magic that the poets speak of in their love poems, but a different, far stronger magic.

I stare down at his face. It has not grown more beautiful since I first found him, festering in the dungeon, and yet it is more dear to me than my own.

His eyes open just then, and he catches me studying him. “What?” His early-morning voice is gruff, like two rocks being rubbed together.

“I was wondering, since I have kissed you three times now, if you might turn into a handsome prince.”

At the sight of his quick, easy grin, I feel my heart dance in my chest.

“Alas, you are still stuck with a toad, my lady.”

“Ah, but it turns out I am quite fond of toads.” I lean down and kiss his nose, surely one of the silliest things I have ever done, but I do not care. “Even toads who sleep the entire day away.” I plant one more kiss upon his face, then force myself from the bed.

I do not even mind that he watches me dress.

When I reach the kitchen, Lazare looks up from the knife he is sharpening, his keen eyes missing nothing, so that I feel almost naked before him.

“Someone is happy this morning,” he smirks.

“Someone is eager to feel the kiss of cold steel before he’s even broken his fast.”

His smile widens, for the fact that I have not already pulled my knife on him only serves to prove him right.

“Don’t you have a cart to fetch or something?” I ask.

He nods toward the window. “It’s here already. Some of us didn’t laze about all morning.”

I look outside and see three other charbonnerie and a cart full of charcoal. Our means to gain access to the city has arrived. “Well then. Let’s get going.”

The strategy that worked so well when we traveled to Rennes serves us equally well here. In no time at all, I have tucked my hair up under a coif and smeared a thin film of coal dust over my face and hands. My altered appearance will render me nearly invisible, for guards pay little attention to lowly peasants and even less attention to the shunned charbonnerie.

But Beast’s huge stature is far too recognizable. This time he is laid in the cart, covered with rough hempen cloth, then buried under a layer of charcoal. Lazare fashions some sort of vent through which he can breathe.

We pass through the city gates and receive nary a second glance, and Lazare steers us directly to a blacksmith he knows, a fellow, he assures us, who will be most happy to give us aid. Even though he is not closely allied with the charbonnerie, he certainly does not bear any love for d’Albret or his occupation of the city.

With the first part of our plan successfully behind us, it is time for me to get cleaned up so I may pay a visit to the convent of Saint Brigantia that sits just across from the palace.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I AM SHOWN IMMEDIATELY TO the abbess's chamber, where she waits for me at her desk. She is a large woman, nearly as tall as a man, with a high, intelligent brow and heavy-lidded eyes. I am shown in, and she motions for the novitiate to close the door on her way out, then leans back in her chair and studies me.

"What does one of Mortain's own daughters want from those who serve Brigantia?"

"I do not come on official business, Reverend Mother, but to ask for your aid in rescuing two young girls. They have been taken by Count d'Albret and I fear for their welfare."

"As well you should," she mutters.

"In order to get them to safety, I must gain access to the castle. A Brigantian habit would provide a most excellent disguise and allow me to enter the palace without scrutiny."

"Do you plan to go alone?"

"No, I will have assistance."

"Then you will need more than one."

Unable to help myself, I smile at the thought. "No, Reverend Mother. I will be accompanied by two men."

She raises one eyebrow. "And who are they?"

"One of them is the Beast of Waroch."

"The same Beast of Waroch who stood so nobly before our own duchess but a few weeks ago?"

"The very one."

"Then I have something else I would share with you. There is a secret passage that runs from the convent to the palace. It was built by the late duke. After he and his family narrowly avoided capture by the French when they stormed the city in one of the many skirmishes, he had his engineers build a secret escape route out of the palace so his daughters would never come that close to capture again. You can use that to free the girls."

It appears all the gods are in favor of this venture, and it is all I can do to keep from leaping over the desk and hugging her. "'Tis a great solution to a most vexing problem. Thank you."

"So it is but a rescue mission?" Her sharp eyes study me.

I hold her gaze. "That is the focus of our foray."

“Good. Although if there are other opportunities that present themselves, I hope that you will seize them. You will need to be most careful. D’Albret and his troops returned three days ago, he and his forces riding hard from Rennes. Whatever he had hoped to accomplish there did not happen, and he and his men are in a foul humor.”

That is good news, then, for surely that must mean that his saboteurs were not able to help him gain entrance to the city.

“That is why things are so quiet here. The townsfolk have taken to their homes and closed their shops, not wanting to come into contact with d’Albret or his men when this mood is upon them.”

For some reason, my thoughts go to the silversmith who fashioned the key for me. “That is most wise of them.”

She pushes herself to her feet and crosses to the window that overlooks the moat. “There is something else you should know. There are reports, reliable reports, that the French regent and a large fighting force are encamped a mere five leagues upriver.”

So close! “Did they think to take advantage of d’Albret’s absence by invading the city while he was making war on Rennes?”

She shakes her head. “I do not know, for messengers have been flying fast and furious between d’Albret and the French for the last fortnight. Whatever it is, they may be planning it together.”

She turns to face me. “I do not tell you this to dissuade you but so that you will keep your eyes and ears open. If you were to catch wind of what is afoot while you are moving these girls to safety, I am sure the duchess would be most grateful. Now, go fetch your companion, and when you return, I will escort you to the passage myself.”

The tunnel is long and dark, and the oil lantern the abbess gave us casts just enough light so that we do not trip and fall. The walls are of dank stone, dripping with damp from the nearby river and the moat overhead. The darkness swallows up most of the light from the lantern. It feels as if we have stepped into the long, murky throat of some monstrous serpent from the legends of old.

When finally the meager light shows a stone staircase, we quicken our pace and hurry up the stairs. According to the abbess, since the duke was aware that his own chamber might well be the first taken in any hostilities, the door opens into the room the duchess and Isabeau shared as children.

I quietly lift the latch, then slowly pull the door open—only to be met by another wall of wood. No, not a wall, but the back of a huge wooden headboard. The door is set into the wall behind the room’s bed and further hidden from view

by the bed curtains. There is just enough space for a person to pass through, although Beast will have to turn himself sideways, and even then it will be a tight fit.

Yannic will wait in the passageway armed with his slingshot and a long dagger, as we do not dare risk having our avenue of escape sealed off by our enemies.

The bedchamber opens onto a small receiving room, and even though I sense no hearts beating in there, I pause. It is as if some invisible barrier holds me back, my mind remembering all that I have endured within these walls, even while my heart sings that it is different now. *I am different now.* I had been forced to disguise my true nature even from myself—for what hounds would not be terrified by the wolf that stalks among them? And even a baby wolf must be given a chance to grow. That thought allows me to step into the chamber. Beast follows silently on my heels.

At the door, I peer out to see if there are any guards or sentries posted, but the hallway is empty. “You have to wait here,” I tell Beast. “At least until I know where they are, and how heavily guarded.” His eyes burn with frustration, for he is not used to standing idly by while others put themselves in danger, but he knows that for now, stealth is our best weapon, not brute force.

In the hall, I am careful to keep my head down and hope the wimple I wear will shield my features from any casual passersby. The farther I move away from the door, the more it feels as if some great weight is pressing down upon me. Instead of making it hard to breathe like it once did, the force propels me forward, much like a crashing wave hurls a boat toward shore.

I have not gone two doors down before I hear voices—the clear, high voices of children. They come from inside the third chamber. There are no guards posted, so I take a deep breath, remind myself that I am Mortain’s daughter, then rap on the open door. The voices stop.

“Come in.” It is Tephania, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I had half feared Madame Dinan or Julian himself would be guarding the girls. But no doubt they did not expect me to come gamboling into the lion’s den unannounced.

I enter the room, careful to keep my eyes lowered, and slip my hands inside my sleeves to my hidden knives, in case I need them quickly. “Hello.” I pitch my voice deeper than normal. “I am Sister Widona, from the convent of Saint Brigantia, and I have been sent to see to the child they call Louise. She is said to have contracted lung fever.”

Tephania draws closer until I can see the tips of her plain brown shoes poking out from under her skirt. “Not lung fever, no. But she coughs all the time and her

lungs seem weak. We would be very grateful for any healing skill you care to offer.”

“But of course,” I say as I shut the door behind me and then slowly look up.

It is Louise who recognizes me first. She leaps from the couch where she has been playing with her doll and runs forward, flinging herself at me. I pull her close, savoring the feel of her small arms wrapped around my neck. She has grown thin and frail, and her cheeks bear an unhealthy flush. Tephania watches her with a mixture of surprise and dismay until her startled gaze moves up to my face. Her mouth drops open and her hand flies to her face. “My lady.”

I hold my finger to my lips and pray she is loyal to me and the girls.

Slowly, Charlotte rises from the couch, her solemn brown eyes never leaving my face. “I knew you’d come,” she says, and I open my arms to her as well. Stiffly, she walks over to me, but she does not throw herself at me like Louise. She has always been more formal, so I reach out and pull her close. Only then does she relax into my embrace.

Tephania glances to the door. “My lady. It is not safe for you here. They say . . . they say the most horrible things about you.”

I smile at her. “Some of them may even be true,” I tell her. “But for now, I have come to get the girls to safety.”

Tephania crosses herself. “Then my prayers have not been in vain.”

“You must come with us, Tephania, or else you will be gravely punished for their disappearance.”

Her earnest gaze meets mine. “My lady, I would follow you anywhere.”

“Good. Then follow us to safety.” I set the girls from me, but Louise sways on her feet. I let go of Charlotte’s hand and pick up Louise so I may carry her in my arms. “Grab their cloaks. And boots. And any warm clothing you can find quickly. We do not have much time.”

She nods and hurries to the chest at the far side of the room.

I turn my attention back to the girls. “We must be very, very quiet. If anyone sees us, they will try to stop us, and we may never see one another again. Do you understand?”

Both nod solemnly, and Tephania returns with her arms full of garments. “Shall I dress them now, my lady?”

“No, there will be time enough when we reach safety. Can you carry all that?”

“Yes, but what about you? Can you carry Louise the whole way?”

“I will not have to.” Just as we are ready to leave, there is a sound at the door. I whirl around to find Jamette staring at us.

“You’re back? I had hoped you would never return.”

“A minute more and I won’t,” I tell her. “The girls and I are leaving, and you will never have to see me again.”

Indecision flits across her pretty, shallow face and I find that all the hatred I once felt for her is gone. “Come with us if you like. You do not need to stay here.”

“No.” She all but spits the word. “I will not betray my lord father. Or yours.”

Suddenly, I am afraid for her, afraid the full force of our fathers’ anger will land on her silly head. “Do not be a fool, for they do not bear you the same loyalty and would wring your neck as soon as listen to your prattle. Come with us. You can have a new life, free of all this lying and deceit.”

Bitterness flashes in her eyes and she takes a step closer to me, her hands gripping her skirts. “I do not want a new life. I have always only wanted your life. All the admiration you commanded, all the attention you garnered, all the riches heaped upon you—those would be mine if you were gone.”

“If that is what you want, then all you must do is let us go.”

She shakes her head. “It is not that simple, and well you know it. I will be horribly punished if I do not stop you.”

And she is right. As she turns to go, I reach out to grab her, but Louise is heavy and I am not fast enough. Jamette steps beyond my grasp and dashes down the hallway.

I turn to the others. “We must go. *Now.*”

The hallway is still clear, but it will be only a matter of minutes before others arrive. I clasp Louise tightly, hold Charlotte’s hand, and pull them toward the bedchamber and Beast. If the guards find us before we reach safety, Beast will be our only hope.

Chapter Forty-Eight

WHEN WE ENTER THE ROOM, he looks up, the ferocity of his expression startling even to me. Then his gaze goes unerringly to Louise. Charlotte shrinks into my skirts, but Louise studies him curiously. “Who are you?” she asks in her high, clear voice. Beast glances at me, helpless, and I see agony in his eyes.

“Do not be afraid of him, Louise.”

“I’m not,” she says, sounding faintly affronted.

“Good. For he was very close to your mother and will see you to safety, no matter what happens. You, too,” I tell Charlotte. Then I turn my full attention to Beast. “We must hurry,” I warn him. “I was spotted, and Jamette has gone to raise the alarm.”

He nods, then looks surprised as I thrust Louise into his arms. “We will need a diversion so they do not discover your escape route. I must stay behind,” I say.

At his horrified expression, I rush to explain. “They cannot come anywhere near this room, else the passageway will be discovered and they will find you within minutes.”

“I will not leave you here!”

His eyes! Oh, his eyes! The fury and the anguish in them rob me of my breath. Two things define him—his honor and his loyalty—and he is being asked to abandon one of them.

Sensing his anger, Louise shifts restlessly in his arms, drawing his attention back to her. Using that to my advantage, I thrust Charlotte’s hand in his, quickly kiss both girls, then begin pushing them toward the bedchamber. “You must get them safely away. Everything else can wait.”

“I will be back,” he says, then leans forward and plants a savage, desperate kiss upon my lips, as if he would have me feel the force of his promise.

I do not indulge myself by watching them go but instead turn and take off the distinctive blue habit so d’Albret will not think to punish the Brigantian convent. I stuff it in one of the chests in the room and then peer out into the hall. I can hear approaching footsteps in the distance, but no one is within sight yet, so I step into the corridor and begin running in the opposite direction.

The sounds behind me draw closer, but if I can gain the main floor, I may be able to slip out the doors and lose myself among the servants in the courtyard. I hit the stairs at a full run, but my hope is quickly crushed by the sound of boots rushing toward me.

It is not the guards or soldiers or even Captain de Lur, but Julian. “Sybella!” His voice is full of both hope and caution. “You’re back!”

“I came for our sisters.”

“Sybella.” He reaches out to grab my arms.

I jerk away. “No. No.” And now that I am telling him no, I cannot stop. It is as if there is a great storm of noes that have been building inside me for years. “No, no, no.”

His brow furrows in concern and he tries again to take my arm. “Don’t touch me!” I pull out of his grip, breathing hard.

He stares at me in dismay. “What is wrong?”

“You. Us. The love you think is between us.”

He shakes his head gently, as if something is amiss with his hearing. “You don’t mean that.”

The confusion in his voice reminds me of when he was a young boy, and it pierces my heart. “I do,” I whisper.

“Why did you run away?” Even though he tries to hide it, the pain in his voice is clear.

What do I tell him? Do I speak of the convent, and my work there? Or do I simply say what is in my heart, the reason I went to the convent in the first place? “Because I was dying inside, Julian. I could not bear this life one moment longer.”

“But we had plans. I have been working to gain our father’s trust so he will grant me a holding of my own. Then we will have a life together. The life we have dreamed of since we were children.”

“That you dreamed of Julian, not me.” In spite of the gentleness of my voice, he acts as if he has been struck.

“But we talked of it, planned it together . . .”

“When we were young, Julian, too young to know that sisters and brothers did not marry and have babies together. What was between us was wrong—”

“Why should we care what the world thinks? They do not understand the bond we share. The horrors we have endured together. I wouldn’t have survived if not for you, Sybella.”

I close my eyes. “Nor I without you, but that does not make what you asked of me right. I only did it because I was afraid of losing you, afraid that you would no longer protect me or be my friend.”

He stares at me in silence, as if he has never truly seen me before. “I was always your friend and would never have stopped protecting you.”

“Julian, you betrayed me! You told on the blacksmith’s boy and had him killed!”

His eyes are wild and his breath grows ragged. “I saved you from a life as a blacksmith’s whore—bearing his dirty little brats and living an existence of toil and labor. I saved you from a lifetime of looking over your shoulder wondering when our father would find you, for he would never have stopped searching. Surely you know that.”

“If all that is true, as you say, then how could you ever have used our sisters against me?”

“I was sent to collect them on Father’s orders.”

“And the locks of hair? What were those, Julian, if not a threat?”

“Is that what you think? That I would do such a thing?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “I think you would wrap it up in fine excuses and pretty lies, but only to hide from yourself what you truly intended.”

“I just wanted you to know that I would keep them safe, as I kept you safe all those years. And this is how you thank me.”

But even now, I do not know if he tells the truth or only thinks he does.

In the silence that follows, I hear once more the sound of booted feet fast approaching. I step toward Julian. “When they come, tell them you have found me and stopped me. Here, take out your sword to convince them.”

Julian shakes his head and steps away from me.

I reach out and wrest his sword from his scabbard, then shove the hilt into his hand. “Do it.” Just as I step in front of his sword point, Captain de Lur, Jamette, and half a dozen men-at-arms reach the landing.

“There she is,” Jamette says. “But where are the others?”

“What others?” Julian asks, looking from me to Jamette and back again.

“Tephanie and the girls,” Jamette says. “Sybella said they would all be leaving together.”

“I found only her. Where did you last see them?”

“In the small solar.”

De Lur jerks his head, and half the men retrace their steps to the solar. Then he turns back to Julian. “Were you stopping her? Or aiding her? One can never quite tell with you.”

Julian’s eyes are colder than frost on stone. “Are you so very certain of that, de Lur? What if my lord father has trusted me above all others and we have but played a deep game to draw her out?”

My gaze snaps to Julian’s face, but even I cannot tell if he is bluffing. Ignoring him, de Lur turns to me. “Your lord father knew just what bait to use to set the trap, and now here you are. Unfortunately, you have chosen an inconvenient time to make your reappearance, as Lord d’Albret has pressing business elsewhere at the moment.”

I arch one eyebrow in disbelief, hoping my scorn will goad him into telling me d'Albret's business. "More pressing than exacting revenge on his prodigal daughter?"

"More pressing even than that."

My mind scrambles, trying to find a way to turn this to my advantage. "Take me to Marshal Rieux, then." For he has at least some small shard of decency and honor. Or at least, he did.

De Lur smiles. "The good marshal is no longer with us. He didn't have the stomach for what was required."

I do not know if he means that they have parted ways or that Rieux is dead.

"You will have to avail yourself of the castle dungeon's hospitality until your father returns." He turns to his men. "Bring her."

Two men step forward to grab hold of my arms. Desperate to keep my knives, I jerk my arms out of their reach before they can touch me. "I do not need to be dragged like a sack of wheaten flour."

De Lur smiles, then fingers the faint white scar on his cheek. "Oh, but you do, my lady."

I do not like what I see in his eyes, and I shoot Julian a desperate gaze, but he is lost in his own thoughts, painful ones, by the look on his face. The men reach for me again, and this time they grab my arms and feel the knives at my wrists. De Lur orders them removed and then searches me for any other weapons.

Once again I must endure his touch, must feel his hot breath against the back of my neck, must listen as his breathing grows heavier. I say nothing, only watch him. I am not certain that I could best him in a fight, but it would be close, and I would certainly cause him grave injury. At the very least, he or his men would have to kill me in self-defense. But I am not certain I am willing to embrace death just yet. Not while there is still a chance I can get to d'Albret.

As they escort me to the dungeon—the very dungeon Beast once occupied—my heart begins to pound like a drum and I can hear my own blood beating in my ears, for this is the stuff of every nightmare I have ever had—being helpless and at d'Albret's mercy once more.

Chapter Forty-Nine

IT IS A LONG, DARK night. Panic and terror do their best to stalk me, but I keep them at bay, knowing that if I succumb, I will only be the weaker for it. Terror is as much one of d'Albret's weapons as his sword or fists, and he wields it with deadly accuracy, using it to sap the will and crush the spirit.

The tower ghosts flutter near me, drawn to my warmth. To distract myself, I force my mind to stillness, curious if these ghosts will tell me their stories.

But there is nothing other than a faint restless rippling in my mind, no cries of anguish, no begging for revenge, no whispered tales of the horror that was inflicted upon them. These ghosts are far older than the others, here long before d'Albret. Maybe they were not wronged in death, but simply died.

Quiet understanding comes, like a soft breeze, and I finally realize why I am able to see not just the souls that depart from their earthly bodies but the restless ghosts who linger. If I am Death's justice, I must be able to hear their stories.

I turn my attention to the living and what wrongs they might whisper to me. Jamette is naught but a victim, too frightened to see the bars of her own cage. And Madame Dinan? She was innocent once, but no longer. She chose to look away from the truth of d'Albret's actions once too often, thus crossing the boundary from innocent to guilty.

And Julian? He was not a child of Mortain and did inherit that extra measure of strength, and yet he rejected so much of what d'Albret wanted him to be, fought so hard against the taint that marred him. Unlike Pierre, who embraced it all.

Julian always offered me kindness and love where Pierre and d'Albret offered only cruelty and pain. We had survived so many horrors together, our life was awash in so much wrongness, that the warped love he held out to me felt almost right. Almost. And in his own way, Julian was protecting me—from Pierre.

I know that love is required to defeat the monster before me, but I am at a loss as to how to manifest that love. I face him secure in Mortain's love, and Beast's love, and love for my sisters, but I do not know how to turn that into a weapon that I can use against him.

I must trust now in the god whose blood flows in my veins and in my own true nature. And while it is not as dark and twisted as d'Albret's, it *is* dark. And strong. And will hopefully offer some small chance of victory. I must have faith, but having faith is hard, so very much harder than despair.

The sound of a key in the lock wakes me with a jolt, and it is all I can do to keep from leaping to my feet and rushing over to peer through the bars. Slowly, I stand.

When the door is flung open, two soldiers stride in, then drag me into the outer chamber. De Lur is there. "It is time to face your father's justice."

I am escorted to a chamber where Madame Dinan herself is waiting for me, along with Jamette. Two servants are filling a tub with water. Dinan does not even bother to look at me, just stares out the window. "Get her out of those rags," she orders.

The two servants step forward, eyeing me warily, but I do not make their job difficult, for none of this is their fault. I watch Jamette the whole time, hoping to unnerve her, for it is her duplicity that has brought me here. "All you had to do was turn the other way," I tell her under my breath, "and I would have been out of your life forever. Julian might even have come to hate me eventually, leaving the way clear for you. But now—now I will be a martyr in his eyes, and my memory much more difficult to compete with."

Her eyes widen and she glances at Madame Dinan to see if she has heard, but the older woman is still staring out the window.

She has aged much since I last saw her. The skin is sagging off her delicate bones. Her eyes are no longer merely nervous but haunted-looking. As if feeling my gaze on her, she turns, but even then she will not meet my eyes. "Burn the rags she was wearing," she tells the maid. "And get her into the tub."

"There is no need. I will do it myself," I say, stepping into the warm water and taking up the soap.

Once the servants have left, Dinan turns to me. "You foolish girl! You have ruined everything!"

"What do you mean?"

"Since d'Albret wasn't able to take Rennes as he'd planned, he had to resort to other options."

"Options that have driven Marshal Rieux from his side?"

She ignores my question. "With the duchess's marriage to the Holy Roman emperor, he has been left with no choice but to . . ." She trails off with a glance in Jamette's direction. "Go fetch her gown," she orders. Jamette curtsies then hurries to do as she is told.

Remembering the abbess of Saint Brigantia's words, I stare at her, the soap in my hand forgotten. "Is this option why my father has been communicating with the French regent?"

She stops twisting the linen handkerchief she holds and I see that her nails are bitten to the quick. "What do you know of that?"

I shrug. "Simply that there are rumors."

She smiles thinly. "You must realize there are other ways he can gain control of the kingdom if the duchess will not honor her promises."

I look away so she will not see how much her words disturb me, for if d'Albret is conspiring with the French regent, it can only mean disaster for the duchess. And why is Dinan telling me this? Is it because she knows I will die and take this knowledge with me? Or is there some small spark of loyalty left in her that abhors the choice d'Albret has made?

But there is no opportunity to ask further questions because Jamette returns carrying one of my gowns. It is of crimson velvet trimmed with gold braid, and I wonder if she has chosen it because the blood will not show.

Chapter Fifty

DE LUR TAKES GREAT PLEASURE in binding my hands behind my back and prodding me forward into the great hall. As I am ushered in, I hold my head high. The chamber is stuffed full of d'Albret's retainers and vassals. Looking among them, I see that there are none of the Nantes lords who were recent allies of d'Albret's. Have they left? Has he killed them all out of suspicion? Or perhaps any of his soldiers with a scrap of decency left with Marshal Rieux. I know not, but the soldiers and vassals here are wholly his and have been for years. They are the ones who stood silently by as he murdered each of his six wives, who eagerly carried out his order to terrorize the town into submission by raping their women and burning their homes. They are the ones who chased down and slayed any servants who remained loyal to the duchess, hunting them with as much feeling as if they were hunting rats. Whatever d'Albret plans for me, there will be no help from them.

De Lur shoves me forward, and, with my wrists bound, I am barely able to keep my balance. D'Albret sprawls in the great chair on the dais, his cold fury lurking just beneath a thin veneer of civility. But my newfound purpose burns so bright within me that there is no room for fear. Or maybe I no longer care. Especially knowing that Death will not—has never—rejected me, but will welcome me home when my time here is done.

Besides, even if I were terrified, I would not give d'Albret the one thing he wants—me cowering at his feet. Instead, I stare coolly at him, as if *he* has been brought before *me* to be held to account for his crimes.

He straightens, his eyes studying me with cold appraisal. “You have much to answer for. You have betrayed my plans to the duchess—twice—run off with my prisoner, and kidnapped my own children from under my roof. Surely no father has ever had to suffer such treachery at the hands of his own daughter.” He rises up from his chair and crosses the small space between us. “What did you do with my prisoner? I had plans for him, you know. Did you let him bed you, like you let the blacksmith's boy?”

Hearing him talk of what is between Beast and me this way sickens me. “The prisoner was nothing to me. An assignment, nothing more.”

“An assignment?” He circles me slowly, assessing. “Are you truly a whore, then?”

Suddenly, I want him to know. *Need* him to know whom I truly serve and all

that I have done to thwart him. “Have you not guessed? I am not your daughter. My mother invited Death into her bed rather than suffer life with you, and I was sired by Mortain Himself.”

A loud silence rises up in the room, broken only by the crack of his hand as it strikes my face. My head snaps back, and I taste blood.

“Then clearly returning you to Death will not be a punishment. I shall have to find some other way to repay you for all the grief you have caused me.”

I know I should stop. Keep my mouth closed and leave well enough alone, but I have stood silent witness in his household for too long. I will not be silent any longer. “I am not merely Death’s daughter, but His handmaiden as well. All the accidents that have befallen your allies and trusted commanders have not truly been accidents but my own hand carrying out Death’s orders and, through Him, the duchess’s.”

D’Albret smiles then, surprising me. He leans in close to my ear. “For all that you wrap your killing in some saint of old, you are just like me,” he says with something akin to pride. “You fool only yourself. It is a shame we could not have come to terms, you and I.”

As he gives voice to the very fear that has dogged me all my life, I smile. D’Albret may play with Death. He may even be good at it, but I am Death’s true daughter. “No,” I say, my voice strong and sure. “I am not like you. I have never been like you. For while you think to control Death and bend it to your will, I *am* His will. I have never killed an innocent, or to serve my own pleasure. I have killed only men like you who are a blight upon the earth.”

“A blight, am I? We shall see.” He reaches for a strand of my hair and then rubs it between two of his fingers. “I find I am quite taken with the idea of mixing my bloodline with Death’s own. Then, surely, nothing could withstand my will.”

The mere thought of d’Albret’s touch sickens me, and the idea of the abomination that would result fills me with unspeakable terror. I struggle against the rope at my wrists, but it does not so much as budge. I curse myself for throwing my true parentage in his face, for I should have remembered just how shrewd he is at finding the thing one values most and using it as a weapon.

D’Albret smiles, and his hand leaves my hair to trail down my face, like a caress. I cannot help it: I shudder at his touch, at what I see in his eyes. “Since you are not my daughter, I could even make you my seventh wife, hmm?”

I glance at Madame Dinan, but her face is a brittle mask.

D’Albret winks at me, then pats my cheek. “She will not mind. She is barren and understands I must have sons to secure my holdings.” Then he grabs my chin, locking me in place, and presses his mouth on mine in a brutal, crushing

kiss. Bile rises in my throat as his teeth grind against my swollen lip. When he licks the cut on my lip, I shudder violently, every nerve in my body screaming at the wrongness of it, the sheer horror of it. With no other way to fight back, I bite him.

He jerks away, fury darkening his eyes. He raises his hand to strike me again

—
“No!” Julian’s voice rings throughout the hall.

D’Albret turns his cold, flat eyes to Julian. “I will take my vengeance as I please.”

“No, my lord,” Julian says again.

D’Albret tilts his head and studies his son. “You cannot bear for others to touch her, can you?”

“It is not that.”

“Do you wish her for yourself? If you will breed me heirs with Death’s own blood in their veins, I would forgive you much.”

I hold my breath and wonder if Julian will take what is being offered. “No,” he says, looking not at d’Albret but at me. As our eyes meet across the distance, I know that he has made his choice—he has chosen to be my brother rather than my lover, and I am filled with a quiet joy. We were always strongest when we faced our tormentors with one mind. But in the next moment, my happiness trickles away, as I see what that choice will cost him. A marquee has begun to form on his brow.

“Wait, Julian.” I start to go to him, but de Lur yanks me back.

Julian steps away from d’Albret and comes to stand before me until we are but a handbreadth apart. “Do you remember when we were children and you were afraid of the dark? Do you remember what I promised you?”

“Yes.” My throat is so constricted with grief that the word comes out in a whisper. He promised that when he grew up, he would slay all the monsters.

“I meant it. I am only sorry I did not do it sooner.”

“If you do this, you will die.”

His mouth wrenches into a wistful smile that nearly breaks my heart in two. “I fear a part of me—the best part—has been dead for years.” He presses a quick kiss upon my brow—that of an older brother—then steps back and turns toward d’Albret.

“Are you truly willing to die for her, boy?”

In answer, Julian draws his sword. He is an excellent swordsman, but he does not have the ruthless skill nor the cruelty that d’Albret possesses. I cannot believe that I must stand here helplessly and watch the one person who loved me the longest, now die for that love. That could even have been d’Albret’s

intention all along, for surely he knows that watching Julian die trying to defend me is the most crushing punishment he could devise.

There is a ring of steel as d'Albret draws his sword, and Captain de Lur pulls me out of the circle the other men have formed. The entire room grows silent. Then Julian advances with a rapid succession of blows, but d'Albret counters with a brutal thrust that causes Julian to leap back to avoid being impaled.

As they eye each other warily, I strain my wrists trying to bring my fingers within reach of the knot, but I am unable to reach it. I turn my gaze to the room, at all the hard and unsympathetic faces.

Beast will come.

But he will be too late.

The crowd murmurs in approval, and I look back to the fighting men in time to see d'Albret deliver two quick blows, one on either side of Julian's head. That is when I suspect d'Albret is only toying with Julian and does not wish to kill him. Or at least, does not wish to kill him yet.

Julian is disoriented just long enough for d'Albret to step inside his guard and deliver a vicious hack to his ribs. I bite down on my swollen lip to keep from crying out, fearing it will only distract Julian more. He doubles over, grimacing with the pain, breathing hard, as blood begins to seep through the cut and onto his doublet.

Pleased by this drawing of first blood, the men break into grim smiles. As they shift on their feet, I feel a hand on my bound wrists. I pull away, fearing one of the soldiers has decided to act on his own, then realize these are a woman's hands that have touched me. A moment later, something hard and sharp is slipped into my fingers.

A knife.

I glance over my shoulder and see Jamette silently slipping back among the crowd. While she does not love me, she *does* love Julian. But what can I do with one puny knife? Does she wish that I put him out of his misery? Or hope that I will use it on myself and stop the fight?

Keeping my eyes on the men in front of me, I slip the knife up so that it is hidden between my hands, then maneuver it until I feel its tip meet the resistance of the rope. Then I begin sawing at the bindings.

D'Albret is openly toying with Julian now; a quick blow here, a nick there, a sudden cut to the arm. Frustrated, Julian sidesteps and swings his blade upward, coming inside d'Albret's guard and almost—*almost*—plunging his sword into the other man's gut, but d'Albret sidesteps at the last possible moment. The mood of the watching men shifts again, their displeasure palpable, for they bear Julian no love. He has never been one of them like Pierre has.

Julian is growing tired now and is no longer quick on his feet. I saw frantically at the ropes, my fingers cramping and slick with blood where I have nicked myself.

Pressing his advantage, D'Albret takes a mighty swing. Julian ducks so that the blade whistles through empty air, then uses d'Albret's brief moment of surprise to deliver a stroke that crunches so loudly I am sure he has broken at least one of d'Albret's ribs. Although I feel like cheering, I keep silent, for it would only draw attention my way.

Then Julian gives up all pretense of fighting fairly or with honor and rushes, lifting his sword so that it will catch d'Albret square in the face, but the older man steps back and stumbles as the crowd gives way, and the blow misses. Even if by some miracle Julian survives the fight, I am not sure the men will let him walk away.

And still I cannot cut through the be-damned rope.

Julian is bleeding from a dozen different cuts, and if he ever owed a debt for having loved me, he has surely paid it.

At the next flurry of blows, I must look away, for Julian's fatigue is so great that I fear each blow will be his last. I pull against the rope once more, hoping I have frayed it enough that I can free my hands, but still it holds.

When the sound of clashing blades stops, I look up. Julian is breathing hard, and I can feel the labored beating of his heart as it tries to keep up with the strain of attacks and fuel his flagging body, and my own heart aches for him. Then d'Albret comes on hard and fast, but incredibly Julian is able to block each blow, until a savage swing that nearly decapitates him. He jerks back just in time, but the tip of the blade opens his right cheek to the bone. I long to run to them, to put myself in front of Julian and stop this game of d'Albret's. I do not even realize I have taken a step forward until de Lur yanks me back. I glance at him and pray I live long enough to kill him after I kill d'Albret.

If I kill d'Albret. The fight is winding down. Julian is staggering, his sword arm drooping, his blade dragging on the floor.

But d'Albret does not press his attack. Instead, he says, "By God, I will end this now." Then he raises his sword high over his head. But instead of lunging toward Julian, he pivots, aiming the blow in my direction, and some small part of me is glad. Glad that he has chosen Julian over me and that I do not have to watch another loved one die.

But Julian, ever quick-witted Julian, sees what d'Albret's intends. He leaps in front of me, and the sword plunges through his chest. His dark eyes widen with surprise—and pain. As I cry out, doubling over in anguish, the rope around my wrists finally gives way.

As Julian falls, the entire hall grows quiet and all the men step back. Not out of respect for Julian, but out of fear for their own skins, for it is hard to know how d'Albret will react to this.

In the ensuing silence, I drop to my knees beside Julian. The force of his leap wrenched the sword from d'Albret's grip, and it is still impaled in his chest. He is soaked in crimson, his face is even whiter than Death's own. His soul beats frantically against the trappings of his mortal body, desperate to be free of the pain that consumes him. He tries to speak, but his pale lips cannot form the words.

"Dearest brother, you were wrong. The best part of you still lives." I lean down and place my lips upon his brow. In forgiveness, and in farewell.

No sooner have I done so than his soul bursts from his body, as if it needed only my permission to be free. And it is free. It is finally, finally free from the dark world it has inhabited for so long.

There is the sound of boots on the marble floor, then d'Albret stands over us. He nudges Julian's body with his foot. "We must add the death of my son to your list of crimes."

As I stare down at Julian's poor, wounded body, true understanding dawns. In order to defeat d'Albret, I have only to *love* more than he hates.

And I do. My heart is filled with the love I bear, love that I was too terrified to give voice to for fear d'Albret would use it against others in order to hurt me. But they are all gone, far beyond his reach. Only I remain.

Julian's sword is but inches from my hand. *Now*, I think. *Now*. Fueled by all the fierce love inside me, I reach out, grasp the sword hilt still slick with my brother's blood, then surge upward, aiming to drive it deep into d'Albret's belly.

D'Albret discerns my intent just in time. He kicks out with his foot, knocking the sword from my fingers, then his hand reaches out and closes around my throat.

I smile. I know d'Albret will not kill me this way, for I was born with the birth cord wrapped twice around my neck and did not die. And I still have the knife Jamette gave me—the very one I once gave her.

Still smiling, I lean in toward d'Albret as if welcoming his hands around my neck. I grip the knife handle firmly and, fueled by seventeen years of the despair I have felt on behalf of those I love, whip the knife out from behind my back and plunge it into his belly, driving it upward.

D'Albret's eyes widen in surprise, and his hold around my neck loosens. He looks faintly puzzled, as if unable to believe what I have done. I shove upward again and twist, willing the knife to damage every organ it touches, just as he has damaged every life he has touched.

As my hand grows wet with his blood, and I watch his eyes dull, I want to throw my head back and howl with victory. Instead, I yank my knife out, and he starts to slump to the ground.

Even now, with his guts spilling out onto the fine white marble, Death does not claim him and no *marque* rests upon his brow. It never will. That is another thing I learned from my true father that night: d'Albret is not welcome in Death's realm. That is the promise Mortain made to all d'Albret's victims, that d'Albret will be barred from the Underworld, his flesh fated to linger until it rots, his soul to wander restlessly until the end of time.

Madame Dinan rushes to his side and tries to shove his guts back into his belly, staining her slender white hands with blood and gore. As she calls for the surgeons, I have a vision of her new life as it spreads before her, tending to d'Albret and his unnatural wound for all the rest of her days.

I glance again at the fallen Julian's face, as white and still as marble. That is when I understand that it was Julian's love that was the key to this victory. His love for me, Beast's love for Alyse, my own love for my sisters—even Jamette's love for Julian—has driven all of us to this moment in time, each strand wrapped around the next like links in a chain.

And now d'Albret is as good as dead. And I am finally free.

Dinan looks up to glare at me. "Seize her!"

Ah, but I am not free yet. There are still over fifty men in here, and all of them are staring at me with eyes bright with the promise of violence and their own brutal nature. What did I hope? That with d'Albret's death, they would be released from their own dark impulses and rejoice in their freedom? No, for they were drawn to him as like is drawn to like, and they eye me now with a hunger for blood and vengeance. Besides, they will have to answer to Pierre for what happened here. I grip the knife I still hold in my hand. D'Albret cannot hurt anyone again—my destiny has been fulfilled. I will not surrender to what I see lurking in the enraged faces around me. Slowly, I lift the knife and press the tip of it to my own throat.

One of the men, seeing what I intend, leaps forward. He looms over me, the helm he wears shadowing his face. I try to pull away from his grasp, but he is as quick as he is tall. When his hand closes around my wrist—the moment our skin touches—I *know*.

My head snaps up, and I look into a pair of light blue eyes that burn with an unholy light.

Beast.

Chapter Fifty-One

THE SIGHT OF BEAST FILLS my heart with such joy that I fear it will burst. He is dressed in d'Albret's colors and shoves a rolled-up leather packet into my hands. His disguise buys us some time, and while his body blocks me from the other men's view, I quickly unroll my knives. Since there is no time to don the sheaths, I stab them through my skirt, threading the blades through the thick fabric so they will not fall out.

"Bring her over here!" Captain de Lur orders.

When I am fully armed, Beast flashes one of his fierce grins at me. "Cut the tabard off, for I will not besmirch my god by fighting in d'Albret's colors."

I cannot blame him. I put the tip of my knife to the tabard and cut it in half, careful that the blade does not go too far. Beast shrugs out of it and pulls his sword from its sheath. For a brief moment, the men think he means to use it on me. "You ready?" he asks.

"I've only been waiting on you."

He smiles again, then turns to face the surrounding men, and confusion erupts. As Captain de Lur takes a step toward us, there is a faint whisper of sound, then his eyes roll up and he crumples. A small rock pings to the floor.

Yannic.

Then Beast gives one of his bloodcurdling yells as the battle lust engulfs him. He raises his sword and lunges to his left to get his body and his weapon between me and the bulk of d'Albret's soldiers.

I kick out, my foot connecting with the nearest man's gut, up high where it will knock all the air from his lungs. Gripping a knife in each hand, I realize that all the hate in this room is no match for the love that fills me. And fill me it does, its effervescence racing along my limbs, chasing away the sorrow and fatigue, as if some holy light rather than mere blood flows in my veins.

But it is no holy light, simply me, whole and unafraid of who and what I am, eager to do the work I was born to do.

D'Albret's men have regrouped and are rushing toward Beast. He meets the first parry, and the sound of their swords is deafening.

I tighten my grip on my knives as another soldier rushes toward me, sword drawn. As easily as if I were practicing with Annith, I duck under his blade, get inside his guard, and shove my knife into his throat. Before he has even begun to fall to the ground, I turn to meet another. But this one has witnessed my trick just

now and lowers his own sword to block another such maneuver. So instead, I flip my knife around, grab it by the point, and hurl it toward him. It takes him straight through the eye, and he drops to his knees.

Two more guards approach and I turn to meet them. Time slows, like a drop of honey suspended from the tip of a knife. As I feint and parry, every move comes without conscious thought. It feels as if my body has been filled with something as cool and dark and unerring as a shadow. I am whole now. Whole and unbroken and filled with an unearthly grace that moves through me with unspeakable joy.

From out of the corner of my eye I see that the battle fever has completely consumed Beast, and he churns through the rushing guards like a plow tills through earth. Truly, we are the gods' own children, forged in the fire of our tortured pasts, but also blessed with unimaginable gifts.

How long we fight, I do not know, but slowly, as if I am being drawn up from the bottom of some deep well, I become aware of my surroundings. Now that I have stopped fighting, I feel as thin and empty as a discarded glove. Over half of d'Albret's men lay dead at our feet. The other half show no signs of retreating. Indeed, two of the men have gone for reinforcements.

Out of knives, I bend over and pluck a sword from one of the dead soldiers who litter the ground, then turn to Beast, who is breathing hard.

The light in his eyes is only half feral now. He opens his mouth to say something, but an explosion rocks the building—indeed, the very earth beneath our feet. It sounds as if a dozen cannons have been shot at once. Beast grabs my hand and begins pulling me toward the door.

“What was that?” I ask.

“Lazare and his charbonnerie.”

“Here?”

“He thought we might need a diversion. Nor did we think it necessary to leave the duchess's own weapons in the hands of her enemy to be used against her.” Another explosion follows.

“And the girls?”

“At the convent of Brigantia. The abbess swore she would not release them to anyone but you or me or on the duchess's own orders.”

As the soldiers recover and regroup, they spot us moving toward the door.

We break into a run.

At the main door to the palace, small knots of servants huddle, peeking out the door and watching, whispering among themselves, but they make no move to stop us.

Outside, in the courtyard, I blink against the bright light. Clusters of soldiers stand, trying to discern the direction of the attack, not realizing it is their very own artillery that has been destroyed. Beast uses their confusion and heads for the east gate. Not wanting to draw any more attention to ourselves, we walk rather than run. But he is a head taller than most men and I am dressed in crimson; it does not take them long to notice us. Besides, they are d'Albret's men, and they know too well the punishment that will be exacted if they fail to stop us. They quickly shift their attention from the unknown attackers to us and begin moving toward the gate, blocking our escape.

Beast does not so much as check his stride, merely switches direction and begins running toward the stairs that lead to the battlements. I do not know what he has planned, but I follow him blindly. Behind us another shout goes up.

I glance over my shoulder to see that the archers have been summoned and are forming a line in the middle of the courtyard.

Luckily, the stairway is covered with a stone arch, which will afford us some protection, and its narrow width will force the soldiers to go two abreast and slow their pursuit.

However, when we emerge on the battlements, I quickly realize there is nowhere for us to go. I throw a questioning look at Beast, who says nothing but continues running until we reach the farthest tower—the one that looms over the river.

More shouts ring out from below and I look down to see the archers are loading their crossbows. Beast stops and turns to me. "We must jump."

I stare down at the swollen, roiling river below. "We will be leaping to our deaths."

"Do I bear a marque?"

I glance up at his forehead, relieved to see there is no dark smudge upon it. "No," I say in wonder.

"Then we will make it. Trust me." As he holds out his hand, three crossbow bolts arc by, flying wide.

The sounds of our pursuers grow louder as they gain the stairs. Soon they will be on the battlement behind us and close enough that their arrows will not miss.

I reach out and take Beast's offered hand. A glorious smile spreads across his face, making it almost beautiful. He lifts my hand and kisses it. "Do not let go," he says, "and kick your feet to get us well clear of the wall."

I nod, then he tugs us several paces back from the edge. We take deep breaths, filling our lungs with air. There is a shout as one of the men gains the parapet. It is an archer, and he is raising his crossbow.

We take a running start, and then we jump.

The wall drops away beneath us and we are flying through the air. We do not let go of each other but kick and windmill with our free arms, trying to get as far away from the shallows as we can. Beast grins maniacally, as if he will keep us alive by sheer will.

Then a cold, hard shock jars my teeth and sends the rest of the air whooshing from my lungs as the water closes over my head.

Chapter Fifty-Two

THE FRIGID WATER SUCKS ME down into its murky depths. It is dark and disorienting, and I cannot tell which way is up. I remember every story I have ever heard of Saint Mer and how she lures sailors deeper and deeper into her realm until they cannot find their way back.

But this is a river, not the sea.

I try to kick to the surface, but my rich, heavy skirt is already filled with water and has turned to lead, pulling me down like an anchor. Even so, I struggle desperately to swim free. The water is dark and cloudy, and my vision is filled with bubbles swirling, much like snow in a blizzard. And still I am pulled down. I push off my shoes, then fumble at the ribbons around my waist so I can be free of my skirt, but they are wet and my hands clumsy, and no matter how I struggle, they are stuck fast in a tight, wet knot. My lungs burn with the effort of not breathing, and I am not sure how much longer I can hold my breath. Black spots dance before my eyes.

At least I have been spared the fate d'Albret had planned for me. And the fierce retribution of his men. I will die knowing that Charlotte and Louise are safe and that d'Albret will never be able to hurt anyone again.

My feet touch the soft, silty bottom of the river, and still I am too stubborn to take a breath, knowing it will be water that fills my lungs, not the air I crave.

Just as my lungs are ready to spasm, ready to gasp for air when there is nothing but water, an icy hand grabs mine. At first, my heart leaps in joy because I think it is Beast, but surely it is far too cold for any human hand. Has my father come to escort me home?

But it matters not. I kick and strain, letting the hand pull me to the surface, hoping we will make it before my lungs give way. But I am cold, so cold. My own hands no longer work properly, and I lose my grip.

I flounder for a moment, then begin to sink again, until the hand—warmer this time—grabs hold and pulls as I kick frantically for the surface.

Up, up, up he pulls. Just when I am certain my lungs will burst, I break through the surface with a loud splash. I take in great gulping breaths of air as I tread water. I look over to see Beast doing the same, but it is harder for him because he cannot stop smiling. When we finally catch our breath, he reaches down and cuts the ribbons that hold my heavy skirt, and it slowly drifts to the

bottom. Then we turn and kick off, letting the strong current of the river begin to carry us away.

I think once more of all those I have loved and lost, and I know that they have found peace at last. And I—I have my whole life before me, and for the first time, it is filled not with fear and darkness, but with love and promise.

And a beast. I cannot help it. I smile, finally able to appreciate the gentle laughter of the gods.

Epilogue

WE STAY WITH THE RIVER'S current until we can barely keep our heads up. It would not do to have the river cast us out into the wide open ocean, for then we would never gain land. Slowly, with leaden limbs and exhausted bodies, we begin swimming for the shore. There are no houses here, nothing but forest and stone. When at last I feel the riverbed under my feet, I nearly sob with relief as my tired, trembling legs are able to stop swimming. Slowly, leaning against each other for support, we stumble out of the river onto the bank and collapse, sodden and shivering and gasping for air.

"You came back," I finally manage to get out.

Beast rolls his head to look at me, the intensity of his gaze searing itself into my soul. "I told you I would."

He did, but how do I confess that I did not believe him? Not that I thought he was lying, but that I did not believe the gods would allow him to return. They have never answered my prayers for aid before.

I say nothing, but lie on the rough rocky shore, relishing being alive and on dry land. As I stare up at the blue sky, I remember that it was Julian who taught me to swim. For all the ill he has done me, he has saved my life twice in one day.

My heart twists in pain. That is when the tears come. Not for Julian my lover, nor even for Julian my savior, as he was in the end, but for my brother. A young boy who protected and comforted me through all the horrors we endured together before the darkness claimed him, too. But in the end, he was able to reject that darkness.

Saying nothing, Beast gathers me into his arms—arms that are full of the promise of the future—and holds me as I say goodbye to the past that has haunted me for so long.

When I have finished, he gently brushes the tears from my cheeks. "I thought you'd been hit by an arrow, just before we jumped."

"I was."

He scowls in concern, running his hands along my back, then my shoulders, searching. "But the arrow . . ."

"Came out in the river." I am unsure how to explain what happened. Was it a miracle? Or something my own mind created as it faced death?

Beast will not rest until he has seen the wound with his own eyes and is

assured it does not need tending. Slowly, I sit up and present my back to him. There is silence, then his finger comes down and touches a tiny hole in my gown. “There is no blood,” he says, with awe in his voice. “Just a white scar.”

“I think it was a miracle,” I whisper. One of many this day. When I tell him of the cold hand that grabbed mine and pulled me up into Beast’s own grip, he grows quiet and sober. In that silence, there is a faint sound behind us where the trees meet the shore. Beast leaps up, hand going for the knife at his hip, then relaxes. When I turn to see who it is, my heart lifts.

Lazare sits atop a small cart, his white teeth chewing on a stem of grass. Yannic is driving. “Thought you might want some dry clothes,” he calls out as Yannic brings the mules to a halt.

Lazare hops out and saunters toward us, eyeing my scarlet gown. “It’s not as fancy as your current fare, but since that’s as good as a target painted on your back, I’m guessing you won’t mind.”

“You guessed right.” I rise to my feet and take the drab gown he holds out to me. Once I have taken it, he hands a similar bundle to Beast.

Only too eager to be rid of my finery, I step behind the trees for privacy. I remove the lone knife that is still woven into its skirts, then quickly don the charbonnerie gear, welcoming the dust-colored skirt and the dark gray bodice. After I have tucked my hair up under the linen coif, I gather up the gown Madame Dinan dressed me in and return to the shore, where the others are talking. Before joining them, I pause long enough to take my knife and stab it into the red dress, relishing the shredding sound the silk makes.

When I am done and the entire thing is naught but ribbons, I feel Beast, Lazare, and Yannic watching me. I meet their gaze steadily. “As you said, it is as good as a target. Best if it is never seen again. Or if it is, let it be mistaken for all that remains of me.” I adjust my grip on the shredded dress, carry it back down to the river’s edge, and toss the whole of it into the raging waters.

The long scarlet strips swirl on the surface for a moment, like a pool of blood, before the current catches hold and carries them, swirling and churning, toward the sea.

When they are finally out of sight, I return to the others. “Now, let us fetch my sisters.”

Fetching my sisters is easier said than done, for the convent sits right across from the palace, the palace that is still teeming with angry, confused soldiers who are trying to come to grips with the attack on their armory as well as the mortal wound to their lord. While we are well disguised, they will all be on high alert, scanning for any unusual activity in the area.

But even convents need charcoal for burning.

We pull up before the Brigantian convent just as dusk is falling. There is still enough light to drive the cart by, but too little to be easily recognized. Or so we hope.

Like before, Beast is hidden in the bed of the cart. Just as I alight from the seat to let him know it is safe to come out, the clattering of hoofbeats comes within hearing. As it grows louder, I put my hands on Beast and press down, letting him know it is not safe to come out.

Twenty riders come into view, galloping toward us along the avenue that runs between the convent and the palace. With a sick twisting in my gut, I recognize their leader—Pierre. He has returned from whatever business he was conducting with the French.

I smear my hands in some of the charcoal dust from the cart, then casually wipe them across my face, before busying myself with stacking the charcoal into a bundle. Every muscle in my body remains tense as Pierre rides by. I do not relax until the column of riders crosses the moat and disappears from view into the palace yard.

“Dark Mother, that was close!” Lazare mutters.

“Too close,” I agree. “We need to get off the road. Pull the cart around to the side. Beast and I will collect the girls and meet you over there.”

The abbess greets us at the door herself. “I’ve been waiting, hoping and praying,” she says.

“And we thank you for your prayers. We needed every one of them.” I give her a quick report of what transpired. When I have finished, she crosses herself. “Well, you have wrested the dice from their hands and given them a toss of your own. Now we must see how they land. But come, the girls have been asking for you.”

We are ushered into a spare clean room where Tephania sits on the floor playing with Louise and Charlotte. Charlotte sees us first and hops to her feet. “You are back.” There is an unmistakable note of relief in her voice.

“I told you I would be.”

She glances behind me at Beast. “And so is he.” Charlotte’s voice is decidedly less welcoming. Fortunately, Louise bounces up from the floor and she throws herself at me.

“I was scared you weren’t coming back.”

I don’t know what to tell her. I ventured into the very heart of darkness to save them—and in saving them, I somehow also managed to free myself. Instead, I

simply hold on to her, letting her feel the truth of my presence. When she starts to wriggle in impatience, I slowly let go. She casts a sly glance at Beast.

I look from Beast back to Louise, then kneel so that I am eye to eye with her. “This is your mother’s brother, Louise. He is your uncle.”

I can feel Beast holding his breath, bracing himself for disbelief or revulsion or any of the dozens of reactions he is used to. But Louise’s face brightens. “He is?” She turns immediately to him. “Are you older or younger?”

He blinks a moment at the unexpected question. “She was my older sister, like Charlotte is yours.”

“You don’t look like her.”

“No, I am much prettier.”

Charlotte scowls at this joke—and, mayhap, at being excluded from this bond—but Louise giggles, her face breaking into a smile. “No, you’re not.”

Beast runs his hand along his chin. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” Louise says. “Momma was beautiful.”

Beast grows serious. “Yes, little one. She was. Both of face and, more importantly, of spirit. I see much of her in you.”

It is there, I realize, staring at her face. The faint traces of Alyse.

“Do you have any stories of her?” The hunger in Louise’s eyes is unmistakable.

“Oh, many!” Beast says.

“Tell me.”

I stand up and take her hand. “He will, sweeting. Once we are in the cart and on the road, he will tell you all about your mother.”

I reach out to Charlotte. “And you,” I tell her, grasping her fingers tightly in my own. In truth, I am not sure I will ever be able to let go. For now, it is enough that I do not have to.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

WHILE *GRAVE MERCY* TOOK PLACE against a historical and political backdrop, Sybella's story is a much more personal one, touching only on the fringes of the political happenings of the time. Because of that, I have taken a bit more creative license with this book.

As with *Grave Mercy*, many of the characters in the book are actual historical figures, and the broad strokes of the politics have been taken directly from history. The duchess did retreat to Rennes with her council, and the French did invade Brittany's borders and conquer a number of towns.

One of the greatest liberties I have taken is that I have greatly compressed the time frames involved. While many of the events of this story did happen in the spring of 1489, there was then a large gap of about a year and a half when nothing significant happened politically. The French took towns that were then reclaimed by Bretons. Ambassadors met and political protocols were observed, all of which makes for fairly dry storytelling. Anne traveled around the countryside, visiting her people, while France kept sniffing around Brittany's borders, looking for a way in. It came at the end of 1490, when Anne married the Holy Roman emperor by proxy and thereby broke the Treaty of Vergers. So essentially I have compressed the events that occurred in 1490 and 1491 and pulled them all together into one year for ease of storytelling.

I have probably taken the most grievous liberties with the historical figure of Count Alain d'Albret, one of Anne's most ardent suitors. It is true that he was in his fifties, large and rough-looking, with an uncouth manner. Madame Dinan, Anne's governess, was indeed his half sister and pressured the young duchess constantly, trying to get her to agree to the match. All of that has been taken from historical chronicles of the time. It is also true that Anne was so repelled by him that she issued a decree stating she would never marry him, no matter what documents she may have signed as a child. This strong revulsion in one so dedicated to her country captured my imagination.

This came together with my research into the folklore of Brittany, where two of the historical kernels for the Bluebeard tales are said to have originated. One is the story of Conomor the Cursed, and the other was about Gilles de Rais. When Sybella first showed up in *Grave Mercy* so damaged and broken, I knew

that she had to have suffered some horrible trauma, and so all those elements swirled together and coalesced into *Dark Triumph*.

After the events at the end of 1491, Count d'Albret seems to disappear from the annals of historical record, except for the recording of his death in 1528. He would have been more than eighty years old, an extraordinary age for that time.

Jean d'Albret, Count d'Albret's oldest son, became King of Navarre, and d'Albret's daughter, Charlotte d'Albret, later went on to marry Cesar Borgia.

For the most part, I have tried to stick with words that were in use at the time the story takes place, but that wasn't always possible. The word *saboteur* did not come into English usage until the early part of the twentieth century; however, the root word, *sabot*, was in use in the fifteenth century. Since *saboteur* has such a distinctly different nuance of meaning that the closest historically accurate word, *conspirator*, I have decided to stick with *saboteur* and hang what little justification I could on the French roots of the word.

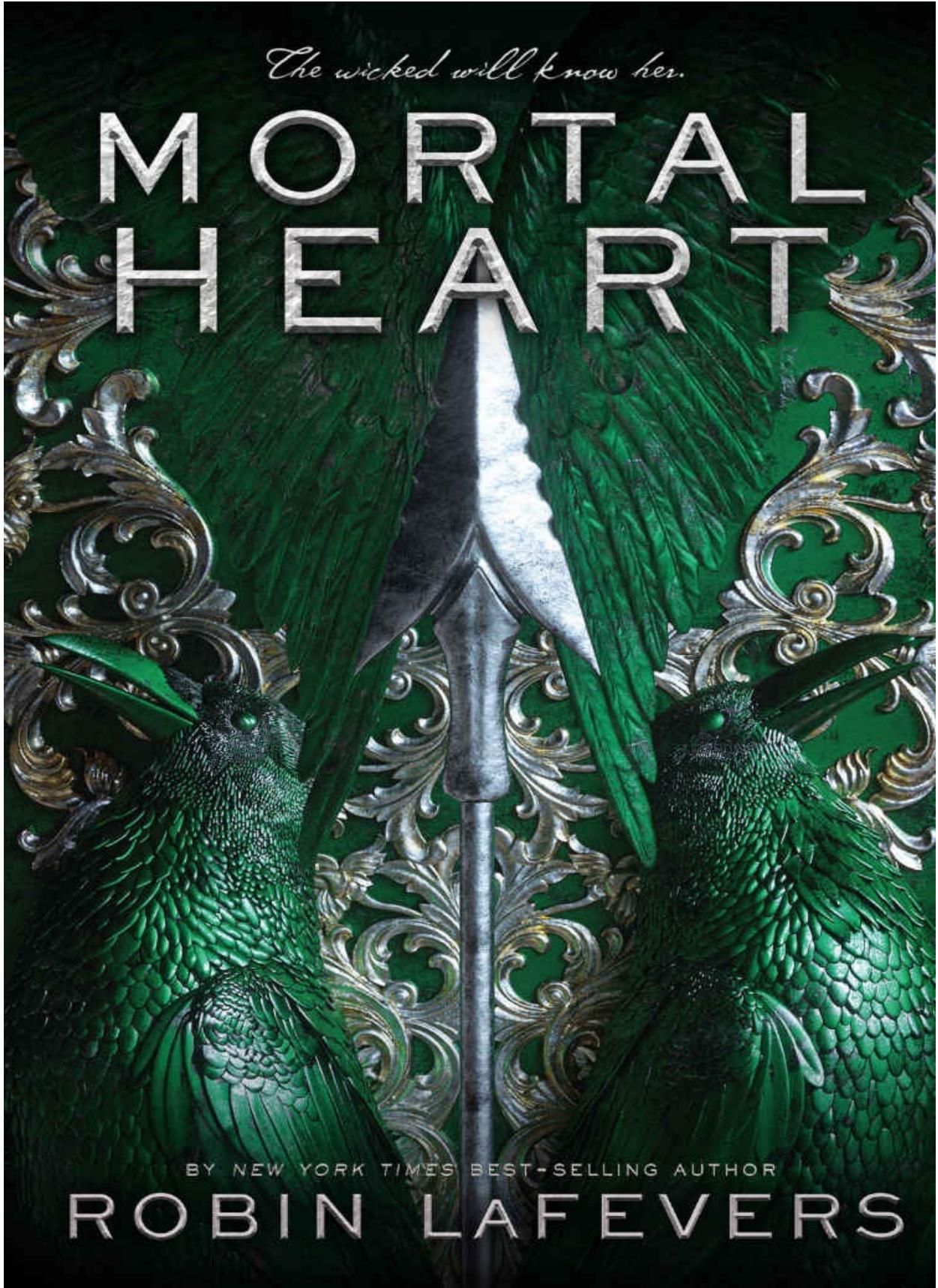
Such are the problems that keep historical fantasy writers awake at night.

The wicked will know her.

MORTAL HEART

BY NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS



For Mark,
again.
And always.
But especially for the last two years.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

At the Convent

ANNITH, a novitiate of Mortain

SYBELLA D'ALBRET, handmaiden to Death

ISMAE RIENNE, handmaiden to Death

ABBESS OF SAINT MORTAIN (formerly Sister Etienne)

SISTER EONETTE, convent historian and archivist

SISTER THOMINE, martial arts instructor

SISTER SERAFINA, poisons mistress

SISTER WIDONA, stable mistress

SISTER BEATRIZ, instructor in womanly arts

SISTER CLAUDE, sister in charge of the rookery

SISTER VEREDA, convent seeress

SISTER ARNETTE, arms mistress

DRAGONETTE, former abbess of Saint Mortain (deceased)

SISTER APPOLLONIA, former convent historian and archivist (deceased)

SISTER MAGDELENA, former poisons mistress (deceased)

SISTER DRUETTE, former seeress (deceased)

MATELAINE, a novitiate of Mortain

SARRA, a novitiate of Mortain

AVELINE, a novitiate of Mortain

LOISSE, a novitiate of Mortain

LISABET, a novitiate of Mortain

AUDRI, a novitiate of Mortain

FLORETTE, a novitiate of Mortain

The Hellequin

BALTHAZAAR

MISERERE

BEGARD

MALESTROIT

SAUVAGE

MALIGNE

Followers of Saint Arduinna

FLORIS, a priestess of Arduinna

AEVA

TOLA

ODILA

The Breton Court and Nobility

ANNE, duchess of Brittany, countess of Nantes, Montfort, and Richmond

ISABEAU, her sister

DUKE FRANCIS II, Anne's father (deceased)

GAVRIEL DUVAL, a Breton noble

BENEBIC DE WAROCH, the Beast of Waroch and knight of the realm

VISCOUNT MAURICE CRUNARD, former chancellor of Brittany

JEAN DE CHALON, Prince of Orange

CAPTAIN DUNOIS, captain of the Breton army

PHILLIPE MONTAUBAN, chancellor of Brittany

BISHOP OF RENNES

FATHER EFFRAM

CHARLES VIII, king of France

ANNE DE BEAUJEU, regent of France

NORBERT GISORS, French ambassador

MAXIMILIAN OF AUSTRIA, the Holy Roman emperor, Anne's husband

The Nine

MORTAIN, god of death

DEA MATRONA, mother goddess

ARDUINNA, goddess of love's sharp bite, daughter of Matrona, twin sister of
Amourna

AMOURNA, goddess of love's first blush, daughter of Matrona

BRIGANTIA, goddess of knowledge and wisdom

CAMULOS, god of battle and war

MER, goddess of the sea

SALONIUS, god of mistakes

CISSONIUS, god of travel and crossroads

Chapter One

BRITTANY, DECEMBER 1488

FOR MOST, THE BLEAK DARK months when the black storms come howling out of the north is a time of grimness and sorrow as people await the arrival of winter, which brings death, hunger, and bitter cold in its wake. But we at the convent of Saint Mortain welcome winter with open arms and hearts, for it is Mortain's own season, when He is full upon us. In such a way does the Wheel of Life turn, with every ending but a new beginning; that is the promise Mortain has made us.

So while most people bar their doors and shut their windows tight, we have cause for celebration and go traipsing through the wood, gathering the sacred yew branches and collecting holly with its bright red berries that remind us of the three drops of blood spilled when Mortain was pierced by love and Arduinna's own arrow.

And while Mortain is a far more gentle god than most people give Him credit for, I do not think He would look kindly upon His youngest handmaidens jousting with the sacred branches that are intended for His holy fire.

"Audri! Aveline! Stop that!"

"She started it," Aveline says, peering out from under the pale red hair that has fallen across her eyes.

"No, I didn't! You did. You always do. Because you're good with swords and knives and fighting, you always want to fight."

"Girls!" I clap my hands, wincing at how very much I remind myself of Sister Beatriz when she loses control of the womanly-charms lessons. "Enough. Audri, go help Florette. Aveline, you come over here with me."

Thinking the other girl in trouble, Audri sticks her tongue out at Aveline, then hurries over to help Florette. Instead of scolding Aveline, I take her hand, lead her to a holly bush, and give her a knife. "You will fill that basket, and I will fill this one."

Pleased at being given a blade, something normally reserved for older girls or the training yard, Aveline turns to the bush and begins cutting.

I keep my eyes on the leaves in front of me as I speak to her. "You are the oldest of the group, Aveline. There is no honor in besting those younger than

you.”

She stops her cutting and turns her strange, solemn gaze on me. “Are you saying I should pretend to be weak so they can feel strong? Is that not telling a lie?” Before I can untangle her knotted logic, she shrugs. “Besides, she is nearly as old as I am and likes to show off by going without her cloak and shoes.”

I hide a smile, for it is true that Audri is quite proud of her ability to withstand cold. Not only does she not feel the wintry chill, but she does not suffer chilblains or deadened limbs when exposed to it. That is her gift for being pulled from the womb of a woman who had frozen to death in one of winter’s most savage storms. She is as impervious to the cold as one of the great white bears of the far north, and proud of it. “That may be true,” I concede, “but you have gifts every bit as glorious as hers and you constantly pick fights so that you may show them off.”

For a moment, the old familiar wave of loss and longing rears up and I catch my breath at the pain of it. Among the handmaidens of Death our birth stories are our most treasured possessions, marking us as they do as Death’s true daughters. But on the day that I was born, no cuckolded husband paced nearby, no herbwitch pulled me from a cold, dead womb, nor did any hedge priest administer the last rites to a dying mother while I rooted futilely at her breast.

Or at least, I think not, for the truth is that I do not even know the day on which I was born. I do not know the manner of my birth, the name of my mother, or even if she still lives, although we think she must not, else I would not have ended up on the convent’s doorstep when I was less than a week old. Of all the women whose feet have pattered along these stone floors, I am the only one to have no inkling of the circumstances of my own birth.

It is like an itching, festering wound I have trained myself not to scratch. But some days the pain and burn of it are nearly beyond bearing. Especially when I am confronted with a cocksure nine-year-old who is blessed with reflexes so fast she has been known to snatch arrows from their flight.

Aveline keeps her attention on the holly but watches me from the corner of her eye. “Does that mean you will let me fight you sometime?”

I cannot help it—I laugh. “You think you can best me?”

She lifts one shoulder. “I think I would like to know if I could or could not.”

At her words, my smile wobbles and it is all I can do to keep from throwing my knife down in defeat. Even this *child* thinks I am no longer a match for her. I carefully avoid looking out at the ocean, just beyond the trees. It is too painful a reminder that both Ismae and Sybella have been sent to places I have not, have begun to fulfill their destinies while I am stuck here playing nursemaid to a gaggle of budding assassins.

I feel a tug at the corner of my gown and look down to find Florette standing there with wide eyes. “We did not mean to make you sad, Annith.”

“Oh, you didn’t, sweeting. I am just”—what? Feeling sorry for myself? Pining for my friends? Wishing fate had dealt me a different hand?—“eager to finish up with these branches so we can begin decorating.”

Her small face clears and she goes back to her own work while I move on to the next branch. It is hard—so hard—not to feel wasted, like a new sword that has been allowed to rust before it has ever been used. I tighten my grip on my blade, reminding myself that the abbess has assured me it is just one of Mortain’s many mysteries, why He has called the others first. If I ever come face to face with Him again, I shall ask why.

Politely, of course.

“Annith?” Aveline says.

“Hmmm?”

“Are we supposed to chop at our branches like that?”

I look down, appalled to see the gouges and scars where I have hacked my knife, again and again, against the pale silver bark of the yew. Saints! “No! Of course not. It is simply that this knife needs to be sharpened.”

She arches one of her pale red brows at me, looking far older than her nine years.

“Annith! Look!” At the sound of Florette’s shouting, I turn around to find her pointing through the small copse of trees. Is it a crow? For I have promised to pay Florette if she alerts me whenever she sees one approaching. It is our little secret. In exchange, I change the sheets on her bed when she wets it and I tell no one, although I think many of the others suspect.

I hurry to the trees, my eyes scanning the sky, but I see nothing.

“No, not in the sky, in the water. It’s a *boat*.”

I jerk my gaze down to the horizon, where I see that Florette is correct: a boat is making its way to the island. There is a quick, sharp stab of fear in my gut until I see that the boat does not bear one of the ominous black sails that portend death. “Aveline, go find Sister Thomine and Sister Widona. Tell them a night rower has arrived. Audri, you stay here with the other girls and continue gathering the greenery.”

I slip my knife into the sheath at my waist, lift my skirts, and hurry across the rocky beach to the landing. There are two men in the boat, the rower and one other—a hedge priest, I presume. A girl sits between them. She is small, small enough that I do not think she can be older than Audri or Florette. As the boat comes steadily closer, I see that her hands are tied, and a rope is around her waist, securing her to the boat.

The night rower meets my furious gaze. “You can quit yer glaring, missy. We tied ’er up only so she wouldn’t jump into the water. Thinks she’s a fish, she does.” I blink in surprise and turn to the hedge priest for an explanation.

He nods in greeting. “It’s true. The locals sent her to Saint Mer at first, thinking she was one of theirs. But the abbess took one look at her and knew she wasn’t. Turns out, her mother drowned, but they found her in time to cut the child from her womb. Except then the father wanted nothing to do with her. Thought she’d caused the mother’s death.”

Her story, like most of the girls’ stories, twists my heart. So many mothers dead, so many daughters blamed. It is almost enough to make me glad I do not know the circumstances of my own birth. What sort of death did my mother suffer? What sins were blamed on me for daring to come into this world?

“Well, you’re ashore now, so untie her at once. What’s her name?”

The hedge priest shoots an uneasy glance at the rower as he unties her. “Melusine,” he says. The sailor lifts the sacred conch shell he wears around his neck to his lips.

When I roll my eyes, it is his turn to glare at me. “’Tis a bad-luck name, miss. Especially for us sailors.”

“It is a foolish name,” the hedge priest mutters.

Ignoring them both, I turn my attention to Melusine herself. “What do you think of your name?”

She looks up at me with eyes the exact color of the sea, and nearly as fathomless. “I like my name. I picked it myself.”

I smile. “Then I like it too. The names we give ourselves are always the best. Now, come.” I hold out my hand to her. The hedge priest carefully helps her to the bow, then over the side and onto the beach. The girl glances longingly over her shoulder to the sparkling blue water. I quickly grab her hand and pull her toward me. “You can go swimming later,” I tell her. “When it is not so cold.”

When I turn to escort Melusine back to the convent, I find a small knot of three girls watching us with large, curious eyes. Aveline arrives just then, breathless from her running. “Sister Thomine is teaching the others right now, and Sister Widona is tending to a mare who is foaling. They said you can see to the new arrival. You’ve done it often enough.”

And so I have.

I shoo the younger girls on to their next lesson a little early—comportment with Sister Beatriz. She will be annoyed, but her petty annoyances are a lesser concern than getting this newest girl settled. I do not think Melusine is injured or

ill, but it is customary to have new arrivals thoroughly examined, for many come to us malnourished, beaten, or in other ways physically abused.

As I lead her down the hall, I try not to think of all the other novitiates I have escorted this way, novitiates who are even now serving Mortain in a much more glorious manner than I. I try not to think of Ismae, ensconced at court with her finery and weapons, doing the work she was born to do. I push away thoughts of Sybella, currently on her fourth assignment, with no word for well over six months. Although *I* did not escort Sybella down the hall—it took four full-grown nuns, two on either side of her, to be certain she did not injure herself or bolt.

No, I will not think of that now. I will not indulge in the weakness of doubt and self-pity. Even though the infirmary door is open, I rap softly on it so that our presence will not startle Sister Serafina. She often becomes so absorbed in her work that she forgets to eat or sleep or even, sometimes, where she is. “Sister? We have a new arrival today.”

Sister Serafina looks up from a long, complex series of tubing and flasks, a contraption of her own design she built in order to streamline her making of simples and tinctures. She peers over a coil of copper tube at us.

“Her name is Melusine, and she was mistakenly sent to the convent of Saint Mer. Apparently, she has an affinity for water.” I smile down at the girl so she will know this is meant without judgment.

Sister Serafina sets down a glass flask, wipes her hands on a linen towel, and studies Melusine. “Fond of the sea, are you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once I have placed the girl in Sister Serafina’s capable hands, I leave the infirmary to inform the abbess of our new addition.

As I draw near her chambers, I hear voices coming from within. Hoping they have gotten word of Sybella or, better yet, word of some new assignment for me, I stand near the door as if merely waiting my turn to see the abbess, then lean my ear close.

“That is dire news indeed.” It is Sister Eonette who is speaking.

“It is most unwelcome,” the abbess agrees. “And could not come at a worse time.”

“Does it not worry you for *other* reasons?” Sister Eonette puts an odd emphasis on the word *other*, an emphasis that has me pressing my ear closer to the door.

“You mean other than Sister Vereda’s illness leaving us Sightless at a time when our young duchess is fending off angry suitors and trying to keep the French from sweeping in and claiming our duchy as their own? When our country is threatened by civil war and risking outright invasion?” The reverend

mother's voice is drier than the week-old bread we feed the pigs. My thoughts fly immediately to Ismae and Sybella and countless others out in the world. Without a seeress, how will we guide their hands? This will leave them exposed and instructionless when they can least afford to be.

"I should not have to point out to you that it is rare enough for one of Mortain's handmaidens to take ill, even one as old as Sister Vereda. Does that not hint at some—"

"Enough!" The abbess's voice slices through the air, cutting short the words I was so breathlessly waiting to hear. "You are not to share your doubts or concerns with anyone. Have Sister Thomine sent to my office immediately."

There is a long, heavy pause that is finally broken by Sister Eonette. "But of course, Reverend Mother." Her voice drips with sarcasm so sharp it is almost mockery. I expect the abbess to take her to task for it, to slap her or order her to do penance for showing such disrespect, but she does not.

The soft tread of Sister Eonette's footsteps approaching the chamber door spurs me to action. Quickly, before she exits, I scamper down the hall, then begin walking toward the office so I am a good six paces away when Sister Eonette steps out. She glances at me. "She has a meeting with Sister Thomine," she tells me.

"Is Sister Thomine in there already?" I ask innocently.

"No, I am to fetch her."

"I will only take a minute." I give her a quick, cheerful smile meant to appease her, but she simply jerks one shoulder in an annoyed shrug. "Very well, but I warn you, she is not in good humor this morning."

"Thank you for the warning, Sister."

She nods curtly, then brushes past me to fetch Sister Thomine. With my head swirling full of questions, I rap softly on the abbess's door.

"Come in."

It has taken me well over five years to be able to enter this office without my heart racing in fear. I am pleased that today all I must fear is that the abbess will sense my curiosity.

"Annith!" The abbess puts down her quill. Even though she smiles, it does not reach her eyes, and her skin is pulled tight with worry. "What a lovely surprise. Have we a meeting today that I forgot?"

"No, Reverend Mother," I say as I curtsy. "I just came to inform you that a new girl has arrived, sent from the abbess at Saint Mer."

"Ah, yes. The abbess had written to me of her." She reaches for a small pile of correspondence and removes a letter from the top. "Her father thought her cursed and wanted nothing to do with her, so she was raised by her mother's

sister, until that woman died giving birth to her own child. Her name is Melusine.” The abbess wrinkles her nose at that. “An altogether frivolous and silly name.”

“The child chose it herself,” I explain. “Perhaps an attempt to grasp the very things that others feared her for and remake them as something lovely and mysterious.”

The abbess looks up at me. “You are most likely correct, and very kind to have thought of that. She may keep it, then.” She leans back in her chair. “You have such a deft touch with newly arrived girls, I wonder if we should have you serve as our novice mistress. At least until you are called by Mortain.”

We have not had a novice mistress in years, not since the abbess herself—then known as Sister Etienne—held that position under the former abbess, whom we called the Dragonette.

She arches her brow, her mouth quirking in rare humor. “Since you look as if you have just swallowed a cup full of verjuice, I gather that you are not much pleased by that idea.”

“While I do enjoy helping with the new girls, I fear that if I were to focus solely on that, my other skills and reflexes could easily grow dull so that I would not be ready when Mortain’s call did come.”

It was the abbess who kept me from despair when Ismae was sent out and I was once more left behind. She assured me it could have nothing to do with my skills or dedication, for who was more skilled or dedicated than I? Clearly, it was some whim of the god. She was certain He was saving me for something extraordinary.

“Very well, then. But from what I hear, you have surpassed many of your teachers in their fields.”

I cannot help but savor her praise. Not because she is stingy with it—she is not—but because I so desperately need it to fill the hole that opened up inside me the day Ismae was chosen over me.

Perhaps fearing the praise will go to my head, the abbess changes the subject. “And how are preparations for midwinter coming along?”

“Aveline and Loisse have both grown so much that they need new white cloaks, but Sister Beatriz is taking care of that. She has assured me they will be ready by the midwinter ceremony.”

“And how does young Audri fare?”

“She is fine. The fumes from the mandrake root only made her sick. Sister Serafina says she will fully recover. Her appetite is good, her bodily humors are in balance, and she sleeps deeply, with no nightmares or other problems. She

should be ready to join the others for lessons as soon as this afternoon, if you wish.”

“Make it so, then. There is no reason to keep her idle. And Lisabet? How is she?”

I smile. “Also fine. Indeed, she has found a new way to mimic death and is much pleased with herself.”

The abbess sighs, as if bracing for the worst. “And Loisse’s arm?”

“As you suspected, the fall from her horse did not break her wrist, merely sprained it. She also will be well enough for the midwinter ceremony, although she will have to carry her torch with her left hand.”

“That will ruin the symmetry.”

I try to keep the surprise out of my voice. “You would rather she did not participate?”

She waves her hand. “No, no. It is just a minor annoyance, an imperfection that cannot be helped.”

“She will not try riding her horse while standing up again, I assure you.” I do not tell her that Loisse was doing it in an attempt to match my own skills, as there is no legitimate reason for an assassin to ride in that position, and I fear the abbess will recognize it as sinful pride.

“Very well. Thank you, Annith.” She picks up her quill, my sign that I am dismissed. I curtsy once more, then turn to leave the chamber, but pause when I reach the door. A question hovers on my lips, but before I can ask it, the abbess speaks. “I will save you a trip to the rookery,” she says without looking up from her work. “There has been no word from either Ismae or Sybella.”

“Thank you, Reverend Mother,” I say as I close the door behind me. I am touched by how well she knows me, that even with her own problems weighing so heavily upon her, she takes the time to reassure me. For her problems do weigh heavily upon her, I realize. It was clear in the tightness around her eyes, and the grim set to her mouth. She has always been the strongest among us. Even when the great tragedy struck our convent seven years ago, she was the one to keep her head and move us forward when others were wont to wail and wring their hands.

Sister Eonette’s veiled insinuations have plucked at my long-held vigilance, and seeing the abbess’s distress causes every muscle in my body to grow tight. The need to know what is afoot is like a small hungry creature yapping at my heels.

I quickly check the hallway to be certain no one is coming, then dart into the short corridor hidden behind a tapestry of Saint Arduinna pointing her silver arrow at the dark, cloaked figure of Mortain. It leads to the small, private chapel

that opens into the abbess's office. Few know about it, and I only learned of it because once, when I was five years old and locked in the wine cellar as punishment, I had overheard Sister Appollonia and Sister Magdalena discussing it, neither of them realizing my big ears were merely one thick door away.

It is a habit I developed when young, collecting secrets like a miser collects coins. I would never have survived my years with the Dragonette if I had not read every scrap of paper that crossed my path, listened at every door, and peered through every keyhole, trying to determine what she expected of me so I could meet those expectations as soon as possible and avoid the painful consequences of disappointing her.

Even though the Dragonette has been dead these last seven years, I have not been able to cast the habit aside. But, just like a miser with his coins, I have no intention of ever parting with any of these secrets. Instead, I use them to soothe the raw and chafed places of my soul and remind myself that others at the convent, others with skills more remarkable than my own, also possess human flaws.

I push aside the tapestry that hides the chapel door, then carefully lift the latch and let myself in. I settle into position just as a sharp rap sounds on the abbess's office door. "Come in." The abbess's voice is faint but distinct.

Both Ismae and Sybella possess the ability to sense the presence of others, even when a door or a wall stands between them. It is yet one more gift that I lack. However, I have learned to compensate by growing adept at recognizing the nuns without seeing them. Sister Beatriz has a light tread, as if dancing on the balls of her feet, while Sister Widona moves so silently, one almost feels her movement rather than hears it. Sister Serafina drags her left foot every so slightly, and Sister Thomine is a great stomper, with loud, sturdy steps that can be heard four rooms away. Unless she is fighting—then she is as silent as the wind and as deadly as an arrow.

"You sent for me, Reverend Mother?" I hear Sister Thomine say.

"Close the door, please."

A faint click of the latch as it is closed, then quiet. "How are Matelaine and Sarra coming along in their training?"

There is a long pause that makes me think that whatever Sister Thomine was expecting, this was not it. "Well enough," she says at last. "Sarra is skilled and competent, but also lazy and unwilling to push herself. Matelaine has less natural talent, but is far more committed. Unfortunately, her unique skills do not aid her in her tasks. Why do you ask? They are young yet. Surely the next one to be sent out is Annith?" I wish to hug Sister Thomine for giving voice to the thoughts in my head.

“Sister Vereda has taken ill.” The abbess’s words are clipped. “She is too ill to see for us anymore. I think Annith may be called upon to take the seeress’s place.”

At first, the words do not make sense to me—it is as if the abbess has begun speaking in some foreign tongue I have never heard. Or as if the thick wall between us has inexplicably distorted her words. But a faint trembling begins in my gut and spreads throughout my limbs, as if my body understands the words before my mind does.

“But Annith is our most skilled novitiate in years. Frankly, I am surprised you sent Ismae out before her, as Ismae had been here only three years and Annith has trained her entire life. Why would we waste those skills by having her be seeress?”

I hold my breath, waiting to hear the answer.

“I do not remember putting you in charge of such decisions.” The abbess’s voice is as tight as a newly stretched drum skin. “Annith has excelled in every task we have set before her. There is no reason to think that augury will be any different.”

There is a short pause before Sister Thomine speaks again, this time so softly I can barely make out the words. “But will she welcome that fate? Again, she has trained since she was a babe to be an instrument of Death. Indeed, I believe that is what allowed her to survive her years with the Dragonette—”

“Enough!” The abbess’s voice cracks across the room like a whip. “She is obedient and accommodating and always has the convent’s best interests at heart. She will do as she is told. See to it that Matelaine’s and Sarra’s training is increased so they will be ready if we must send them out. For too long we have focused on training the eldest novitiates and have not spent enough time training the others.”

My heart pounds so loudly that I can scarce hear the abbess’s dismissal of Sister Thomine, and the sound of the office door closing feels so distant it could have come from the bottom of the sea. I grasp for the solid wall behind me, then slowly lower myself to the ground. What does she mean? How can she possibly—I put my hands over my face and scrub it, trying to restore my wits.

In all my seventeen years at the convent, it has never occurred to me that being seeress was a path open to any of us. Although, thinking upon it now, I realize the seeresses must come from somewhere. But I’d always assumed it was a position given to a nun when she was too old to perform other duties. Or—well, the truth is, I have not thought about it much at all.

And why would I? I have never shown any skill or affinity for scrying or augury. Nor have I ever been taught such things. I look down at my hands,

surprised to find that they are still shaking. I clench them into fists.

The abbess cannot be serious. She herself said that I was one of the most skilled novitiates ever to have walked the convent's halls. It cannot possibly be Mortain's will, for if so, why would He have given me these talents? These skills?

For the first time in over seven years, I find myself wondering what the Dragonette would think of this if she were still alive. No, I do not need to wonder. I know—she would never have considered such a thing. It would be like fashioning a weapon and using it to stir a pot.

I do not even know if the abbess means this to be a great honor or a punishment.

No, not a punishment, but a tempering. That is what the Dragonette would have called it, her voice ripe with her palpable desire to create of me a perfect weapon, one whose existence would glorify Mortain.

Only now it appears this weapon is to be locked away, never to be used for the purpose for which she was intended.

I slip out of the chapel and begin walking down the hall. I must come up with a plan. Find some way to dissuade the abbess from acting on this notion of hers. As I turn the corner, I stumble upon a small clutch of the older girls huddling and whispering among themselves. At my approach, their gazes fix on me like hungry crows on a gobbet of meat.

Merde, but I do not wish to speak with them now. Not with the abbess's threat still buzzing in my head like angry hornets, for this news has upended me as thoroughly as one of the lay sisters empties a bucket of wash water.

My long years of training rise up and take over, and I shove my distress and confusion behind a veil of piety and obedience. "Girls," I murmur in a near perfect imitation of the abbess.

Sarra grits her teeth; she hates me most when I act thus, but Matelaine and Loisse greet me warmly.

"Do you know what all the furtive meetings with the abbess were about?" Matelaine asks as she and Sarra fall into step beside me.

It galls me to have to pretend that they know something I do not, but I smile brightly at her. "No, I missed the fuss. What was it about?"

Sarra lifts one eyebrow and places a mocking hand upon her chest. "Do not tell me that we know something that Saint Annith does not?"

In a movement that shocks me, my hand snakes out and grabs her wrist. "Call me saint again and you will see just how saintly I am *not*." My voice is low and filled with anger that has little to do with her.

The begrudging admiration I see in her eyes surprises me almost as much as my own actions. I let go of her hand and take a deep breath. Everyone thinks that my goodness comes easily to me, that it hardly counts because I do not struggle with it, but I *do*. Just like rosary beads run through a priest's fingers, so does a litany of goodness run constantly through my head: *Be strong, be certain all your actions glorify Mortain, show no weakness, allow your will to bend before others'*.

It is especially appalling to be called a saint when I fear that my being so obedient is the very trait that threatens to alter the entire course of my life. I force my voice back to cheerfulness. "Now, you'd best fill me in so that I may know it too."

Sarra's smugness disappears and is replaced by sullenness. "I do not know what it was about, only that there was a fuss. I was hoping you would have the details."

"No, but give me a day or two and I am certain I can ferret them out." And with that, we reach the refectory, where we put our spat aside lest the nuns notice it and get involved.

Chapter Two

ALONE AT LAST IN MY ROOM, I give myself over to the thoughts I have held in check all through supper. There must be a way to convince the abbess I am not suited for the task she has in mind for me. That it is not the best use of my skills—skills I acquired through hard work and steel-willed determination, despite the cost to myself. Skills I was promised would be used to glorify Mortain and do His work, not be sent to fester in the dark, musty closeness of the seeress's chambers.

The abbess said nothing about Seeing being one of Mortain's blessings or gifts that He gives to us—she said only that it could be taught, and that I would not mind because I was obedient and biddable and had the convent's best interests at heart. But it is to Mortain that I owe my faith and dedication, not her, although she might well be forgiven for thinking that.

Ismae and Sybella have always thought that everything comes easily to me and that I enjoy a position as convent favorite. They do not know, for I never told them, how fine a razor's edge I have spent my entire life walking, ever since I took my first few toddling steps.

To be raised in a convent full of women who are devoted to spiritual matters is a barren life for any child. But when those women worship Death and have dedicated their lives to serving Him, learning His arts, and carrying out His will, it can be a bleak and joyless existence.

So, while for Sybella and Ismae, the convent was a refuge of sorts, an escape from the horrors of their past, for me it was something else entirely. My childhood was a time of frequent and unexpected tests, usually administered when I had been lulled into a false sense of complacency—something I had been warned against, so the tests themselves were simply punishments that I deserved.

Like the time I was six years old and walking with the Dragonette on the beach in order to see the older girls off on their trip to the mainland. As soon as they were out of sight, the Dragonette picked me up and tossed me into the ocean to see if perhaps swimming came naturally to me, as it does to some daughters of Mortain. Or the time she ordered a sack placed over my head to see how long I could hold my breath (not long at all—especially since my screams sucked up the remaining air most quickly), or when she slipped her hand around my shoulders, and I thought I had finally done something to earn a sign of affection from her—only to have that hand move up and wrap itself around my

neck and squeeze, to see if I could withstand such pressure as those who are born with their birth cords wrapped around their necks are sometimes able to.

I grew to dread those sessions with her, for all that they meant I was her favorite. And I hated that I could not be strong enough to accept the special favor she bestowed upon me without ruining it with my fear. There were times, many times, when I believed it would kill me. Sometimes, I even wondered if that was her intent.

If so, the Dragonette had not counted on my sins of pride and stubbornness. She did not yet understand just how firmly I could plant my feet in the ground of rebellion to prove her wrong. Or perhaps she counted on precisely that. I soon learned to make sure that even my failures were ones she would have to—at least grudgingly—admire, that showed that even though I may be flawed, those flaws would honor Mortain. I threw myself so wholeheartedly into my lessons and so thoroughly mastered my tasks that soon the sisters could find no fault with me.

If one of the other girls was a better archer, then I would sneak out in secret and practice for hours, days, weeks, until my fingers bled and my wrist was bruised from the plucking and the twanging of the bowstring. But soon the raw fingertips hardened and grew calluses and I learned to ignore the sting of my wrist. Thus I not only became the best archer among all the girls, but grew impervious to pain as well.

Eventually, the Dragonette came to know my every flaw and fault line like a mason knows his stone, and learned just how stubborn I could be. But this abbess and I have not had that sort of relationship. When I was younger, she was often off on her own assignments and duties and so did not see the full measure of my determination.

I will have to show her—remind her—that there is more to me than mere obedience and docility.

In the morning, I awake as sharp and ready as one of Sister Arnette's finest blades and am nearly bouncing on my toes in impatience. We are to report to the archery field first thing, before the wind picks up. Perfect, for I am as skilled an archer as anyone at the convent—including Sister Arnette, who teaches us. Matelaine tries to speak with me, but I pretend I do not see her, as I have thoughts only for the challenge before us.

As we line up in front of the targets, I narrow my focus so that the world consists of only the target and the tip of my arrow. As easily as I cast Matelaine aside moments ago, I cast aside any doubts or hesitation. The time for subtlety has passed. It is a luxury I can no longer afford. My only recourse is to prove

that there is no one else at the convent whose skills compare to mine. Then the abbess will have no choice but to pick me for the next assignment.

I breathe out, then release the bowstring. Even as the first arrow finds the bull's-eye, I am reaching for the next. I release again, and again, and within a handful of minutes, I have fired all my arrows, with all twelve in a three-inch grouping in the bull's-eye.

Breathless, I ease back to see all the other girls have ceased their practice and are watching me. "That is how you do it, girls," Sister Arnette says with a satisfied nod in my direction. "Now, quit gawking and fire."

And then I must wait for them to finish so I can retrieve my arrows. I repeat the performance with my second and third volley, but by the fourth volley, the wind has picked up. I misjudge its strength, and an arrow goes wide.

"That's it!" Sister Arnette calls out. "We won't be able to get much more practice in with this wind. Put down your bows and—"

I close my ears to her words, make some calculations in my head, then fire again. This one hits the bull's-eye, and the next and the next. The fourth goes wide again, but only because there was a lull in the wind after I released the bowstring.

"Enough." Sister Arnette's voice is right next to my ear. When I turn to look at her, we are nearly close enough to kiss. "It is too windy. We'll come back to it tomorrow." She gives my arm an affectionate pat to let me know I have excelled. Part of me welcomes that small gesture of recognition and wishes to smile back at her in gratitude, just as I would have yesterday or the day before that. Instead, I force myself to ignore it. I want her—all of them—to see just how obedient and pliable I am *not*. "Truly, Sister? Will assailants stop because the wind is too great? Will Mortain unmarque our targets when a breeze blows too strongly? Would not a true assassin be able to shoot under such conditions?"

Still holding my gaze, she calls out to the others. "When you are done here, report to the stables." There is a spark of anger in her eyes. Good, for anger is exactly what I need today to feed this hunger—this desperation—to prove myself.

"Are you trying to shame them?" she asks in a low, tight voice.

Aveline's words of yesterday—was it only yesterday?—come back to me. "No, but how does pretending to be weak make them stronger?" With that, I turn and leave. Even as I make my way toward the stables, a small, bitter worm of regret tries to climb up my throat, but I refuse to feel bad for pointing out the folly of not training in all conditions.

The next lesson of the day goes much the same, only this time I manage to anger the even-tempered Sister Widona, something I have not ever done in all

my years at the convent. Her face is white and pinched as she scolds me for driving my horse too hard and jumping him in his exhausted state, thereby risking breaking his leg and my neck. When she orders me back to the stables, I want to put my heels to the horse's sides and canter in the opposite direction. I can feel him quivering beneath me, eager to be allowed to show his full strength and power. Like me, he has more in him, and Widona cuddles him just as the abbess cuddles me. It is only the threat of being barred from riding for an entire fortnight that causes me to comply, for my riding skills are one of my best arguments as to why I should be the next one sent out.

As I return to the stables—alone and under reprimand—it occurs to me that if I anger enough of the nuns, perhaps they will beg the abbess to send me out on assignment lest they be tempted to kill me themselves.

The next day, we report to the training yard for knife fighting, using wooden blades fashioned by Sister Arnette that have the look and heft of true knives. I have spent nearly the entire night going over and over the abbess's words until my heart is raw and my muscles twitch with a desperate need to do *something* to avert the fate she has in store for me.

I use that sense of desperation to quicken my reflexes and rack up seventeen kills in the first quarter-hour.

Sister Thomine orders a break, then calls me aside. "Your skill is as fine as anyone's I have ever seen," she tells me. "Novice and full initiate alike."

It is all I can do not to ask that she report this to the abbess at once. Instead, I bow my head meekly. "Thank you, Sister."

"However, you are not the only novitiate here. You need to begin holding back or else the other girls will never have a chance to learn *their* skills." Her words cause my head to jerk up in frustration, but she does not notice and gives me an awkward pat on the shoulder, motioning me back to the group.

My next opponent is Matelaine, who looks more than a little wary of me. Instead of giving her a reassuring smile, I narrow my eyes. I cannot go easy, especially not on Matelaine. Not when it appears that the abbess is contemplating sending her out so soon. In the real world, assailants will not hold back or soften their blows, so how will my doing so teach the others anything except how to be weak and die young?

I nod once to indicate I am ready. When she steps forward with a right-handed strike, I move in, and with three quick strikes I have her on the ground. I am not even breathing hard as she glares up at me.

After I beat Matelaine once more, and Sarra twice, Sister Thomine orders me out of the yard for the afternoon. I keep my head held high as I leave, and

remind myself that strength is nothing to be ashamed of.

My redoubled efforts in my training lessons have borne rich fruit, for not only have I demonstrated that no one else is equal to my skill, I have rebelled openly enough that reports of my behavior should make their way back to the abbess and have her reconsidering whether I will be so compliant with her every wish.

While I feel certain that the abbess will quickly see the error of her decision once the nuns' accounts begin to trickle in, it is always best to approach a problem from two sides.

If Sister Vereda were not ill, they would not need me to be their new seeress. Therefore, I must do all in my power to ensure that Sister Vereda recovers.

Chapter Three

SISTER SERAFINA HAS BEEN OVERWORKED ever since Ismae left, as Ismae was the only other one here who was able to handle poisons with no ill effects. With the additional nursing duties she must perform for Vereda, Serafina will be truly buried by all her tasks. It is logical enough that she will need some help.

But if I simply show up and announce my willingness to help, word of it might get back to the abbess, which would not only raise her suspicions but confirm her belief that I am willing to do anything that is asked of me—no matter that it is not what I have trained for. The trick will be to provoke Sister Serafina into ordering me to help so it will not seem like my idea at all. I assure myself that is the reason for my subterfuge and not this overwhelming need that dogs my every step to be precisely the opposite of obedient and helpful.

I pause just outside the infirmary door. As I listen to the clink and tinkle of glass flasks and a lone voice muttering, my mind casts about for some demand that will trigger her ire so forcefully that she will be quick to punish me with extra chores.

I think of the older nun's dear face, her sallow skin and plain features, and the small vanity that has her paying young Florette to pluck the dark hairs that have begun to sprout from her chin, hairs that her aging eyes can no longer see.

And that is when I know what will annoy her the most.

I close my eyes and try to muster the callousness I will need for this, for I am loath to cause Sister Serafina any pain. But surely hers will be a small pain when weighed against an entire lifetime spent shut inside the seeress's chambers.

Besides, as the Dragonette used to work so hard to impress upon me, an assassin has no use for a soft heart. *Ruthless*, she always urged me. *You must be ruthless*. With that reminder, I rise up on my toes, make my steps light and dainty, and prance into the room. "Oh, there you are, Sister!"

Sister Serafina looks up from the herbs she is chopping and frowns at me. At her elbow, a kettle sits over a small flame, and faint beads of perspiration cover her upper lip. "Who is looking for me now?"

I pretend I do not notice her tone. "Just me." I lift a hand to my cheek and frown. "I have come to ask if you could make a special wash for my face. Sister Beatriz says my complexion is not as smooth as it should be to pass for a noble lady at court." Sister Beatriz has said no such thing to me, but she *has* said it to poor Loisse.

Sister Serafina shakes her head in disgust and keeps chopping. “I do not have time for such frivolities, and surely neither do you.”

For a moment my resolve falters. Should I not just confide in her? Would she not sympathize with my plight? After all, it was she who first saw, then subsequently tended, the wounds on my body, even when she had been ordered to leave them alone so that Mortain’s own will could guide the healing process. Her hands were gentle and her tongue mercifully silent of questions as she carefully cleansed and then treated the lacerations. Even more admirable, she has never once brought it up or presumed any special confidence between us, nor even allowed herself to glance toward the scars she once tended with so much compassion.

But it is too big a risk. Just because she did me a great kindness years ago does not mean she has sworn herself to secrecy on my behalf. “Is it frivolous to make myself perfect in Mortain’s eyes so He will use me for His work?” I allow my true concern to show on my face.

“You are already perfect, child,” she says, her voice flat.

I turn to an empty polished metal basin on her worktable and angle it so that I may see my own reflection. “Then why have I not yet been chosen?” The distress in my voice is no subterfuge—it comes straight from my heart.

“I know it is hard for you with both Sybella and Ismae having been sent out. But your time *will* come.”

In spite of the old nun’s words, a hot prickly feeling rises up in me and I want to shout at her that it might not come, it might *never* come if the reverend mother has her way. Terrified by this surge of unfamiliar anger, I bow my head and speak softly. “But surely I must do everything in my power to be ready for that moment.”

Sister Serafina presses her lips together and chops faster. Acting as if I cannot sense her mounting annoyance—indeed, a great thick ox would be able to sense her mounting annoyance—I move closer and peer over her shoulder. “What are you mixing? Is that mallow and comfrey? Those make a fine wash to improve the complexion, do they not?”

The old nun stops chopping and slams her knife down on the table. “I do not have time to hold your hand, nor offer you pretty comfort or useless potions. Surely there is something better you can do with your time. Other skills you can perfect besides your vanity.” She wipes her hands on her apron and pours more water into her small bubbling kettle.

I let my shoulders slump. “But what would you have me do? I am like a fifth wheel on a cart. I am skilled in the use of every weapon in Sister Arnette’s armory; I can best Sister Thomine in a fight as often as she can best me; my

archery skills are better than anyone else's here; and I can ride a horse bareback, backward, or standing up."

Sister Serafina cocks her head, eyes alight with curiosity. "Standing up? I thought only the followers of Arduinna knew how to do that trick."

"No. Sister Widona taught me." I let a plaintive whine creep into my voice. "There is nothing left for me to do. Even Sister Beatriz has taught me every dance, every means of seduction. Why, she has even taught me how to—"

"Enough!" Sister Serafina holds up her hand, halting my words. Surely it was a Mortain-inspired strategy, turning to the one subject that makes her most uncomfortable—the skills of seduction they teach us.

She dumps the handful of herbs she has chopped into the kettle of boiling water. "Very well," she says. "If you have mastered everything they have to teach you, I have some things you have yet to learn."

I take an eager step toward her. "You will give me more poison lessons?"

She snorts. "I have already taught you everything I can about poisons. To learn any more, you would have to be immune to them, and you have not acquired *that* skill, have you?" She turns and looks at me sharply, as if almost hoping it were true.

I shake my head and sigh, fighting down a familiar pang of jealousy at Ismae's most practical and rare of gifts. "Alas, no."

"So I will teach you my other skill. Nursing."

I look at the row of empty beds. "But we have no patient."

"Ah, but we do. Here." She shoves the empty metal basin at me, then picks up a tray covered with small pots of salves and piles of herbs. "Follow me."

Of all the duties the nuns perform here at the convent, those of the seeress are the ones I know the least about. Sister Vereda does not join us at meals, nor participate in our feasts or celebrations. She does not teach us any lessons or train us in any skills. It is as if she does not exist. The only time a handmaiden meets with her is if she is going on assignment and Sister Vereda has Seen it. Since I have not yet been sent out, I have never met with her.

Old Sister Druette, who was seeress before Vereda, was just as mysterious, although far more terrifying. She was known to stand at her door, peeking out into the hallway, ready to grab or pinch a passing novice when she wanted something. Most of us did everything we could to avoid walking down that corridor.

I follow Sister Serafina down the hall that leads to the inner recesses of the convent and struggle to keep my footsteps firm and brisk. Dread begins to seep

into my bones, an awareness that when I step into Sister Vereda's chambers, I could be staring into the face of my own fate.

No. Surely as soon as the seeress can See again, the abbess will put away this idea of hers.

Once we reach the thick oaken door that leads to the seeress's chambers, Sister Serafina shifts the tray she carries, lifts the latch, and slips inside. I try to follow, but my feet will not obey. They are stuck fast, as if they have been entangled in some invisible web.

Sister Serafina turns and frowns at me over her shoulder. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I say, and force myself to step over the threshold.

Sister Vereda's chamber is dark and dim. The smells of a sickroom hang thick in the air: pungent herbs, a full chamber pot, old fevered sweat. It feels like every breath the seeress has ever drawn still sits here, trapped for all eternity. It is all I can do not to gag and run screaming from the room.

I take slow, deep breaths through my mouth and allow my eyes to grow accustomed to gloom. Once they have, the first thing I see is a pale orange glow from the four charcoal braziers set around the room. As my vision adjusts further, I am able to make out the interior, a small, cramped place with no windows, only the one door, and not even a true fireplace.

Sister Serafina sets down her tray, then takes the basin from my hands. "How is she?" she asks the lay sister who sits by the bed.

"She is well enough, for now," the lay sister replies. "But she is fretful when awake, and her breathing grows even more shallow and labored."

"Not for long," Sister Serafina says with grim determination in her voice.

When the lay sister has left, I trail behind Sister Serafina as she draws near the bed. Even though Vereda is old, her cheeks are as smooth and plump as a babe's. I cannot help but wonder if this is because it has been years since she set foot outside this room and felt the sun or the wind against her face. She wears no wimple, but a small linen cap covers her hair with only white wisps escaping in a few places. Her body is a lump, obscured by layers of blankets to keep her warm. As I stare down at her, Sister Eonette's comment that Sister Vereda's illness hints at some sinister undercurrent comes back to me. "What is wrong with her?" I ask, keeping my voice low.

Sister Serafina sets her little kettle on one of the charcoal braziers in the room. "I do not yet know."

"I thought we who were born of Mortain did not get sick?"

Sister Serafina purses her lips and motions impatiently. "Bring me the dried coltsfoot, comfrey, and mallow root you have in the dish there."

I do as she asks and wonder why she will not answer me. Still silent, she takes the herbs and dumps them into the kettle and begins to stir. After a long moment, she finally speaks. “We do not get sick. Or not often, at least. And when we do, we heal quickly. Let us pray that Sister Vereda will heal quickly as well.”

Since it is the prayer I have uttered with every breath I’ve taken since overhearing the abbess’s plans for me, it is easy enough to agree. “Good. Now remove her blankets and unlace her shift. We’re going to put this poultice on her chest and keep it there until the phlegm releases its hold on her lungs.”

In this moment I realize I have no earthly idea what this sort of nursing entails. It sounds most vile. I am torn between laughter and tears. All my life, I have waited in breathless anticipation for my meeting with the seeress. It would be the culmination of seventeen years’ hard work—a triumphant call to serve Mortain. But instead, I am here to empty her chamber pot and wipe up her spittle.

It is almost—almost—enough to make me wish the Dragonette were still alive. And even though she has been dead these seven years, my stomach clenches painfully at the thought.

Chapter Four

IT TAKES NEARLY THREE WEEKS, but just as winter solstice draws near, we are finally able to chase the illness from Sister Vereda's aging body. She is still weak and frail, but she will live.

I have never nursed anyone as vigorously or fervently as I did the old seeress. I slept on a cot next to hers; spooned rich broth through her thin, wrinkled lips; sponged her fevered brow with cool water mixed with herbs; and applied poultices to her shriveled chest with my own hands, desperate to chase the fever from her lungs.

She was not an easy patient, for though I have helped Sister Serafina with new girls when they arrive, the seeress was far more restless and fussy. Not to mention the unpleasantness of her foul, stale little room. I vow, not a whisper of fresh air has entered that room since she was first sealed in it all those years ago.

And so it was with great joy that I awoke two days ago to find her milky-white eyes open, her skin cool, and nothing but grumbling and complaints on her lips, for it takes no small amount of energy to gripe, and surely that is a good sign.

A gust of wind, sharp and salty from the surrounding sea, snatches at my cloak and sends a gray cloud swollen with rain scuttling across the sun. Even though it causes me to shiver, I lift my face and spread my arms wide, willing the brisk air to carry away all the vestiges of the sickroom.

As far as I know, nothing more has been said of me replacing Sister Vereda, at least not that I have been able to overhear. But even if it has, there is more joyous news this morning: Sister Vereda's visions have returned. Assuredly, they were small, unimportant ones, but they were visions nonetheless, and I cannot wait to report them to the abbess. Once I have confirmed that they are true.

That is what brings me to the rookery.

It is dark inside the small hut and reeks of crow droppings and faintly rancid meat. Sister Claude is settling a crow on its perch and crooning in a soothing, tuneless murmur. The old nun's disheveled black habit covers her shapeless form like a set of poorly groomed feathers. Her head, encased in her black veil, is scrawny and birdlike, her nose as long and sharp as any beak. She cocks her head at me. "Haven't seen you in a while. Wondered where you got to."

"I've been helping with poor Sister Vereda, but she is better now, so I should

be resuming my regular duties.”

She grunts. “Too bad no one told the abbess that. You just missed her.”

That news stops me cold. “The abbess? What was she doing here?”

She sniffs. “Said she was taking a turn in the garden and saw the crow come in, but I can’t fathom what she’d be doing in the garden on a day like this. Do you think she was checking up on me?”

“I can’t imagine why she would be,” I assure her. But it is most odd. In all my years here, I do not remember her ever coming to the rookery for messages. It is not like I am the only novitiate who can fetch and carry for her. I distract Sister Claude from her worries by handing her the small packet of sugared almonds I pilfered from the kitchens. “Here, I brought you something. Let me stoke the fire, and then I will heat some wine to go with it.”

The old nun’s face brightens and she clacks her teeth together in anticipation as she goes to take a seat. That is Sister Claude’s secret: she has developed an overfondness for wine. Although who could fault her when she is so often excluded from the excitement and festivities that take place in the convent proper?

I tend the fire until it is burning brightly, then take one of the pokers from the hearth and wipe the ashes from it with my apron. “Who was the message from?” I ask as I thrust the poker into the fire. Pretending I am not overly interested in the answer, I pour wine into a heavy tankard.

“’Tweren’t either of those friends of yours,” the old nun says around a mouthful of nuts, “so don’t be fretting.”

I ignore the thin rebuke, grab the heated poker, and then thrust it into the tankard. There is a faint hiss as the hot metal warms the wine, and the scent of it fills the room.

“’Twas Chancellor Crunard,” she says as I hand the wine to her. That is her other secret, that she will trade bits of information for creature comforts and kindness, things that I would give her anyway.

“And we only received the one?”

“Aye.”

I bite back a sigh. It appears Sister Vereda was spouting nonsense this morning rather than true visions, for she had reported that there would be two messages. Hiding my disappointment, I turn my attention to the crow who is still pacing across the table, faintly agitated and fluffing out his feathers. Trying to decide how much more I can press her for answers—did she have time to read the message before the abbess arrived?—I reach for the thick heavy crock that holds the birds’ rewards and snag a gobbet of meat to feed him.

Just as he snatches it from my fingers, the door to the rookery flies open and crashes into the wall. For a moment I fear that the abbess has returned and has been listening at the door, but no, it is merely the wind howling into the room, causing the crows to raise their voices in caws of annoyance.

“I’ll get it,” I tell Sister Claude. I hasten across the room to push the door shut when my eye is caught by a small, dark speck dizzily making its way through the gathering clouds. It takes me a moment to realize it is another crow.

My spirits lift; the old seeress was correct after all. “I’ll be right back,” I call over my shoulder, then hurry outside.

The poor creature struggles mightily against the wind, which seems to be playing with it much like a cat plays with a mouse. A gust flings the crow higher into the sky, only to have an invisible hand bat him back down so that it is all he can do to stay in the air. For a few seconds he can do nothing but hover, trapped by the force of the wind, before it releases him and he shoots forward.

I raise my arm and the crow lunges for it, grabbing hold with sharp eager claws. Quickly, I bring my other hand up around the bird and begin murmuring soothing noises as I smooth his feathers. I stare at the bulging packet on his right leg. I must make a decision, and quickly.

If Sister Claude knows there is a message, she will watch me closely to be certain I do not read it. And once I leave the rookery, I will not have access to the materials I need to reseal the message and hide evidence of my snooping. In different circumstances, I might have kept the message for a few hours until I found an opportunity to read it, but with the storm coming in, the timing of the crow’s arrival will be well known and my trickery easily caught.

But what if it is from Ismae? Or Sybella? Although I have all but given up hope of ever hearing from them.

Cradling the crow close, I remove the message from his leg. A surge of triumph rises in my chest when I recognize Ismae’s handwriting. Thus decided, I slip the message into one of the pouches of my apron, then slip the crow into one of the bigger pouches. Once I sneak him in, it will be easy enough to hide him among the other birds.

I hurry back to the rookery, an excuse at the ready. But when I let myself in I see that Sister Claude’s head now rests gently on her chest, the tankard empty and loose in her hand.

I murmur a prayer of gratitude, then move to the table and pull the exhausted, bedraggled crow from my apron. Before he can even think about opening his beak to squawk or complain, I slip one of the gobbets of meat in to silence him. I give him two more as bribery, and when he has thoroughly calmed himself, I place him on an empty perch, where he begins grooming his feathers.

I glance at Sister Claude to assure myself she is still napping, then slip my thin-bladed knife from its sheath and pry the wax seal from the parchment. I move over to the light of the fire so I may read the message.

Dearest Reverend Mother,

Much has happened in the last few days, and none of it good. Count d'Albret conspired to come upon the duchess alone and attempted to force himself on her. His attempt only failed because—warned by Sybella—I arrived before he could carry out his ill intent. Alas, there was no marque upon d'Albret's vile person, otherwise I would have gutted him like a fish.

The duchess is fine, if a bit shaken, and is adamant in her refusal to consider d'Albret's offer of marriage, no matter the consequences, and she has issued an edict to this effect. Duval, Captain Dunois, and Chancellor Crunard support her fully in this. Indeed, of all her councilors, I fear those are the only ones she can trust.

We all breathed easier when d'Albret and his retinue left the city but alas, our relief was short-lived. Last night, in front of the entire court during a mummers' play, an attempt was made on the duchess's life. The masked hellequin in the play leaped up onto the great table and pulled a knife. Luckily, Mortain guided my hand with His own, and my aim was quick and certain—I was able to bring the assassin down before he could strike.

Reverend Mother, I fear he may have been a true hellequin, for there was something unnatural about him—some absence of soul that leads me to believe he was not human. Or at least, not fully so.

Ismae's words send a deep chill through me, for while most think hellequin no more than tales told to keep children from straying too far from home, we at the convent know that they are real, and that they too belong to Mortain, although they serve a different purpose than His handmaidens do. They are the tortured souls of the damned who have pledged themselves to serve Mortain in order to earn their redemption.

In the Privy Council meeting immediately after the attempt, Chancellor Crunard revealed my true identity to the others. There is much anger and confusion among the members of the

court right now, along with much finger-pointing. Accusations are flying. I pray daily for Sister Vereda to See a way out of this mess. Or, at the very least, to See who is behind it so I may take action upon him.

*Yours in Mortain,
Ismae Rienne*

When I have finished reading, I hug the parchment to my chest and breathe deeply. Ismae is fine. She is better than fine—she has proven her worth and made the convent proud by saving our young duchess’s life. And she has been in contact with Sybella.

Close on the heels of that sweet relief comes a spurt of bitter heartbreak. I should be there with Ismae, protecting our duchess, doing our god’s work, not trapped on this island. I close my eyes and let the feeling pass through me. I have proof of the seeress’s returning skills; surely that will put a stop to this idea of the abbess’s.

I return to the table and remove the black sealing wax from the small cubbyhole where I keep it hidden. Holding it near the candle, I wait for it to melt, place two thin drops on the exact spot where Ismae’s seal was, then press the original seal into that. When it cools, it looks whole and unbroken, with no hint of anyone having tampered with it.

I slip the resealed message into my pocket, then cross over to Sister Claude. I gently remove the empty tankard from her hand and tuck the blankets closely around her old, thin body. It is time to give the abbess the good news about Sister Vereda.

As I make my way to the abbess’s chambers, a flutter of excitement rises in my chest and it is all I can do not to give a little twirl in the corridor, but I contain myself. Surely a handmaiden of Death should not feel so giddy with delight.

When I reach the abbess’s office, the door is closed. At my knock, she calls out, “Who is it?” and some part of my mind cannot help but notice this is not her customary response.

“It is Annith, Reverend Mother. Another crow arrived just after you left and I have come to bring you the message.”

“Very well, come in.”

When I open the door and enter the chamber, the abbess is just taking a seat. I dip a small curtsy, then approach her desk, the sound of my footsteps nearly silent against the crackle and snap of the fire in the hearth, a fire that does little to warm the chill in the room.

When I reach the desk, I smile—a smile I fill with every ounce of affection I have ever felt for her over the years, no matter that her recent decision threatens to undermine that. “Sister Serafina said I should let you know that Sister Vereda had two small visions this morning. They were true ones, not simply ramblings. And I bring proof.”

Her eyebrows shoot up in what she no doubt intends as surprise, but it seems to me that there is also a faint gleam of alarm in her eyes. “Indeed? And what were these visions?”

I hold out the note. “That we would receive two messages from the mainland today, and that it would be raining before noon. The first drops began to fall just as I came inside.”

The abbess’s face relaxes and she quirks her mouth. “The cook can predict the rain simply from the way her knees creak.”

“But she cannot predict the number of messages we receive,” I point out gently.

She nods her head in a reluctant gesture of agreement. Unnerved by the less-than-joyous reception of this news, I fold my hands before me. “Is that not a good thing, Reverend Mother? That in these most troubled times, our wise and experienced seeress is finally regaining her Sight? I would think that would be something worth rejoicing over tonight as we begin to celebrate midwinter’s arrival.”

“But of course, Annith. I am most delighted to hear this. I only wish that we had more than a report on the weather and a courier’s tally as proof of her returning abilities, but it is a good sign, nevertheless.” She takes up her quill from its stand and nods at me. “I imagine if you hurry, you will be able to help the others decorate the refectory. And Annith?”

“Yes, Reverend Mother?”

Her voice softens, filling with warmth. “That was well done of you, helping Sister Serafina nurse Vereda. It made both of their lives much easier, and I know it brought the old seeress much comfort.”

“It did?” I thought she hardly noticed whose hand was tending her.

“It did. And it proves once again how invaluable you are to the convent—how perfect your obedience and dedication.”

Words crowd up my throat—I did not do it out of dedication, I want to tell her, but because I wanted the seeress to get better so I would not have to take her place.

But I cannot say it. I cannot confess to the abbess that I overheard that conversation. My need to keep such transgressions secret drowns out the need to

deny her words. "I am glad I was able to be of service," I say, "for now that she is well again, perhaps she will See an assignment for me."

The abbess smiles fondly. "Perhaps she will."

I hold her gaze, trying to discern if she truly means that or if she simply thinks it is what I wish to hear.

In the end, I leave her chamber none the wiser.

Chapter Five

WRAPPED IN OUR CEREMONIAL CLOAKS made of thick white wool, we file out of the courtyard just past midnight. Nearly all of us are in attendance, from the youngest to old Sister Claude, who shuffles along beside Sister Serafina, holding on to her arm so that she will not trip and break her aging, brittle bones. In our right hands we carry a lit torch so that we may see the path that lies ahead, and in our left, we hold our offerings to Mortain.

Many of the younger girls carry small cakes from the convent kitchen, ones they piously chose to offer to Mortain rather than eat. Little Audri plans to offer her shoes, which would be more impressive if we did not all know how much she hates to wear them. I suspect the abbess will have one of us collect the shoes after the ceremony. Melusine brings a pearly pink shell from the sea. Matelaine carries the letters her parents have sent her—letters she has read aloud to us a hundred times, as we are all jealous of her two living parents. She is an oddity among us, for her parents—even her false father—see her as a joy rather than a burden and have sent her here to the convent for the opportunities it affords her, not because she is feared or hated. In truth, I am impressed by the depth of her offering.

I have brought an arrow. One that I made with my own hands and the one that flies truest. I intend to aim tonight's offering directly at Mortain Himself so that my prayers will be certain to reach Him.

Midwinter is my favorite time of year, a time when Mortain feels close to us. Once, when I was a child, He was this close to me always. Whether because of my youth, my dire need of Him, or because the terror of those years was simply so strong that it parted the veil between our worlds, I do not know. But I miss it. It is like a faint hunger that gnaws at my heart rather than my belly.

And while I am not terrified like I was as a child, I do feel lost and confused, afraid I will be pushed down a path I've no wish to take. Now more than ever, I need His guidance.

The dim light of the pale moon casts everything in shades of black and silver. Our processional is accompanied by the crashing of the waves against the rocky shore and the moaning of the wind, which whips at our cloaks so that they flap like the wings of the crow Sister Widona carries in a twig cage.

As we make our way through long-dead scrub grass and jagged boulders covered with lichen, I think upon the many tales of the ill-fated love between

Mortain and Amourna and why winter comes to our land. Each of the nine bishoprics of Brittany has its own tale of how Mortain did—or did not—capture the fair Amourna. In the land where the patron saint of travelers was born, it is said that Death traveled far and wide looking for a love that would survive even His dark realm. He thought He'd found it in Amourna, but in the end, the love she bore Him was too fragile to survive Death, and thus He travels the land, mourning for her.

The followers of Saint Brigantia claim it was Mortain's quest for full knowledge of life that led Him to seek Amourna out and open His heart to her, for how can one truly understand life without knowing love?

Those who have dedicated themselves to Saint Mer say that Death gazed upon the goddess of the sea and was smitten, but He could not follow her to her realm, nor she to His, so He settled for Amourna, who mourns being a second choice for all eternity.

In those places where Saint Salonus, the god of mistakes, is well loved and worshiped, they say that it was all a mistake, some trick of fate. Some even claim that Salonus himself had a hand in it.

Those who still honor Dea Matrona claim that Death was once Matrona's consort, and life and death were one. But with the coming of the new god, she cast Death out in order to find a place in the new church. Thus scorned, Death turned to her daughter Amourna for comfort, and it is not Matrona's sorrow that causes winter to blow its harsh winds over the land but her jealous heart.

It is only the followers of Saint Arduinna who have nothing to say on the matter, for while their goddess was there and surely they know what truly happened, out of respect for both Arduinna's sister and her mother, they choose not to contradict either story.

The true story—the one we learn here at the convent—is that Death came upon Amourna and her twin sister, Arduinna, in a meadow, and that He was instantly taken with Amourna's loveliness. Mistrustful of the way Mortain was looking at her sister, Arduinna drew her bow and let fly one of her sharp arrows, which pierced Mortain's heart. But not even a goddess can kill the god of Death. He simply plucked the arrow from His chest, then bowed and thanked her for reminding Him that love never comes without cost. Surprised by His demeanor, she consented to let her sister ride with Him to His home.

The rest of the world believes that winter comes because either Dea Matrona or Amourna is mourning her loss. We who worship Mortain know that neither is true. We know that when the night is at its longest and darkness reigns, Mortain journeys back to our world from His own, and winter follows on His heels simply because it is His own true season.

Tonight's ceremony feels different from all the ones that have come before, as if I am walking along the edge of some knife I cannot see. On one side lies the future I have always dreamed of, serving Mortain as an instrument of Death in the world of men. If that comes to pass, I will never be part of our midwinter celebration again. None of the other initiates have ever returned for it, and that thought brings me great sadness.

On the other side of the blade lies the future I do not wish for myself—that of seeress. And even if that should come to pass and I must remain on this island all the rest of my days, I will still not ever take part in this ceremony again.

Either way, it is the last time I will make this walk, and the night is made bittersweet because of it.

At last we reach our destination—the door to the Underworld itself. The dark gaping mouth is capped by a large flat stone that stands upon other stones, each taller and wider than a man and each planted deep in the earth so that the chamber disappears into the small hill. Smaller stones mark the pathway leading to the entrance.

As the head of our order, the abbess goes first, planting her lit torch between two of the rocks, then kneeling at the opening to Mortain's realm. She places her offering there—I cannot see what it is, no matter how I crane my neck—then bows her head in prayer. When she rises, Sister Eonette goes next, followed by each of the other nuns. Sister Claude is last, and when she is finished with her prayer, it takes not only Sister Serafina but Sister Thomine as well to help her to her feet.

Then it is the novitiates' turn. As the oldest among us, I have the honor of going first. All my life, I have only ever wanted to serve as His handmaiden. Now more than ever, it is important He knows that. That He be reminded of that.

As I step forward, I press my fingers against the sharp point of the arrow, sucking in a breath as it bites into my flesh. When I feel the faint dampness of my own blood, I let it drip onto the arrowhead, careful not to let any of the older nuns see. Something tells me they would not approve.

As I kneel before the door to Mortain's realm, I bow my head. *Please, Mortain, I pray. My life is Yours to command, but if it please You, I would use my skills and gifts in Your service rather than simply sitting in a small room.*

When my prayer is finished, I lay my arrow down atop the other gifts there. As I do, the night breeze shifts, bringing with it an eddy of cold air from the barrow that feels as if it reaches out to caress my face. In that moment, I am certain He has heard me.

Satisfied, I rise to my feet and join the others.

Chapter Six

AFTER THE MIDWINTER CELEBRATION, THE black storm clouds move in from the north and envelop our island, bringing with them howling winds and stinging rain. It feels as if Mortain has come forth from the Underworld with a year's worth of unshed tears.

I am feeling hopeful, but wary and nervous as well, for while I know Mortain received my offering, I also realize I have made a grave—perhaps even fatal—error in my strategy. In my desperation to get Sister Vereda well, I have managed to confirm the abbess's belief that I am willing to do whatever is needed to serve the convent, and I do not know how to undo that. I wish that I could unravel time and replace my actions with different ones, but that is not possible. And so I wait. And fret. I am filled with a nearly unbearable tension, as if my body is a bow being drawn taut by the hand of fate.

When the clouds clear long enough for a crow to get through with a message, I try to haunt the rookery. But the abbess is always there first, as if she is watching even more closely than I am. It cannot be an accident, this new habit of hers to collect the messages herself, and I cannot help but wonder what it means.

What I truly need are some days of vigorous training to shed some of my tension, but the weather does not allow for that. Instead, Sister Beatriz arranges a mock ball so we may practice our dancing, but I am distracted and clumsy and manage to step on Sarra's toes—twice—until she pinches me in retaliation.

This season, whose gifts have always calmed me and brought a renewed sense of purpose to my life, now holds only questions and uncertainty.

Sister Vereda is slowly growing stronger and some days I wish to storm into her chambers and pepper her with questions—on her visions, how she was chosen, and how she lost her sight. Finally, afraid I will go mad, I make my way to the armory. Sister Arnette is not only our weapons mistress but our smith as well. Surely she has something—anything—that needs the pounding of her smith's hammer. I would even settle for horseshoes or cooking pots.

That is where Matelaine finds me, one week after the midwinter ceremony. “Annith?”

I look up from the dented vambrace I am planishing. “Yes?”

“The abbess is asking for you.”

Everything inside me grows still and I carefully set the vambrace and hammer down on the bench. “Did she say what she wanted?” Matelaine gives a quick

shake of her head, and thoughts of Ismae and Sybella bring me to my feet.

“Have there been any crows this morning?”

“No,” she says, the word allowing my heart to calm somewhat.

Somewhat, but not altogether. “Has she met with Vereda?” I try to keep my voice casual, but it is of little use, for Matelaine knows what I am hoping for.

“Not that I have heard, but then, I would not necessarily know.”

We exchange a glance, and she reaches out and squeezes my hand. “I will pray she has an assignment for you,” she whispers, then leaves me to make my way to the abbess’s office alone.

I stand outside the abbess’s chambers and try to compose my features into an expression of calm. I remind myself that this means nothing; I am often called to her office. It is most likely some new task she needs help with—taking inventory of convent supplies or checking on the seeds we have stored for the early-spring plantings.

When I have both my hope and my worry well in hand, I reach out and knock.

“Come in.”

The abbess sits at her desk, a pile of correspondence at one elbow, the large convent ledger in which she records all the assignments at the other. When I see that book, my heart gives another flutter of excitement. “You asked to see me, Reverend Mother?”

She looks up at me and sets aside the letter she was writing. “Ah, Annith. Yes, I did. Please come in. Sit down.” I have not seen her much of late, as she has been busy in her office writing missives that she sends out at the merest lull in the winter storms.

“The midwinter ceremony went well. Thank you for arranging that.”

“It was my pleasure to be of some small help, Reverend Mother.”

“I know. That is one of your best qualities, Annith. Your willingness to step in and do what must be done, cheerfully and with great skill. Sister Serafina says that Sister Vereda continues to do much better, thanks in large part to your help in nursing her.”

I clasp my hands in front of me to keep my desperation from showing. “She is doing much better, Reverend Mother. She is having visions daily now. She saw that Melusine would be swept into the sea and would swim out safely. She saw where the barn cat had her kittens, and she has predicted with great accuracy when the clouds will break and the crows get through, as well as precisely how many messages will arrive.” Except once, when she missed her count by one, but I do not mention that.

The abbess slips her hands inside her wide sleeves and smiles at me with such fondness and pleasure that in that moment, I am certain—*certain*—she will

finally grant me my heart's desire.

"That is why, after much thought and prayer and discussion with the other nuns, I have decided that you will begin training with Sister Vereda immediately so you may take her place as seeress when her aged body finally stops working once and for all."

Her words are like a physical blow, sending all the air whooshing painfully from my lungs. "Please, no!" I whisper.

Her smile evaporates as quickly as my hopes. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"I mean, Reverend Mother, while I am eager to serve Mortain, I do not think I can do it as seeress."

The abbess frowns at my words, but I cannot tell if it is in annoyance or simply puzzlement. "For a girl as dutiful and devout as yourself, I would think it the perfect existence."

"No, Reverend Mother. It would not be."

A brief flash of pain appears in her eyes, as if somehow my not wanting to be seeress has hurt her, but it goes so quickly I am hardly certain I have seen it. "Come, Annith. We always knew you were destined for something special—what is more special than being the seeress, the most unique among all the handmaidens? You will not be interacting with Mortain through intermediaries like the rest of us, but will instead be His voice in the world."

Every word she utters is like a long bony finger wrapping itself around my heart, squeezing until there is no hope left within it. "Reverend Mother, I have spent my entire life training for one thing—to be Death's handmaiden and carry out His will here on earth. At no time have I ever felt called to the duties that Sister Vereda performs."

Her lips thin and her nostrils flare with irritation. "You are young and do not yet know what Mortain truly desires of you."

I realize now, now that it has been taken away from me, that the only thing that kept me from despair all these years was the belief that one day I would finally be able to get off this island—this place where I have had to guard every thought, hide every true feeling, and weigh every gesture. It was the promise of having a life of my own—away from the convent—that fueled my determination to excel at everything they threw at me.

That gives me the courage to speak freely. Or foolishly. "How do you know this is what He wants? Surely, if Sister Vereda had seen such a fate for me, she would have made some mention of it as I sat by her bed day after day for the last fortnight, would she not?"

"Are you questioning me?" The abbess's voice is so forbidding and full of steel that I am reminded of Sybella's insistence that she is not the kind paragon

she appears but a cold ruthless adversary one should be wary of crossing.

“No, I am questioning Mortain’s will.” That suddenly seems far less frightening than questioning hers. “I cannot believe I am the best choice for this job. Does it not take a lifetime of training to be able to do what Sister Vereda does? I have only ever trained to kill.”

“Except the god has other plans for you.”

“Then why has He not allowed me to peer into the future as Sister Vereda does? For I assure you, He has not given me any such gifts.”

Ismae and Sybella used to tease me and claim that I was able to see the future, for how else was I always able to block their blows and slip away seconds before a door was opened or a curtain pulled back? But having a good sense of timing and quick reflexes is a far cry from being able to See the future, let alone See Mortain’s will—a cold trickle of dread seeps into my marrow, and goose flesh erupts along my arms. Unless . . . does this abbess know my secret? The Dragonette promised she would never speak of it, but what if she had and now this abbess knows and *that* is behind the plan to make me the new seeress?

When the abbess speaks again, her voice is quiet, gentle even. “Annith, you need to understand. This is Mortain’s will for you. You must either obey or be cast out. Surely you’re not saying you would rather leave us than serve in the manner that is asked of you?”

Once again, I cannot quite grasp what she is saying. “I cannot be sealed up in that room,” I whisper. She of all people should know that. I do not wish to let her down, but I fear I will wither and die if I must do as she asks.

Her face is so full of poignant regret that it pierces my heart. “If that is how you feel on the matter, we can make other arrangements.” Relief, giddy and sweet, fills me. Until she speaks again.

“There are any number of men who would be only too happy to take you to wife. You are so good with the younger girls, and I am certain there is a widowed farmer looking for someone to care for his children. There always is.”

I stare at her in utter shock, and the ground underneath my feet feels as if it has shifted irrevocably. “Are those truly my only choices?”

“Yes.” She stares back at me, daring me to choose the drab, colorless fate she has set out before me. She is no longer the firm, loving woman I have known all my life but the fierce, ruthless tyrant that Sybella struggled with all these years. Thinking quickly, I bow my head, as if subdued by her words.

She casts aside her sternness for a moment and leans forward. “Think, Annith! How many handmaidens do we have at the convent? And of those, only one is called to act as seeress, only one is deemed worthy of sitting at the very heart of

the convent and being privy to Mortain's wishes. You are being offered this great honor, one bestowed upon a select few."

"Then it is not because I am flawed in some way? Or because I failed one of the Dragonette's tests?"

She appears stricken by my words. "No! It is only that you are more worthy than most. That all your years of training and hardship and endurance have paid off in ways you had not dared to dream of."

And even though her face is the very picture of loving concern, even though her need for me to believe her rolls off her in waves, it is impossible to trust her any longer. Not when she has just altered the shape and direction of my entire life.

Time. I must buy myself time to think.

I allow the overwhelming enormity of what has just transpired to show on my face. "This is all so much, Reverend Mother. So much more than I had ever even considered. I . . . I would like to spend some time in thought and prayer before I give you my answer. I want to be certain I can commit my full heart to what Mortain wants of me, for I will not shame the convent or myself by serving Him falsely."

There is a brief spark of irritation, but she quickly tamps it down. "Very well. But the time I can give you is not infinite. I must know in three days so I can make other arrangements if need be."

"I will have an answer for you by then," I assure her, and I hope that it is true.

Chapter Seven

ONCE I AM OUTSIDE IN the hallway, I stop and lean against the wall, trying to keep panic and desolation from weighing down on me. I press my fingers against my eyes and force myself to take slow, deep breaths, but it does not help. My whole body aches, as if my very bones will burst from my skin.

I have always believed that if I did everything the convent demanded of me, I would be rewarded with my only desire in life—to go forth from the convent and serve as Mortain’s handmaiden. It is the guiding principle I have built my entire life on.

If, as the abbess has always claimed, she is my ally, then how can she foist this unwanted fate upon me?

Before anyone can see me, I make my way to the back of the convent, where the wine cellar is located. My footsteps slow as I draw near. Sybella used to laugh at me, thinking me too afraid to steal wine from the cellar. But the truth—the truth I worked so hard to conceal from both her and Ismae—was that it was not stealing, but the cellar itself that held so much terror for me. Terror born of long nights shut inside, with no scrap of blanket to warm myself or bite of food to eat. A confinement so solitary and harsh that it took me three days to find my tongue after my first night there.

Terror, I remind myself, that I used to make myself stronger, tougher. The idea that it might not have made me strong enough is unthinkable.

But in addition to all that terror, one of my moments of greatest joy occurred in that room, and I cannot help but wonder if that joy is in some way tied to the abbess’s decision to groom me as seeress.

The Dragonette quickly and harshly dismissed the event, and I came to believe what she claimed: that I had merely imagined it. I put it aside, buried it with all the other small shames and mortifications of my childhood. But now, now I wonder if perhaps it was real after all. While I always held out some small shred of hope that it was true—that the Dragonette was wrong, and it hadn’t been my fevered desire to please her that caused it—today for the first time, I want desperately to believe it was *not* true. Because if it was, then perhaps I am uniquely suited to act as seeress after all.

I stop in front of the rough wooden door and glance both ways to be certain no one is nearby. As my hand reaches out for the latch, my heart begins to beat too

quickly and I must remind myself that there is nothing to fear. No one would dream of shutting me in there again.

But the mere idea that they think to shut me in the seeress's chambers for the rest of my life is just as bad.

Squaring my shoulders, I step into the cellar, letting the cold of the room—and a rush of painful memories—settle over me like a mantle.

The first time I was locked in here, I was but two years old, punished for daring to cry when Sister Etienne had been sent out on assignment and I missed her.

The second time was when I'd seen the cook butcher the hen for our evening meal and so refused to eat it. I was locked in the cellar with my bowl of chicken stew and not allowed to come out until I had finished every last drop.

When I was five, I was locked in the cellar yet again, this time for balking at butchering the hen we were to have for our supper. While the other girls closest to me in age were simply scattering feed in front of the hen house or collecting eggs, the Dragonette had decided that I must begin practicing the art of killing. My hands were too small to get a decent hold on the large ax, and the lay sister who had to hold the hen still had no stomach for the task, wishing instead to do it quickly herself and be done with it. And so I faltered, whether through lack of strength or lack of will or simply because I did not understand what was required of me, I no longer remember. What I do remember was being locked in the wine cellar with the wounded chicken and forced to watch its slow painful march toward death, a much more painful death than would have been granted it had I been strong enough.

I spent the first hour sobbing in remorse-filled terror, afraid the chicken would drag itself over to me and peck out my eyes. When that did not come to pass I cried for the chicken itself, and for its obvious agony. At last my tears ran out and I simply sat with my back pressed against the cold stone wall, chilled and shivering as I watched the chicken die.

During that long, horrifying night, at some point I realized I was no longer alone. A tall, darkly cloaked man was there as well. That should have frightened me even more, seeing an unknown man in the heart of our womanly cloister, but I was so relieved at not being alone with the dead bird anymore that it never occurred to me to fear him.

He was long-limbed and graceful and dressed all in black. Even though he lowered himself to the floor next to me, there was something proud and stately in his manner. When I saw him, my hysterical dry sobbing hiccupped to a stop. He quietly took my hand in his, although my fingers were so cold I could not

feel it, and sat next to me, saying nothing. But I was no longer alone, and that brought me great comfort.

I remember falling asleep eventually, leaning against his shoulder, and when the door opened in the morning, they found me sleeping soundly on the floor with my head gently pillowed by a rough hempen sack.

It wasn't until we went to church that morning and I saw the marble statue in the sanctuary that I recognized the hooded, cloaked figure. It was Mortain Himself whose arm I'd drooled on while drifting off to sleep.

Excited by this, I could not wait until the Dragonette summoned me to her office later that day. I told her all about my nocturnal visitor. I thought she would be overjoyed by this sign of His pleasure with me, but instead, the corners of her lovely mouth turned down with disapproval. "You are lying," she said.

"No!" I was distraught and more than a little terrified that she would think so.

"Ah, but you are, for you wish yourself to be special. I'd expected more from you than cheap lies." Her eyes—always so shrewd and piercing and full of her confidence in me—filled with tears, and I was shamed beyond measure that I had caused her such pain. Feeling lower than the grubs that root in the convent midden heap, I fell to my knees and begged her forgiveness.

Now I cross to the wall where I once thought I'd dozed with Death. It is blocked by a stack of small barrels and kegs so that I cannot sit down and lean against it like I did those many years ago. Instead, I reach out to touch the wall, trying to resurrect that moment in my life.

But nothing comes. There is no strong visceral reaction, no sudden clearing of memory, no true answers flaring to life at the touch, and I am left hoping it was nothing more than a child's overwrought imagination coupled with a desperate need to worm her way into a demanding abbess's good graces.

If it was not, then I am well and truly suited to being the seeress. And as much as I love Death, I do not think that I love Him enough to entomb myself in the convent before I have even lived.

Chapter Eight

I DO NOT SLEEP AT all that night and instead imagine that the walls of my room are drawing closer, pressing down on me, nearer and nearer until they threaten to force all the air from my lungs.

The morning brings little relief, for we are all trapped inside yet again. Today we are confined to the convent armory under the sharp-eyed supervision of Sister Arnette. Winter's storms and damp salt air will corrode the fine steel of our weapons, dulling the blades, and mildew the soft leather harnesses and sheaths if we do not tend to them, so today we sit with crocks of goose fat and bags of fine sand, polishing every metal surface in the armory.

It is the perfect task for me—a mindless activity that requires little thought but allows for my physical restlessness. Just as the rag in my hand circles over and over the fine steel of the knife blade, so too does my mind polish the few options available to me so that they are bright and sharp and clear.

I can acquiesce to the abbess's wishes, as I have always done. Or I can . . . What paths are truly open to me?

I try to think if I have ever heard tell of a handmaiden of Death refusing to serve or choosing to walk away. I have not, but with my newly awakened cynicism about the convent and its motives, I'm not sure the nuns would pass down such tales, even if they existed.

I could simply leave. Sneak off in the dead of night and run away.

Except I feel certain the abbess would use all the power at her disposal to bring me back.

Or perhaps, as old Sister Appollonia used to claim, Mortain Himself would send His horde of hellequin after any daughter of His who dared to defy Him. I think of Ismae's letter and shudder.

I set down the knife I have just finished polishing and pick up another. I swipe the rag in the yellow goose fat, then dip it into the dish of fine sand.

But *am* I defying Him? That is at the root of my uncertainty. Has He asked this of me, or is it the abbess's will?

If it is His will, am I willing to turn my back on Mortain and all He has meant to me? Forget all the times He has been there for me? My faith, my dedication to Him, is as much a part of me as my arm or my leg or my heart.

It is hard not to question my own motives, for I realize now that I have been trained since birth to blame myself as thoroughly as I have been trained to wield

a blade. It is so easy for the sisters to imply that it is my obedience and willingness to surrender my will to Mortain that is being tested—but what if that is not what is being tested at all?

What if that is what they tell us so we will not question their own selfish motives?

As I set down the polished knife and pick up the next one, a wave of desire hits me, so strong that it causes my hands to tremble. I want to use this blade. All the blades here in this room. That this could be taken away from me leaves me nearly breathless.

Then an entirely new realization dawns on me, and the fingers clutching the slender stiletto's handle grow white. What if this is a test from Mortain Himself rather than from the convent? A test for me to prove my commitment to Him, prove my unwillingness to be diverted from His plans for me?

What if, instead of surrendering, I am supposed to fight for what I want? For surely Mortain does not fashion His handmaidens into such strong weapons and then expect them to topple in the first stiff breeze.

And how am I to know which it is?

Next to me, Sarra rubs her nose with the back of her hand before reaching for another knife. “You look like you’re planning to stab someone with that, not polish it.”

Keeping the knife clenched in my hand, I look up at her and allow every bit of anger and frustration I am feeling to show in my eyes. She blinks and leans imperceptibly back. *Good*, I think, then smile, a movement so brittle it is a wonder my cheeks do not shatter.

The armory door opens just then, admitting a gust of frigid air and Sister Thomine. When she steps into the room, her gaze goes directly to Matelaine. “The abbess would like to see you in her office,” she says.

Matelaine looks shocked, then worried, and I do not blame her, but something in the way that Sister Thomine will not look at me causes an alarm to begin clanging inside me like a distant bell.

Matelaine rises to her feet and brushes back her long, bright red hair. “But of course,” she says in a contrite tone, already apologizing for any wrong she has done.

As she and Thomine leave the room, I carefully resume polishing the knife. I feel the other girls glance my way, curious that Matelaine is being called to attend the abbess. Even Sister Arnette's gaze lands upon me, but I carefully keep my head bent and do not look up. For some reason, I think of Sybella and how she was sent back out before she had fully healed. All of us, even the nuns, could see that she wasn't ready yet. For a while, I thought it was due to the innate

skills she'd arrived with, and perhaps tinged somewhat by the fact that she and the abbess clashed from the very beginning, like an angry cat dropped amidst a pack of dogs.

And then I remember Ismae, who had no innate skill except for the thin veil of anger she wore and her resistance to poison, and I am filled with a sudden desperation. I glance over at Sister Arnette. She is helping Loisse, who has managed to cut herself on a blade in spite of knowing better. Like a single ray of sun forcing itself through the clouds, a realization dawns—I no longer care, at least today, if I anger Sister Arnette or any of the nuns. An urgent need to know what the abbess is discussing with Matelaine drives me to my feet and pushes me toward the door.

I stop where the corridor branches off into the short hall that leads to the abbess's private chapel, but no one is around to see, not with the bitter wind howling down the hallways like an angry wolf.

As I settle into position, I hear the murmur of voices. I recognize the abbess's low, calm tones and Sister Thomine's shorter, louder responses. It takes my ears a moment to adjust to the low cadences so that I can understand the actual words being said.

“. . . tells me you have shown great improvement.”

“I am honored that she thinks so, Reverend Mother.”

“You should feel honored that Mortain has seen fit to bless you with such skill,” the abbess says. The reproof in her voice is mild, but it is there.

Matelaine murmurs something I cannot hear, then the abbess speaks again, this time her voice soothing, as if comforting the wound her earlier words have just made. “Because of your great improvement and your renewed dedication to your studies, you are to be rewarded with your first assignment.”

My heart slams against my rib cage like a bolting horse, driving all the air from my lungs so I cannot draw breath. When my breath finally returns, it brings with it a hot gush of anger. My ears fill with a great rushing sound and something inside me snaps. Or breaks. Or shatters. With no thought to the consequences of my actions, I throw open the door to the abbess's chambers and step into the room.

The voices stop abruptly, and three heads turn in my direction. Two mouths, Sister Thomine's and Matelaine's, are open in shock, but the abbess's is pressed into a firm, flat line. Spots of angry red appear on her pale cheeks. “What is the meaning of this?”

My entire body thrums with barely checked fury. “You cannot send Matelaine.” I step farther into the room and slam the door behind me. “You cannot.”

“Have you been listening at my door?” the abbess demands.

“This is not right. Matelaine is too young to be sent out. Too untrained. She is not ready yet.”

The abbess rises from her chair, trying to use her height to intimidate me, but I am beyond caring. “You forget your place here, Annith. Remove yourself at once to your chambers and wait for me there.”

But I have not forgotten anything. Indeed, it feels like I have finally remembered myself. Deep inside me, the alarm keeps clanging. “You cannot be serious about sending Matelaine out! She is only fifteen. She has not passed any of the tests required to be a full initiate, nor has she learned all the skills needed —”

“So are you now the novice mistress, and no one told me?”

The icy sarcasm in her voice is sharp enough to strip the flesh from my bones, but it doesn’t matter. Instead, I say what we all know is true. “I have trained longer and passed all the tests.”

“We have already spoken of this. Serving Mortain is not a right, but a privilege. A privilege *I* grant to you, not one you can march in here and demand for yourself.”

“I thought it was a privilege granted by Mortain.”

Her head rears back slightly, but before she can respond, I continue. “I can best Matelaine in a fight, and shoot ten bull’s-eyes to her one. I can land a killing blow faster and more accurately than she can.” In spite of how it might appear to the abbess, it is no longer about what I *want*. I am well and truly afraid for Matelaine. “Would you send ten-year-old Lisabet next? Or Loisse? No one this young has ever been sent on assignment before, and you are surely risking her life.”

“What of Margot or Genevieve? They were but twelve years old.”

For a moment, I cannot fathom whom the abbess is talking about, and then I remember. “Are you merely placing Matelaine in the household of one of our enemies to act as spy, like you did them?” The panic in my chest lessens somewhat.

“What I do is none of your concern.”

“It is if I am to be seeress.”

I hear Sister Thomine’s sharp intake of breath, and Matelaine whips her head around to stare at me. For one hugely satisfying moment, the abbess is speechless, for she knows I am right. If I am seeress, then I will be involved in all these decisions—I will be the one to See who is to stay and who is to go. She cannot deny it.

“But not until you have completed your proper training.”

“Then Sister Vereda has Seen this?”

The silence in the room is thick and absolute. Sister Thomine turns to look at the abbess, and even Matelaine seems uncertain.

“Of course she hasn’t. Since her illness, her visions have only been of small, pointless things.”

“Then how can you send Matelaine out?”

The abbess’s mouth snaps shut, and as we stare at each other, I feel the past seven years of my life unraveling like an old rope. “You think Mortain’s business comes to a stop when one of us is ill?” she says at last.

“What if that is the very reason she has grown sick? Because Mortain wishes the convent business to cease for a while?”

“Mortain will protect Matelaine like He does all His daughters,” the abbess says through clenched teeth. She turns to Matelaine. “Go to your chambers and pack your things. I will be there shortly to give you your final instructions.”

As Thomine and Matelaine leave the room, the abbess thrusts her hands in her sleeves and strides over to the window. I flinch as she passes, her anger as palpable as a fist. But so is my own. “I have earned this,” I tell her in a low, hard voice. “By right of all of the Dragonette’s trials, I have earned my place as an instrument of Death.”

She turns to look at me, her eyes blazing blue fire. “And what of me, Annith? What have I earned?”

“What?”

“You speak of the Dragonette, of your time with her. Who was it that snuck you food to eat when she would have had you go hungry? Who was always there, ready to free you from your confinement early, even at the cost of punishment to myself? Who soothed you when you cried, hid your crimes from her, and did everything possible to make your life bearable?”

“You did.” Every word she says is true. While Sybella might feel the current abbess to be harsh and unfair, to me she could never be a true monster. Not like the Dragonette, who still gives me nightmares, even though she has been dead for seven years. And while this abbess was as much my rescuer as any knight from the tales of chivalry, I never expected her to use the affection between us like a merchant with a sack of coins, trying to bind my will to hers.

She takes a deep breath and visibly calms herself. “By rights, I should have you expelled from the convent for such insubordination and disobedience. However, because of the extreme fondness I hold for you, I am going to assume this is a one-time occurrence—brought on by the duress caused by the weighty choice before you. But make no mistake, Annith, if this happens again, I will throw you out.”

And there it is. The threat I have lived with my entire life. If I am not good enough, kind enough, thoughtful enough, obedient enough, I will be cast from my home like a stunted fish from a fisherman's net.

The abbess takes a deep breath and folds away her anger like an unneeded blanket. "Now, I must have your answer, Annith, for I am leaving the convent to travel to Guérande in two days, as events are growing ever more serious. I need to know if this is settled before I leave, and more importantly, I need to know if I can trust you."

My heart leaps at the news that she is leaving, for if she is gone from here, then I will have more freedom to . . . what? Maneuver. Think. Strategize. Search for answers to the burning question of why she will not let me take my rightful place in Mortain's service. All that I do not know swirls inside me, like some foul storm, so strong it nearly makes me ill. But I know my chance of finding answers will be better with the abbess gone. I take a deep breath and put my hands up to my face, as if to scrub the tumult away. When I withdraw my hands, I see the abbess watching me carefully. "Yes, Reverend Mother." I permit a faint tremble of uncertainty to show and allow my shoulders to droop, as if in defeat. "If there is no other choice, I will stay at the convent to serve as seeress."

It is not the first lie I have ever told her, but it is the first one that I do not feel any guilt or remorse for having told.

Chapter Nine

I FIND MATELAINE IN HER ROOM packing a small leather satchel. She is no longer dressed in her habit but in a traveling gown of forest green with her red hair unbound from its customary braid. She looks up when I enter. When she sees that it is me, the bright look on her face evaporates and she returns to her packing. “What do you want?”

“I have come to bid you farewell. And to explain, and perhaps apologize.”

“You think you can explain away trying to humiliate me in front of the abbess?”

“Matelaine, I was not questioning your skill or devotion—I was questioning the abbess’s decision. You are being sent out before you have even completed your training and I am truly concerned for your safety.”

“Are you sure you are not simply jealous? We all know how much you’ve been longing for an assignment of your own.”

“That is true—I won’t deny it. But even if I were leaving on an assignment of my own this very minute, I would still be worried for you. Aren’t you the least bit concerned? With all the lessons you haven’t been exposed to and the tests you haven’t taken yet?”

She snorts as she places two clean linen shifts in the satchel. “If I was, do you think I’d confess it to you so you could carry the tale straight to the abbess and attempt to keep me from going?”

A sense of helplessness and futility washes over me. I look out the window, wondering how to explain to her the complexity of what I am feeling when I can scarce explain it to myself.

“Is being the next seeress not enough of a prize that you must grab my tasks as well?” Although she keeps her voice pitched low, anger hums through it.

I turn from the window, hoping she will see the truth of my words writ clear upon my face. “I do not wish to be seeress and would gladly trade with you! It does not feel special. It feels like a trap—a trap that I will be stuck in until the day I die. But more importantly, I have no skill, no aptitude for it, and I cannot understand why the abbess has chosen me for such a role.”

She shakes her head. “And now you act as if you know more than the abbess. Truly, Annith, you have let the nuns’ praise go to your head.”

She is the third friend of mine to be sent away, and I am terrified that I will not be so lucky as to have all three survive. I fear for Matelaine in a way that I

did not for Ismae or even Sybella. She is so much younger and less experienced. “Matelaine, I do not wish to part—”

“After Ismae left, you and I were the closest in age, and I saw that you were lonely, and I was lonely, and I thought maybe we could be friends. Well, I understand now. We will never be friends. You need not worry that I will make that mistake again.”

Her words cut me to the quick. I reach out and grab her hand, squeeze it. “We have always been friends. But Ismae—well, she was one of the first true friends I had ever had. Of course I was closer to her, just as you are closer to Sarra and Lisabet over Loisse and Audri. It does not mean that Loisse and Audri don’t have a place in your heart.”

There is a long moment of silence, then Matelaine wrinkles her nose. “Well, I’m not particularly fond of Sarra,” she says, and I am filled with a giddy sense of relief. Then her face grows serious. “You always hold a piece of yourself back, Annith. For all your love and affection and kindness, there is always a part of yourself that you withhold from others.”

And of course, she is right. For one sharp moment, I teeter on the edge of sharing my past with her, my awkward, painful childhood, but I cannot. Not now, when she must be preparing herself for the challenges ahead. I squeeze her hand again. “When you return,” I tell her, “if I am not sealed away in that cursed room and unable to speak to anyone, I will tell you about that part of my life.”

She smiles then and gives my hand a return squeeze. “I will look forward to hearing it.”

I surprise her by throwing my arms around her and giving her a fierce hug. “Be safe, Matelaine. I will pray for you every day until your return.” Tears sting at my eyes and try to crowd their way up my throat. With one last encouraging smile, I turn and leave before the abbess arrives.

Chapter Ten

FOR ALL THE TRAINING I have done, for all that I have practiced stealth and cunning and deceit, I never dreamed that my first true use of those skills would be against the very convent I serve.

Because I do not want the abbess to change her mind about leaving, I become as biddable as the sheep she wishes me to be. I do not even give in to the temptation of letting my mind stew over all the questions and issues that plague me, for fear that she will sense it somehow.

It is like putting a lid on a boiling pot.

My new role at the convent is announced that night at dinner amid much merrymaking and goblet-raising, as if the abbess is determined to show me just what a joyous occasion it is. I smile so much that my cheeks ache with it, and I look demure, as if slightly stunned that such an honor should be laid at my feet.

By the next day, as the abbess makes her final preparations to leave, the other girls have begun to look upon me with poorly hidden suspicion, as if I suddenly have the ability to snatch the very thoughts from their heads, and they withdraw from me. They edge away on the prayer bench, claiming to remember something they forgot, then choose different seats when they return. All these girls whose bruises I have tended, whose bodies I have trained, and whose secrets I have shared now act as if I have suddenly sprouted wings or a second head. They have started to separate me from their daily lives just as Sister Vereda is separate, and I feel a lifetime of isolation stretching out before me, as endless as the sea.

Of course, it is too much to ask that the abbess should leave the island without one final meeting between us. I marshal every fiber of deceit and subterfuge I possess and weave them into a façade of calm acceptance to wear for our encounter.

“I have told all the other nuns of your new duties so they know you are not to participate in any further training exercises except as seeress.” She is not sitting behind her desk but standing beside it, putting a few final things into her valise.

I smile cheerfully. “Very well, Reverend Mother.”

“Sister Vereda will start with small daily lessons that you can then practice on your own.” She pauses in her packing. “Annith, I cannot tell you how important it is that you apply your considerable talents to these tasks. The gathering political storm is bearing down on our country. From all reports, the duchess’s court has splintered into factions, leaving her and our country even more weak

and vulnerable than before. We must bring every skill and every resource we possess to her aid.”

“But of course, Reverend Mother. I will use every talent at my disposal to serve Mortain and our country in this most dire time.” I wait to see if she catches it, the way I have avoided promising to devote myself to my new seeress duties, but she is so distracted by her imminent departure that she does not appear to notice.

She rattles off a few more last-minute instructions. Apparently, just because I am to be seeress does not mean I am not to serve as her right hand as well. When the meeting is finally over, I wish her a warm farewell, then turn to leave.

“Annith?”

I pause with my hand on the door. “Yes, Reverend Mother?”

“Is everything all right between us?” The note of longing in her voice surprises me. After all that has transpired, after all her bullying and cajoling, can she believe things might ever be right between us again? I look over my shoulder and give her a smile so warm I almost manage to convince myself of its sincerity. “But of course, Reverend Mother. Everything is exactly as it should be. I will pray daily while you are gone.”

I do not tell her that the nature of those prayers will involve asking Mortain to help me find a way to expose her actions for the lies and betrayals that I believe them to be.

Needing to be certain she is truly leaving, I follow her down the path to the beach. Hidden from view among the bushes that edge the rocky beach, I watch as the night rower helps her into the boat. She is taking two of the lay sisters with her as traveling attendants, and they will row themselves across in a second boat.

As the old sailor pushes off, she sits, stiff and straight, in the prow of the boat, her gaze firmly fixed on the mainland.

Why has she changed the very nature of my service to the convent? Is it something inside me, or inside her? And what options do I have, short of running away? For if I were to do that, it would leave her plots and machinations unchecked and unquestioned, and she might send Sarra or Lisabet out next.

Surely there are rules that abbesses must follow, and avenues of redress available when they do not. Or are we novitiates fully at the mercy of the convent?

That prospect is too grim to contemplate, so instead, I decide to do everything in my power to learn what is behind her decisions. Then I will see if that

knowledge can be shaped into a weapon that can be used to force her to change her mind.

Chapter Eleven

WHEN IT IS TIME FOR me to meet with Sister Vereda for my first seeress lesson, it is all I can do not to run screaming in the opposite direction.

“You’re late,” she says when I let myself into her chambers.

“How can you say so when you cannot see the hourglass?”

She sniffs. “Monette brought my tray in some time ago.”

“Perhaps Monette was early, Sister.”

Her mouth twitches and I cannot tell if it is due to some faint hint of humor or she merely found a crumb of bread hidden in her cheek. I fold my hands in front of me and try to look contrite. “What shall you be teaching me today?”

“Punctuality, for one. And respect for your elders. If you happen to learn a bit about how to read Mortain’s will in the flames of the sacred fire, that would be good too. Bring that empty brazier closer to the bed now. And be careful not to spill the ashes.”

Once I have done that, she sends me to fetch the small bag of crow feathers we will need. Unable to see a thing in the gloom, I light a candle before I move toward the shelves. They are crowded with boxes and small caskets, piles of small bones, and a silver chafing dish. I grope carefully, hoping not to knock anything over. My hand bumps into something as cold as glass but far, far heavier. Even though it is clearly not the sack of feathers, I pick it up and bring it closer to the candlelight.

It is a small, dark vial, but so heavy that I know it is made out of crystal, although I did not know crystal could be as black as night. The surface is cut into facets, and the candlelight shimmering upon it gives the illusion of stars in the night sky. Carefully, I lift the stopper, which ends in a long, thin pointed wand. That is when I know precisely what I hold in my hand. It is the Tears of Mortain, administered to every novitiate who sets out on His path so that she can better discern His will for her.

My hand closes around the vial and I clutch it tight, as if I could absorb the knowledge and gifts the drops bestow through the crystal. It is just one of the mysteries of the convent that I have been denied.

“Annith?” comes the old voice. “Are you still there?”

“Yes, Sister. The feathers were buried under the bones. What sort of bones are they, anyway?”

As she prattles an answer, I reluctantly return the Tears of Mortain to their

place. I cannot use them now, but it comforts me to know where I can find them should I ever need them.

Having no intention of spending all my days studying augury, I begin making plans to learn what is at the heart of the abbess's decisions, for it has become painfully clear that she is not using me simply to fill some general need of the convent. Her desire to have me be seeress is personal. If it is something about me that makes me uniquely suited for the position, then why not just tell me? And if she will not, then perhaps there is something in the convent records of my birth that will explain her decision. Now that I have been awakened to how thoroughly trained I am to accept lies as truth, I feel I must reexamine everything I have been told.

It is possible that I am not truly alone in the world. Perhaps I have some family—however distant—to go to should I decide to escape.

And there it is: *escape*, the word I have been avoiding since I first realized I had no choice but to pretend to accept the abbess's plans. She has changed the very nature of the bargain we made so long ago, when I pledged my undying loyalty and unwavering devotion in exchange for—what? For her to see me as unflawed? For her to allow me to pursue what I had dreamed of my entire life? Of course, I was too young to put all that into words, but she knew well enough. She has always played me like an instrument tuned to her hands, and this was no exception.

After a week of scouring the convent's scriptorium, I acquire only a small pile of information, but it is more than I had when I started. I learn that the seeress must be either a virgin or a woman beyond childbearing years who has sworn an oath of celibacy. That is it—the only two requirements for the office. Those who are caul-born or whose eyes have been blessed with Mortain's gift of Seeing into a man's heart make the best seeresses, but nowhere does it say that either is required. So whatever is behind the abbess's desire to have me serve as seeress, it is not my having something that others here do not possess. I am not the only one—or even the best one—to take on those duties.

But that is the only fruit my search has borne. I have found nothing about my own past. While I did not have a surname or place of birth to go by, Annith is a rare enough name, and I had hoped it was used only by certain noble houses. However, although I have learned that the noble houses of Brittany contain three hundred Annes, four Mildreths, and two Annelises, there is no other Annith on record.

With so very little on which to hang my hopes, I find it ever harder to endure my lessons with Sister Vereda. Thoughts of escape dance around in my head like

leaves in a windstorm, and I fear she will reach out with her gnarled hand and snatch one, then all my hopes will be lost.

It is two weeks before I find an opportunity to search the abbess's office. Sister Eonette appears to enjoy her time in there and lingers far past her morning hours. I wonder if she wishes to be abbess, and if so, would she welcome my exposure of the current abbess's lies? I remember her heated conversation with the abbess on the day I first overheard the plans to make me seeress and realize I may have an ally in this, if it comes to that.

I do not like the subtlety of having to pick the lock on the abbess's door, but it cannot be helped. I slip one of my nearly needle-thin blades into the lock, lift, turn, and sigh in relief at the satisfying *snick* as it unlocks.

Pale moonlight spills in from the two windows, illuminating the enormous cupboard that covers most of the wall behind the desk. It might well take me all night to search each of its hidden drawers and shelves. I push away from the door, eager to get to work. Although there is only a quarter-moon, it is bright enough for me to see by, so I do not need to risk lighting a candle.

The intricate scrollwork of the cabinet is carved with strange wild beasts cavorting among curves and arches, their polished wooden eyes watching me as I try to open one of the doors. It is locked. I cast about for a likely hiding place for the key. Hopefully it is not dangling from the ring Sister Eonette wears at her waist.

My luck holds and it is in the first place I look, the drawer of the abbess's desk, for who would dare breach the abbess's inner sanctum without invitation?

Me, that's who, and I will dare much more than that before I am done.

There are four keys, and one by one I try them. The third unlocks it. The first drawer coughs up nothing but bills and receipts for goods sold to the convent: bolts of dark blue samite for new habits and white wool for the midwinter cloaks, leather for shoes and grain from the local miller. In the second drawer is correspondence with Church officials about local matters, such as the leasing of fields on the mainland, and the letter from the abbess of Saint Mer just before she sent Melusine.

I turn my attention to the bottom cabinet. This one contains a number of small drawers and cubbies stuffed with more letters and old correspondence, some small coins, and half-used sticks of sealing wax. At the very bottom is a large drawer. I take a deep breath as I open the drawer, letting it out when I finally see the prize I have been looking for—the large leather-bound ledger that contains the record of every one of Mortain's handmaidens as far back as the first days of the convent.

I grasp the book with both hands, carry it over to the window, and set it on the sill.

The pages are old and yellowed and some so fragile I fear they will come apart under my fingers. Gingerly, I turn each page, marveling at the old script, so ornate as to be nearly unreadable.

I keep turning the pages, looking for dates that correspond to my arrival at the convent. Finally, nearly three-quarters of the way through, I see *July 1472* scrawled atop a page. I run my finger down, past entries for July, August, and September, then quickly turn the page, but the next one is dated January of 1473. That cannot be correct. I arrived in the fall of 1472, toward the end of October. I turn back a page, but the last date is still September 1472.

How can that be? According to the ledger, I have never existed at all.

Perhaps the dates are out of order. I bring the heavy book up closer to my face and tilt it toward the moonlight. A leaf is missing. It appears that the page that holds all the answers I seek has been carefully torn from the book.

My pulse quickens, for is not the fact that the page is missing a sort of answer in itself?

To be certain, I hurry back to the drawer, thinking perhaps the page had simply come loose and fallen out, but no, the drawer is empty except for a large flat box. It is of some dark, glossy black wood, and I turn it over and over in my hands but can find no lid, no seam, no catch, no way of opening it. But it is heavy, and something inside moves when I shake it.

My hands tingle with excitement, for it must be something truly important to be enclosed in a box that cannot be opened. As enticing as that is, the box likely does not hold the answers that I seek, so I put it aside and resume my search for some record of my arrival.

I move to the bottom right cupboard and give a small gasp of delight when I find a neat row of small, calfskin-bound black books. I pull one out, flip it open, and am pleased to see the abbess's elegant writing covering the vellum. As my eye moves across the words, I realize that it is a recording of the day-to-day operations of the convent. I turn a few more pages, and when my eye is caught by the name Melusine, I quickly read the abbess's summary of her arrival. Surely that means all our arrivals would be noted in these journals as well as in the main convent ledger.

I pluck the fifth one from the end, and when I open it I see that the handwriting is not that of the current abbess but a bolder, more precise script. I glance at the dates: 1470 to 1475. With trembling hands I turn the pages, skimming the words until my own name jumps out at me. Clutching the journal

to my chest as if the words might disappear before I can read them, I hasten back to the window so I may have the full light of the moon.

1472

Today the night rower delivered a small babe, a tiny wrinkled thing that cannot be but a handful of days old. According to the hedge priest and the herbwife who delivered the child, the girl was sired by Mortain, but the priest and the herbwife did not know who the mother was or could even name her. The night rower's son's wife has recently lost a babe and will be glad for the work as wet nurse. Thus does our Lord Mortain provide for even the least and smallest of His creatures.

1474

The child called Annith grows apace and is apparently healthy. At two years of age, it is not too early to begin her training. Indeed, she will be most fortunate among us, for few are given the opportunity to begin walking in Mortain's path at such a tender age. Besides, the novice mistress coddles her too much and will make her soft. Best to train any softness out of her as early as possible so she may be as perfect for Mortain's service as we can make her.

1475

The child cried and sobbed and made a terrible fuss over being parted from Sister Etienne. As punishment, she has been locked in the cellar until she is willing to sleep in her own bed in the dormitory with the other girls without fussing. I will show her that she does not need anyone to survive and that it is unwise to form such attachments. I shall have to think of some punishment for Sister Etienne as well, for she is almost as distraught as the child.

1475

It took three days to break the child, which, were it not so inconvenient for us all, would speak admirably of her will and spirit. We will take that raw stuff and mold it into a truly remarkable weapon for Mortain's use.

1475

The child cried inconsolably when two of the barn cat's kittens died. We explained to her that death was nothing to be afraid of, but when she would not listen to reason, more extreme measures were called for. She was locked in the wine cellar again, with the two dead kittens, in order to prove to her that she had nothing to fear from death. When she was finally quiet, she was let out. Sister Etienne said she did not speak for two entire days. Let us hope that means this lesson has been fully impressed upon her.

A hot sickness churns in my stomach, then crawls up my throat and spreads down through my arms. It is one thing to have such memories locked away in one's head where they are subject to one's own doubts and the softening of time. It is quite another to have them so coldly recorded upon a page, with no regret or admiration or anything to indicate the true torment of what I suffered.

I swallow convulsively as a wave of old familiar fear rises up in my throat. But I feel something new as well, something dark and unexpected. Anger. No, not anger, I realize as my heart hammers and my skin feels as if it will erupt into flames. Fury.

Outrage that the awful terror of my young life is laid out so casually, as if the abbess were reporting how many lambs the ewes dropped in the spring.

Fury at the sheer callousness and cruelty and harshness of the punishments doled out to me when I was younger even than little Florette.

I want to fling the book from me, throw it into a fire and burn it to ash, but I also want to clasp it tight as proof of what I have endured. What I have *survived*.

Proof of what is truly owed me.

The Dragonette's calm, passionless words drive home just how much was demanded of me as a child in order for me to earn my place at the convent. That feeling has chased me all my life—that I am a flawed and imperfect vessel.

My cooperation—no, my full and utter capitulation to their desires—was the price I *had* to pay for survival. It was a bargain as binding as any contract, for all that it was a silent one. I pledged to do all that she asked of me, agreed to rise to the challenge of all her bedamned tests—and in return, I would be allowed to serve as handmaiden to Mortain.

I have earned that destiny. By right of all that I have endured, I have earned this. Such was the silent contract between the Dragonette and me, sealed in my

own blood and pain and terror, and no one, certainly not the current abbess, can change the terms of that bargain.

I slip the journal into the pocket of my apron and turn to the cabinet directly behind the abbess's desk. It is nearly morning, and I am out of time. My heart hammering in my chest, I return the convent ledger to the drawer. I lift the box to return it as well, then pause, weighing its heft in my hands. To someone who collects secrets, the box is too great a temptation to leave behind. Besides, perhaps whatever it holds is important enough that I can use it as some form of leverage.

Chapter Twelve

I AM NOT ABLE TO leave right away. There are preparations to make in order to ensure the nuns do not come after me, at least not until I have gotten well away from the coast and the main roads.

For a moment, a brief moment, I feel a pinch of uncertainty. Who will See for the convent when Vereda dies if not me? Would that not leave them as vulnerable and as blind as the seeress?

No. They can simply pick another virgin. Or better yet, one of the women past childbearing age. I have had well over a dozen lessons now and have not discerned so much as an approaching storm or what the cook will prepare for supper, let alone Mortain's will.

I do not lull myself into believing this will be easy. I have only rarely been outside the convent walls, and have never been allowed to roam free on the open roads or wander through towns and cities unsupervised. My only experiences were the few trips Sister Thomine took us older girls on, precisely so we would have such experiences.

However, in the weeks following my discovery of the journal, I manage to put aside a small supply of provisions—an empty water skin, some hard cheeses and purloined loaves of bread, as well as a heavy gown that does not mark me as a handmaiden of Mortain. Obtaining a supply of weapons is harder, for Sister Arnette is always in her armory and most of the weapons are larger than the cheeses, and they clatter far more loudly than the gown. Poisons, too, present a challenge, for I must slip into Sister Serafina's workshop in the dead of night and pray that there is nothing noxious brewing that could cause me harm.

Unable to decide if I am arming myself for defense or as the assassin I have trained to be, in the end, I prepare for both.

My last step is writing the letter I will pretend has come from the abbess to request my presence at her side in Guérande. Without such a message, a search party would likely be sent out as soon as my absence was discovered.

It has taken me a while to come up with a justification for the abbess's request, as it is a complete turnabout of her plans for me.

It has also required that I become even more skilled at forging her hand. I lean back and admire the carefully scripted note.

Dear Eonette,

Now that I have seen firsthand the threats that our duchess faces, I have decided to have Annith join me at court. I believe that all of Mortain's resources need to be brought to bear on the challenges that face our duchess if we are to have any hope of prevailing. It makes no sense to leave one of our most skilled novitiates withering behind our walls when the duchess so clearly has need of her.

I know that we must still address the issue of seeress soon, but with Vereda having made such an unexpected recovery, I cannot help but feel that Mortain Himself has bought us some time.

I fold the parchment and seal it. As the wax hardens, I pull my saddlebag from its hiding place under Sybella's old bed. There is no one I must say goodbye to, for while I will miss the younger girls, it is not worth the risk of alerting them to my actions. I will better serve them by confronting the abbess and ensuring none of them is ever sent out before they are fully trained. If it is some misguided fondness for me that is at the heart of the abbess's unwillingness to send me out, it is wrong and must stop. It is too gross a betrayal of the others and I will not have it on my conscience.

I take the message, crack open the wax seal, then crumple the note, as if it has been read in great haste, before tossing it on my bed. When they come looking for me in the morning, they will see the abbess's request and assume that I was the first to read it and set out immediately. While some of the nuns might wonder why it came to me directly, others will know of my talent for ferreting out information and should not question such a thing.

Dressed in my heaviest gown, I slip into my winter cloak and take one last look around my room. The convent has yielded what few answers it had, which in turn have created only more questions. And the truth that the Dragonette's journal pounded home with the force of a fist is that I do not owe anyone here a thing.

I sling my pack over my shoulder, running through my list of supplies one more time. There are no items I have forgotten. My hand twitches with the memory of the faceted crystal vial in Sister Vereda's chambers, as black as night and densely heavy. Do I not have a greater need than others for such a thing if I am to be cut off from the convent's support? Surely I must try to use every means available to better see Mortain's will for me.

The entire convent is dark and quiet, so it is easy enough to slip unobserved to Sister Vereda's chambers. There is the risk that with her returning skills, she will

See what I intend to do, but it is one I must take. Even if she discovers my plans, she cannot yet rise from the bed, nor would anyone hear her frail voice raise the alarm, buried as she is deep in her own chambers, far from everyone else. Even so, I hope it does not come to that.

I carefully crack open the door. The room is as dark as the Underworld itself, with naught but a faint red glow here and there from the charcoal in the braziers. The old seeress's breathing is deep and even, so I slip inside and quietly shut the door behind me. I pause a moment to let my eyes adjust.

Once I have gotten my bearings, I slowly move across the room, watching the floor carefully to be certain I do not trip or stumble or make any unexpected noise. It takes me but twelve silent steps to reach the shelf. I glance once more at the sleeping seeress, listening to the deep, sonorous rumble of her breathing, then turn and reach for the vial.

As my hand closes around the dark crystal, I am surprised once again at how heavy it is. I know little of the Tears of Mortain, for it is one of those mysteries that only true initiates are supposed to be privy to, but I have heard stories. Whispered tales and hints of rumors. The Tears are said to enhance our ability to see and experience life in order to better imitate how Mortain is able to see and experience life. They are supposed to correct for our human inadequacies, whether by making it easier to sense life behind closed doors or by allowing us to better see His marques. I lift the stopper to reveal the long, crystal wand that ends in a sharp point. A single drop of the Tears hovers on the tip. I take a deep breath and slowly lift the stopper to my face. I force my eye open, but before I can place the drop of Tears in it, Sister Vereda snorts in her sleep. The sound startles me so that my hand holding the stopper jerks and the drop splashes onto the bodice of my gown. I freeze, wondering if the old woman will wake. There is a long moment of silence, then her loud breathing resumes.

As I replace the stopper in the crystal bottle, I decide to take the Tears with me. Not only so that I may use them when needed, but also so that I can ensure that the nuns will not send anyone else out on assignment while I am gone. Surely they would not send one of the novitiates without the Tears of Mortain to aid her.

Once the Tears are secured in my pack, I take a deep breath, turn, and begin carefully making my way out of Sister Vereda's chambers. I shift my hips to avoid the corner of one table, then shift again to avoid the stand that holds a charcoal brazier. By the time I reach the door, I am damp with sweat and coiled tighter than one of Sister Thomine's whips. Out in the hallway, I lean against the wall and calm my thudding heart. It is not Sister Vereda's chambers that cause it

to race, but the enormity of what I am about to do. But what other choice do I have?

The day I have dreamed of for as long as I can remember has finally come—I am leaving the convent. Not in a triumphant march to do Mortain's bidding, as I have always imagined, but on a determined search for answers. I will find the abbess in Guérande and make her tell me precisely why she insists I be seeress despite the many others who could fulfill those same duties. If it is not something personal, then it must be a flaw or lack of mine, and I will force her to tell me what it is, not hide behind half-truths and lies. Because once I know what that flaw is, I can fix it. I can change that part of myself, as I have so many times before.

Chapter Thirteen

IT IS A TERRIFYING THING TO CROSS the sea at night, but I tell myself it is exhilarating. There is nothing but the glimmer of moonlight to steer by, and the sharp salt-scented breeze from the sea whistles past my ears, bringing a faint spray to my face. And while my arms are strong from long hours spent at weapons training, they are not accustomed to rowing and so begin to ache after the second hour. Or what I judge to be the second hour, for it is hard to tell. Exhilarating, I remind myself. This is what freedom feels like, and it is exhilarating.

After a long while, I begin to worry that I have missed the mainland altogether and am merrily rowing out to the open sea. I wipe the sweat and salt spray from my eyes and peer into the darkness in front of me. There are no lights to guide me toward shore, no cooking fires or candles or torches. I stop rowing and tilt my head to the side. It is hard to hear over the thudding of my own heart and my ragged breathing, but I think I detect a faint sound of waves breaking. And where waves are breaking, there will be land. Hopefully, it will be the smooth beach I am aiming for and not the jagged rocks and shoals of the southernmost coastline. With a quick prayer to Mortain, I adjust my heading to the north and resume rowing.

Soon, the sound of the waves becomes different, more of a gentle lapping with a hollow ring to it—the sound of water against the wooden hull of a boat. A labored sigh of relief escapes me as I muster one more burst of energy.

When I finally feel the slight crunch of rocks under the hull, I fling the detested oars from me, only too happy to be done with them. If not for my leather gloves, my palms would be blistered and shredded from the bedamned things.

With the boat firmly on the beach, I stand on the seat and leap as far clear of the shallows as I can, then turn back and grab the prow of the boat to pull it up farther onto the beach so the tide will not carry it away. I cannot help but note that my arms are as weak and feeble as newborn lambs.

I could head for the stable, saddle one of the horses myself, and simply ride off, but I fear it would raise doubts as to the legitimacy of my summons to the abbess's side. It seems more convincing to wake the night rower and demand assistance, just as if I were on a genuine convent assignment. After all, I have

saved him the hard work of rowing. The least he can do is saddle my horse. Besides, I don't wish to be mistaken for a horse thief.

I approach the small cottage and rap sharply at the door. It does not take long for the old caretaker to open it—he is accustomed to being awakened in the middle of the night to row boats across the sea. “Eh?” He peers up at me.

“I need you to saddle a horse.”

He stares at me a long moment, and I force myself not to fidget. “Haven't seen you out alone before, have I?” he finally says.

Annoyed that he would notice such a thing, I merely arch a brow at him. “Is it part of your duties to question my comings and goings?” The truth is, I would not put it past the abbess to arrange such a thing.

“Eh, don't bite my head off, missy. Let me get my coat and a lantern.” He disappears back into his cottage, and I turn and look out at the sea, relieved that there is no sign of pursuit, although surely the earliest they would notice my absence would be after the second morning bell.

The old man comes to the door wrapped up in his cloak and carrying a lantern to light the way to the stable. Not sure what I am supposed to do, I follow him. At least until he turns and arches one of his own thick, white eyebrows at me. Pretending I do not see it, I swing my travel bag off my shoulder, set it on the ground, and begin rummaging through it, looking for one of my small leather pouches.

When I find it, I draw out a pinch of salt to leave as an offering to Saint Cissonius. He is the patron saint of both travelers and crossroads, and I feel most assuredly as if I am staring at some sort of unseeable crossroad, unable to discern the true path ahead of me. As I sprinkle the salt onto the earth beneath my feet, I whisper a brief prayer and ask Mortain Himself to guide me on this journey.

The old man returns just then. When I see that he is leading my favorite horse, Fortuna, my impatience with him leaks away, and I smile. “She is my favorite.” I run my hand down her silky black mane.

He shoots me a sideways glance. “Why d'you think I brought her?”

It occurs to me that all of us at the convent should pay closer attention to this man, who sees far more than he lets on. “And I thank you for it.”

He grunts, then helps me secure my bag to the saddle before cupping his hands and holding them out for me. I accept the boost and, stepping lightly, throw my leg over Fortuna's back, then settle into the saddle and draw up the reins.

My bow is within easy reach and my quiver of arrows is at my back. I do not expect trouble, but neither am I afraid of it. In truth, I am eager for whatever the

road may hold, knowing I am more than able to meet the challenge.

Once I am on a horse that can outrun pursuit, the tension across my shoulders eases and I realize I did not believe that I would be able to escape undetected. But I am not a child any longer, and am more than able to pit my wits against any of the older nuns'. Nor are they still able to easily frighten me with their tales of the dreaded hellequin pursuing any who dare to defy Mortain.

The clear sky holds, and the moon is just past its fullness, providing plenty of light for me to see by. Fortuna is well rested and fresh, prancing in the crisply cold night air, her breath coming out in small white clouds.

As we set out, I quickly become aware of how different the world is at night. For one thing, there are infinite shades of gray, from palest silver to nearly black. And while I have ventured onto the mainland before, it has always been with others from the convent. I have never been as utterly alone as I am in this moment. There is no one to order me about or tell me what to think or how to behave. There is no one to say I must turn this way or that. No one to cast me disappointed looks when I fail to do as they wish. Nor do I have to bear the weight of those unspoken wishes.

There is a sensation—a lightness—in my chest, something I have never felt before, and I cannot decide if it is disagreeable or pleasant. Part of me wishes to poke at it, examine and sift through its meaning. Instead, I urge Fortuna to a canter and look to my future rather than my past.

The nearest village is only three leagues from the coast, but traveling in the dark it takes me the rest of the night to reach it. Some jaunty cock crows to greet the morning, and smoke from a dozen chimneys rises up, pale smudges against the dawn. Even though my bones ache with fatigue and my eyes are gritty with the need for sleep, I decide to keep riding. Unreasonable as it is, my fear of being followed is so great that I could not sleep, or even rest, if I allowed myself to stop.

I see almost no one on the road other than a man hauling a wheelbarrow full of firewood. A woman sits with her spindle in a doorway, watching a young child feed the chickens. In the fields to either side of me, tillage has begun. One lucky man has two oxen yoked to his plow, but I pass many more farmers too poor to afford any such beasts. Instead, they simply strap the yokes to their own shoulders. With the recent storms, it is muddy, backbreaking work, and I do not envy them. I think of the widowed farmer the abbess threatened to give me to, and my blood simmers in anger all over again.

My mind keeps going back to the choices before me and how to honor both my own desires and Mortain's. I have always hoped to live in accordance with His will, but for the first time I begin to fear I will be forced to make a choice between His will and mine. If being seeress is truly His wish and not the abbess's, if He truly wants from me what I cannot bear to give, then I will have to choose one over the other. The mere thought of that makes my heart feel as if it is being ripped in two.

Besides, it is hard to reconcile that sort of Mortain with the one I have known all my life. The one who comforted me and encouraged me, the one who accepted every gift I offered Him, whether it was the small black moths and beetles I found or my childish attempts to master some new skill in His name. I cannot believe that He would reject the gifts I wish to place in His service and demand of me things that fill me with dread and foreboding.

But if it does turn out to be Mortain's will, what then?

Will I continue to dedicate my life to Him as I have always imagined—even if that service requires me to spend the rest of my days in a living death?

I do not know the answer to that question, and that frightens me nearly as much as the abbess's plots.

I make the town of Quimper just as night is falling and am one of the last allowed through the city's gates before they close. The guard takes one look at the attire that marks me as one of Mortain's and hastily waves me through. Quimper, while a large town, is close enough to the coast—and the convent—to keep faith with the old ways. Or at the very least to have a healthy respect for them. More importantly, it is easy to lose oneself in a town of this size, and it makes the job of those pursuing me just that much more difficult.

I stop at an inn, where the innkeeper's wife fusses over me like a mother hen. It is all I can do not to point out to her that I am an assassin trained, but the fire she sits me in front of is warm, the cup of wine she thrusts in my hand is spiced, and her ministrations are soothing. I am normally the one doing the fussing, so this is a novelty for me.

The next morning I sleep far later than I intend and do not wake until the sun is high in the pale wintry sky. Cursing myself for the lost time, I slip into the extra gown I brought, the one that does not mark me as Death's handmaiden. Thus dressed, it will be easy enough for me to blend in with the other townsfolk, and my passing through will be less easily remembered should anyone from the convent ask after me.

Once I leave the town of Quimper behind me, I alternate between galloping and walking Fortuna, wanting to put as much distance as possible between me

and the convent without exhausting my horse.

It is bitterly cold this morning, but the dampness has left the air, and the mist rolled back out to sea. There are few birds that have braved this wintry chill and their music is sparse and forlorn. The wind is sharp and biting and causes the nearby trees to rustle and shake.

The doubts I so easily ignored back at the convent begin to swarm in earnest. My plan to hold up the abbess's half-truths and lies before her and use them to convince her to change her mind suddenly feels lacking. I now wonder if it wouldn't have been better to wait and confront her when she returned to the convent. At least at the convent, those who truly cared that she followed our rules could add their voices to mine. Or would they? I have begun to wonder if any of them even care, else surely someone would have pushed harder against her when she sent Matelaine out.

But the abbess has already been gone several weeks, with no word of when she plans to return, and in truth, I could not bear to stay on that island any longer for fear I would go mad.

As dusk begins to fall, it becomes increasingly clear that I will not make the next town by dark. I do not know if there are any inns outside the city. There could be a convent or a monastery in which I could find lodging for the night, but I do not *know* that there is. My hands on Fortuna's reins tighten in frustration, and I am suddenly beset by all that I do not know.

The only things I have seen on the road are small cottages and farms, but their occupants will no doubt question a maid traveling on her own and will likely already be sleeping six to a bed, with naught but a shriveled turnip from the last harvest to put in their soup pot.

Besides, I cannot help but notice that the farther I am from the coast, the fewer homes have the silver coins or willow twigs marking them as followers of the Nine.

Instead, I decide to camp. Up ahead, just off the side of the road, is a copse of trees that is sheltered from the worst of the cold wind. The sky above is clear, with no storm clouds threatening. Sister Thomine took us out many a night to teach us precisely such skills, so it is something that I know how to do rather than something I must simply guess at.

I pick a spot carefully, one sheltered from the road and the weather and where the ground is covered with more fallen leaves than rocks and twigs. There is even a small patch of tender grass shoots peeking up through the leaf mold—sweet grazing for Fortuna.

Once I have dried her off to be sure she will not catch a chill, I slip a rope halter on her, then tie it to a tree within easy reach of the new grass. I lay down my bedroll, then try to decide whether I should risk a small fire. While I am not afraid of drawing anyone's attention—I am utterly capable of defending myself—neither do I wish to act foolishly. I decide on caution and pull two strips of dried meat and a chunk of stale bread from my saddlebag. As I withdraw my hand, it bumps up against the smooth black box I found in the abbess's office.

I place my food in my lap, wipe my hands, then take out the box. As I run my fingers along the dark polished wood, I wonder once more what it might contain. At one point, I wondered if it might hold the missing ledger page, or perhaps other secrets concerning my birth. But upon reflection, I realize that makes no sense. In any case, that cannot be all it contains. I shake it gently, puzzling out the slight shift of its contents. I could break it open now, as I am well away from the convent and no one can hear me, but for some reason, I hesitate. If nothing else, a box such as this deserves to be opened with respect and ceremony, not by being smashed with a rock on the side of the road.

As I shove it back into the saddlebag, I consider taking out the small calfskin-bound journal and reading more of the Dragonette's entries, but once again, I hesitate. I am not sure I wish to taint the start of my journey with her presence, and so leave it safely tucked in the bottom of the pack.

The thundering of hooves wakes me. Scores of them, I think, my heart thudding nearly as loudly as the approaching riders. I open my eyes and sit up, trying to orient myself.

The riders are drawing closer, close enough for me to hear the blowing and heaving of their horses. Trying not to lose my bearings, I reach behind me for the tree. When my fingers connect with the trunk, I stand up, trying to discern just how many riders there are. A hound brays off to one side of me, followed by a second bray, this one closer to the riders. The unearthly sound raises every hair on my head. Fortuna whinnies, then stomps her foot. Before I can move to quiet her, the sound of the hooves changes, no longer a dull thudding on a dirt road, but muffled, accompanied by snapping twigs and the rustle of trampled leaves. They have left the road.

I glance over to where Fortuna is secured. There is a jingle of harness as she tosses her head, snorting and blowing in fear. *Merde*. She will give me away, but I dare not go to her and try to quiet her. My only hope of not being trampled in the dark is to cling to this tree like a vine. I pray to Mortain to make Fortuna and me invisible. To let the other horses make so much noise that they will not notice the small ones Fortuna makes.

Keeping my hand on the tree, I slip around to the back of it so I will not be in plain sight if they discover the clearing.

They are louder now, the sound of the hooves accompanied by the constant baying of the hounds. I am assailed with a feeling of hot breath and red eyes bearing down on me. It takes all of my training and every last scrap of my courage to keep from bolting like a rabbit flushed from its lair.

I take a deep breath and imagine that I am as solid and strong as the tree I cling to. Before I can draw a second breath, there is a whisper movement off to one side. I whip my head around, but a large, firm hand clamps down across my mouth, then a heavy body presses along the length of me, so close that I can feel the rough bite of chain mail against my back. “Shhh.” A deep voice slithers across my ear with no more weight or substance than a shadow. “You don’t want to risk drawing their attention.”

Even as my heart lurches against my ribs in shock, I begin to assess his hold, where it will be easiest to break. Before I can make my move, one of the great hounds bays again. The howl sounds as if it comes all the way from the bowels of the earth, wrapping dark ribbons of terror around my heart and causing all the hairs along my arms to stand up. It is so close that I am certain I will feel the dog’s sharp teeth on my flesh any moment. The man presses his hand—hard—against my mouth in a signal to stay quiet. And while I do not intend to suffer his presence a moment longer than I must, I judge him a safer bet than the oncoming riders. Once they have passed, I can easily deal with a single man.

Clasped together like two lovers, we wait, our hearts beating nearly as one as the riders break into the clearing. They stream past, dodging and weaving among the trees, tall, dark shapes on even darker horses, the thudding of their hooves causing the ground to shake, the heat of their lathered bodies like a warm summer wind.

Their passing seems to last forever as rider after rider gallops by, the sound of the dirt churned up by their horses’ hooves pattering like rain.

And then, suddenly, they are past us, growing farther and farther away in the distance.

The tightness in my body lessens somewhat, but the stranger does not loosen his hold. He stays pressed tightly against me until we can no longer hear the riders. Indeed, it is so quiet you would not know they had been here at all.

When I finally feel the muscles of his hand across my mouth begin to relax, I ram both elbows behind me where I judge his stomach to be, ignoring the pain as they connect with the chain mail he wears. He grunts in surprise, and I whip my arms up behind my head, grab his arms, and, using my own body as a fulcrum,

lever him up and over my shoulder. I feel him leave the ground, feel him become airborne as he flies over my shoulder, then hear a thud as he hits the forest floor.

Chapter Fourteen

TO HIS CREDIT, BUT FOR a faint *oomph* as the air is forced from his lungs, he gives no cry of surprise or any other sound that might give us away. For one, two, three long heartbeats, I stare down at him.

The darkness does not allow me to see him clearly, so I am left mostly with impressions, and they are not overly comforting. A strong arched nose, a square jaw, and dark eyes beneath dark brows studying me just as intently as I study him.

After a long moment of silence, there comes a creak of leather and a faint jingle of well-oiled chain mail as he rises to his feet. “A simple ‘Thank you for the rescue’ would have sufficed.”

I step back to give him room to rise but also to put additional distance between us. “Except I had no need of rescuing.” I keep my voice pitched low like his, so as not to risk its carrying on the wind. “Indeed, your attempt to help nearly gave me away.”

“It was not I who nearly gave you away, but that hair of yours. It fair shines like a beacon in the moonlight.”

Annoyed, I reach up, grasp the hood of my cloak, and yank it over my head. “There. The threat has passed. You may be on your way.”

“You are wrong if you think the threat has passed. The hunt will roam the area until dawn and could easily double back this way. You will not be safe until the sun is up.”

“What have I to fear? They are not hunting *me*.”

“Aren’t they, demoiselle?” He takes a step closer and I force myself not to take a step back. “Can you be so very certain of that?”

I do not try to hide my growing annoyance. “Who are they? What manner of men hunt in such a way at night? Have French soldiers landed on our coast?”

“They are not French soldiers.”

I do not know him well enough to tell if that is a smile in his voice, but for some reason I think that it is, which rankles me. It was not so very foolish a suggestion. Before I can come up with something to say to put him in his place, he asks, “Where are you traveling that you must be out on the road so late at night?”

I can think of no reason not to tell him. “Guérande. I have family there. And what of yourself?”

“I am traveling east, along the same road to Guérande. You are cold,” he says. There is a crunch of leaves as he takes another step toward me.

I cross my arms so that the daggers at my wrists are within easy reach. “Yes, well, it is winter and the nights are cold.”

“You cannot risk building a fire. The light and heat will call the hunt back this way.”

“You will be pleased to learn I have no intention of doing anything so foolish.”

“How, then, do you plan to keep warm through the night?”

Gods’ wounds! Could he be any less subtle? Sister Beatriz warned us often of men of his ilk. “Shall I guess at what you will suggest? You think we should close this distance between us so we may share our body heat, no?”

“We would not be the first to do so,” he says.

While I have spent many an hour wondering what it would feel like to lay pressed close against a man, all that curiosity has fled under the weight of my current predicament. I reach openly for my knives, letting my sleeves ride up so that the handles of my daggers show. “I think I will take my chances with the cold, for I am no lightskirt to warm your bedroll. If you attempt such a thing, you will find only the kiss of sharp steel to greet you.”

“I have no intention of forcing you.” He sounds faintly aggrieved. “I wanted only to point out that two are stronger than one and more able to guard against the unexpected, that is all.”

“You would make your camp elsewhere if I ask it of you?” I say flatly, making no attempt to keep the disbelief from my voice.

“No,” he says, and it is all I can do not to crow, but he continues before I can speak. “They will double back at least once before dawn. I cannot in good conscience leave you to fend for yourself until then.”

“I do not need your help. I am well able to defend myself.”

His head tilts to the side. “What manner of maid are you,” he muses, “that you can defend yourself against an entire hunting party? Not to mention heave a man nearly twice your size over your shoulder?”

I open my mouth to proudly tell him of my lineage and use the reputation of Death’s handmaidens to keep him from attempting any mischief, but then hesitate. I have no earthly idea who he is. And as strong and skilled as I am, he is at least twice so, for all that I was able to toss him over my shoulder. He will not be caught off-guard so easily again. I have no idea if Mortain’s name will even be known to him, or known in such a way that he would take it as a deterrent. “I am someone who was raised to be the equal of any man and know well how to defend myself.”

“Against a horde of fourscore or more?”

As many as that? I think, somewhat dismayed. “Of course not,” I snap. “No man can defend against that many.”

He leans back against the trunk of the tree and folds his arms across his chest. I cannot help but remember the rock-hardness of that same chest pressing into my back but moments ago. “Not even if that man is one of their own and therefore has the power to protect you?”

He is one of them? “Why would you do that? Protect me?”

He shrugs. “Let us just say I believe I know the manner of your upbringing and why you claim to be a match for any man. I have a . . . debt I owe to those who raised you, and I would pay some small part of it by seeing you safe.”

His confession robs me of speech and all I can do is gape at him like a caught fish. Who is he that he would owe the convent such a debt? And how did he guess who I was? But I let none of my confusion show on my face. “What manner of men maraud through the countryside eager to do others harm? Surely there are other, better, targets for them to fight. I hear we are recently overrun with French troops. I would suggest they start with them.”

He narrows his eyes, studying me anew. “How do you not know the nature of the hellequin’s hunt? Have you sprouted from the earth wholly formed, like some miraculous cabbage?”

There is a faint clink of chain mail as he leans forward, eager to impress upon me the seriousness of the situation. “For that is who will be pursuing you if you do not come with me. Hellequin’s hunt.”

A sharp ribbon of unease snakes along my spine, and I must work hard to put a note of disdain in my voice, lest it tremble instead. “You must truly think me wool-witted to believe that, for they are otherworldly creatures, not fashioned of bone and blood. They ride steeds of smoke and moonlight, not the pounding horseflesh that horde was riding.”

“Did they appear wraithlike to you? Did the force of their horses’ hooves sound unearthly?”

“No,” I say, my mind scrambling furiously. “They did not.” The ribbon of unease turns into a cold trickle of fear as all of the nuns’ scoldings and warnings come back to me. Who is to say the nuns’ tales of the hellequin hunting down those who dare to defy Mortain are not real as well? Ismae’s mention of the hellequin that appeared at the Yuletide festivities rises up in my mind.

Which means they could, in truth, be hunting me.

Could my absence at the convent already have been noted? Or in leaving, have I broken some sacred binding that has called the hunt upon me? And if I have, are they to return me to the convent or simply to hunt me down?

Almost as if my thoughts have called the hunt back, I feel a distant rumble that begins in the ground beneath my feet. I glance accusingly at the stranger. “I cry foul,” I say softly.

He gives a single shake of his head as he pushes away from the tree. “I did not call them.” He turns to peer out into the darkness, as if judging their distance. “But you’d best decide what to do swiftly.”

“What are my choices?”

His head swivels around and he pierces me with his black gaze. “Come with me and allow me to protect you from the others, or be hunted.”

“Why do you care what happens to me?”

“Let us just say that I have a good idea what awaits you out there on the open road alone, and I am not certain that you do. And remember”—he flashes a grin that could only be described as morose—“I am a hellequin. I am hunting for redemption as much as for prey. Perhaps saving you will bring me closer to that end. Besides, we are traveling in the same direction.”

In games of politics and maneuvering, Sister Eonette has always claimed it is best to keep one’s enemies close. If the hellequin are really such a threat, then it seems wise to do as he suggests and ride into their midst, keeping my true identity hidden from him, just as he tries to hide me from the hunt. Then, once I have become a part of their routine and earned some small measure of their trust, I can slip away when the opportunity presents itself.

He cocks his ear, listening, then holds out his hand to me. “Now, unless you wish to be caught . . .”

“Very well.” I ignore his hand and turn to pick up my bedroll. While I hastily roll it up, the stranger plucks my saddle from the ground with no more effort than plucking a flower from a bush, then settles it onto Fortuna’s back. She stomps briefly in unease, her ears twitching nervously, before she calms under his touch.

The sound of the approaching riders grows louder, and my heartbeat starts to match the pounding of their hoofbeats.

“We must hurry,” he says.

I slip my quiver over my shoulder, then grab my bow. “I am only waiting for you to get out of my way so I may mount,” I tell him. It is not wholly true, but it gives me some small sense of being in control of a rapidly crumbling situation.

He lifts one mocking brow, then steps away from Fortuna. I ignore his cupped hands and mount without his help, another small but important declaration of how I intend our relationship to progress. Fortuna catches the scent of the approaching riders just then and tosses her head. Before I can ask him what he plans to ride—he is not riding with me on Fortuna!—he moves to the edge of the

copse, where his own mount is tied to a tree. He leaps gracefully onto his horse, then wheels the demented-looking beast toward me. In truth, the horse looks as if he has ridden straight from the Underworld itself. His eyes are wild, and his nostrils wide, as if he is taking in all the scents of the night around him. His neck arches proudly and he paws at the ground, eager to be on his way.

And then they are upon us: one of the great horses breaks through the edge of trees surrounding our clearing. Before I can react, the stranger reaches out and grabs my reins. I do not even have time to protest before the jolt forward forces me to grab hold of my saddle lest I tumble off, then both his horse and Fortuna leap forward as the rest of the riders emerge from the trees and surround us. Shadowy black hounds nearly as big as ponies lope along the edges of the pack.

The galloping horses are an unholy sight that raises goose flesh along my arms. They are the color of midnight with churning hooves, their lips and nostrils seeming to glow red with their efforts. They engulf us like a river, swirling around us like water around a boat. We join them, causing barely a ripple.

The riders are as unsettling as their horses. Some wear hooded cloaks, so I cannot see their features. Others are garbed in dark chain mail and boiled leather. One rider has spikes on his vambraces, and another wears a bandolier of knives across his chest. I have an impression of dark eyes and unshaven faces that are fierce with the thrill of the hunt. They do not react to my joining their ranks other than to shift slightly to make room for Fortuna.

I do not know how long we ride—hours, it seems, although time has taken on an almost ghostly form so it might have been only minutes that passed. Every once in a while, the group breaks into four sections and appears to quarter the countryside, looking for prey.

I cannot help but be grateful that they are not hunting me. Or if they are, that they do not yet know it.

Chapter Fifteen

WHEN WE FINALLY SLACKEN OUR pace, I realize that my rescuer and I have moved toward the front of the pack. He raises his hand in the air, and the hunt slows to a walk. A small knot of hellequin break off from the others to ride forward. “Why are we stopping?” a giant of a man asks. He wears a boiled-leather breastplate and his arms are bare except for long gauntlets that reach almost to his elbows. An ax is strapped to his back, and a long sword affixed to his saddle. His hair is long and flutters faintly in the night breeze. He is utterly terrifying.

“I’m calling a halt for the night,” my rescuer says.

A faint grumble begins among the other riders, building into a growl of discontent.

“But there is at least another hour until dawn!” A tall, lanky youth speaks. He is loose-limbed and fairly bouncing in his saddle, so I assume he was not accustomed to riding before becoming a hellequin. His most riveting features are his easy smile—unusual enough in this group—and his eyes, which are like those of a child who is convinced that everyone has gotten a larger sweetmeat than he has.

A third man, who wears fine armor and is strikingly handsome but for the fact that his eyes seem to hold nothing but emptiness, shoots me an unreadable glance. “It is because of her, isn’t it?”

Slowly, my rescuer turns and looks at the speaker, his manner so chilled that I am surprised frost does not appear on the ground beneath his horse. “It has nothing to do with her. It is because there is nothing out there. If you had not been so caught up in your riding, you would have realized the hounds have not brayed in hours.”

That quiets most of them, although one lone voice in the back is still grumbling, reminding me of nothing so much as a petulant child. “Stay here, and do not speak to anyone,” my rescuer orders me, then rides off to deal with the malcontent. That is when I realize he is not just one of the hellequin, but their leader.

As I wait, the nearest hellequin drift closer. I do not see them move, but become aware that there is less space between us than before. In addition to the giant, the armored knight, and the lanky youth, there is an elegant, sharp-featured man whose face is tinged with the unmistakable arrogance of nobility.

He is an exceptional horseman and carries a well-wrought sword at his side and wears fine leather gloves.

To my other side is another truly terrifying figure. He is just as tall as the first giant, who now sits to my right, and even broader across the shoulders. He wears spiked vambraces and an armored breastplate, and in his left hand he carries a mace. His horse wears an armored faceplate, the only one of the hellequins' horses to do so. It gives him a most unnerving air. Just looking at him calls to mind the hacking of limbs and the scent of blood, and it is all I can do not to shudder.

They say nothing but study me intently, some with hunger and others with dispassion. I force myself not to fidget, but Fortuna, sensing my unease, grows restless beneath me.

Just as I decide it would be safer to move than to obey my order to stay put, the giant to my right, the one with the long hair, speaks. "You've nothing to fear. No one will harm you." He grunts in what can only be disgust. "Not with Balthazaar's scent all over you."

His words bring a hot flush of embarrassment to my face and I want to explain how his scent came to be all over me, but that desire wars with the command not to speak with any of the men. Then righteous indignation flares and I want to throw my true identity before them all like a gauntlet and tell them I am one of Mortain's own and they'd best treat me with respect.

Except, if they are hunting for me, it would be beyond foolish to dangle my identity in front of them like raw meat before a wolf. Instead, I swallow my pride—which burns mightily as it goes down—and try to look like the sort of woman who would allow a man (a hellequin!) to make her his. To distract myself, I turn my attention to the rest of the hunt. While dawn is still a way off, the sky has begun to lighten enough that I can see the whole of them somewhat better than before.

They number between sixty and eighty, all of them men. Some look like outlaws and brigands, unkempt and bearing every manner of weapon. Others are concealed in darkness, their black cloaks and hoods the only things giving them form and substance. A handful of the riders are striking in their beauty, looking almost like the fallen angels the Christian priests speak of. Some look like fallen warriors, rough, scarred, and gruff of manner.

My rescuer—Balthazaar, the giant called him—comes riding back to my side just then, and it is the first time I am able to get a good look at him. He is breathtakingly handsome in a dark, almost broken way. He wears his hair long, and his jaw and nose are strong and sharp, as if chiseled of the finest marble by a master stonemason. His eyes are deep-set and so dark they look like pools of

night without so much as a star shining from within their depths. Even more intriguing, there is something vaguely familiar about him. Although I know I have never seen him before in my life, there is some thread of recognition, a hidden connection between us, as unwelcome as it is unnerving.

He looks up just then and catches me staring. I long to glance away, to hide the boldness of my perusal. Sister Beatriz says that is the first step in the complex dance of ensnaring a man with one's charms, but I do not wish to ensnare him—or even have him think that is my purpose—so I raise my chin in defiance and leave my gaze on his face.

“It is too late to turn back.” The left corner of his mouth tightens in what could be either amusement or annoyance.

“I’ve no wish to turn back. I merely wished to see what manner of man I had thrown in my lot with.”

Without even moving, he does something so that his great black horse takes a step toward me, then another, crowding Fortuna so that she must back up or be trampled. “And have you passed your judgment? Detected the reek of sin and evil and found us lacking? Condemned us all over again in the court of your mind?”

I meet his gaze steadily, doing nothing to hide my irritation. If he—if they—are hunting me, I cannot afford to show fear and act like prey. “No. I myself know something of darkness and sin and am not so very quick to judge others.”

Balthazaar turns from me to the small crowd that has formed around us. “Be gone,” he growls.

They all scatter except for the longhaired giant, who lingers a moment, giving the other man a long, hard look. “It is not fair. To the others.” His voice is so deep, it seems as if it rises up from the ground beneath our horses’ hooves. “She is too great a temptation to them.”

Balthazaar does his thing with his horse so that it tries to crowd the other man, but it is like trying to crowd a mountain. “This is no country jaunt, Miserere. It is meant as penance and atonement. Being surrounded by temptation is part of the indenture.”

The giant stares a beat longer. “There is temptation, and then there is taunting.” His impersonal gaze flickers over me once more, then he turns and rides away, his horse managing to send a shower of dirt our way as they depart.

“And so you meet Miserere.”

“He is an impressive greeting party. Are all the men as pleasant as he?”

“No, but there are others who will be more dangerous to you, so you will do well to stick by my side.”

“Like a thorn,” I say with false cheer.

“A long, sharp, inconvenient thorn,” he mutters.

I gape at him. “This was your idea, not mine.”

He shrugs that truth aside. “Now that you have seen them, do you really think you would have been better on your own?”

“No.” Even so, I am already questioning the wisdom of my plan, for these are not merely servants of Mortain but dark, tortured men who reek of threat and danger. Once it is full light, I will slip away. None of the old tales speak of the hunt riding during daylight. Surely I will be able to escape then.

Balthazaar leans across his saddle, putting his face close to mine. “Do not even think it,” he says. “They have your scent now and can hunt you anywhere. No matter how much of a head start you think you have, they will find you. And they will not stop until they do.”

I am saved from replying when all around me, the hellequin begin dismounting. Eager to be out of my saddle, I remove my left foot from the stirrup. It takes me two tries to actually dismount, and then—at last—my feet are once again on solid ground. I cling to the saddle, waiting for my legs to remember how to unbend at the knees. Balthazaar looms over me like a specter of the night. “Are you all right?” His voice is brusque.

“Of course,” I reply lightly. “If you would show me where to tether my horse, I would like to tend to her. She does not have as much practice with nocturnal hunting as your horses do.”

I am fairly certain I see a pinch of regret cross his face, and it heartens me, even if it is for my horse. “I will have one of the others tend her—”

“No!” The force of my refusal surprises us both. “I would rather do it myself.” I need something to focus on besides the strange group of men in whose midst I have found myself.

He nods, then motions to the right, where the other horses are being picketed.

I glance at them dubiously. “Will she be all right with the others, do you think?”

He arches an eyebrow. “They are only horses, demoiselle, and not even flesh-eating ones at that.”

“I am not so sure,” I mutter, then I lead Fortuna away, my body grateful to be moving again. Balthazaar follows me. In spite of his words, I am careful to choose a spot as far away from the others as I can. As I reach down to unbuckle Fortuna’s saddle strap, he directs his gaze to the surrounding countryside, as if he cannot bear to look at me a moment longer.

In the ensuing silence, I quickly finish tending to Fortuna. When I am done, Balthazaar motions for me to follow the other hellequin, who are milling at the far end of the copse, where two great stones frame an opening that seems to lead

into the earth. With a start, I realize it is a doorway to the Underworld, just like the one at the convent.

So that is where they go during the day, why no one ever sees them once the sun has risen: they return to the Underworld. Which means there must be many such passageways throughout all of Brittany.

Once inside, I see that it is not a narrow cave or a tunnel leading to the Underworld as I had always imagined, but something far more immense. An antechamber, is my first thought. It is hard to tell with the shadows and darkness that swallow up the contours of the place, but the cavern appears to be as large as the convent. The walls are carved out of raw earth, and the ceiling . . . I look up, but there is only darkness and shadows overhead.

At the far end of the chamber, it narrows again into a much smaller doorway than the one we entered through, one that seems to hold back a thick, almost living blackness.

“While you may move freely about the cromlech, do not cross that doorway.” Balthazaar speaks from just behind me. “For once a mortal crosses the threshold of the Underworld, they may not return.”

I study his face to see if this is a jest, but it does not appear to be.

Once they have gathered inside the cromlech, the hellequin sit and lean against the walls of the cave, stretch out on the floor, or huddle in groups of twos or threes. One or two even light a fire.

“I would not think that hellequin would need fires to warm themselves.”

“They do not need them, precisely. It is more a source of comfort. And to remind themselves they were once human.”

His words make me aware of how very much I do not know about these servants of Mortain, for all that they serve the same god that I do. I open my mouth to ask one of a dozen questions that crowds my head, but he holds up his hand. “You are hollow-eyed with fatigue. Your questions can wait until nightfall.”

Nightfall. Their morning, when they begin their day.

Balthazaar chooses a spot near the front and drops my saddlebag on the floor. “You will be safe here. But if you do not feel safe, come find me. If you cannot find me, find Miserere, for he is to be trusted most of all of them.”

“That does not comfort me as much as you think it should.”

He grunts, then strides off to join the others, his black cloak rippling behind him like a piece of the Underworld itself. Unsettled, I turn my attention to my own needs. I am near the front, but there are over a score of hellequin between me and the exit. I do not think I will be escaping tonight—or this morning, I correct myself, adjusting to the upside-down rhythms of the hellequin.

I long to get up and explore. To be this close to the Underworld, to Mortain, has me nearly restless with a longing to peer into His realm and see what mysteries I may discover. It is hard to be so close to answers and yet be unable to pursue them. But it is possible the answers might not be to my liking. Perhaps Mortain *has* sent the hellequin after me, and if I poke my nose in His domain, He might spot me Himself.

Besides, Balthazaar's warning still rings in my ears, and even if it did not, I am not foolish enough to go cavorting among all these rough men. Many of them still watch me—I can feel the weight of their gazes as they alight upon me, much like the wings of the small dark moths I used to chase as a child. There is a wildness here—everyone is a collection of hard broken edges and sharp prickly spines. Wholly bathed in sin, and still seeking redemption in spite of it. It puts my own smaller sins in perspective and makes me proud to serve a god who is so forgiving.

Then another thought comes to me—perhaps Mortain has answered my prayer. At the start of my journey, did I not pray for His guidance and protection? What if He has given it to me—in the form of His hellequin? It is a startling thought and makes me fully aware of just how hard it is to determine if one's prayers have been answered.

After my flight from the convent, the gallop through the night, and minimal sleep, I am well and truly exhausted. I do not even bother to eat but simply lay out my bedroll, then collapse upon it. Sleep overtakes me before I can so much as kick off my boots.

Some hours later, I come awake. Pale fingers of daylight penetrate the darkness of the cave, but I cannot tell what time it is. I blink in confusion, trying to get my bearings, and realize someone is next to me. I freeze. Every muscle in my body tenses—not in fear, but in anticipation. Moving as little as possible, I reach for the knives at my wrists. When my hands are firmly wrapped around their handles, I turn and look.

It is Balthazaar, sitting on the floor with his back against the earthen wall. He is so close to me that his hip almost touches my shoulder. My grip on the knives loosens. Annoyed at the faint feeling of comfort his presence brings me, I allow myself a small, private defiance and roll my eyes in the darkness. "You're smothering me," I whisper under my breath.

"I'm guarding you."

My head whips around. He was not supposed to hear that; indeed, *I* barely heard it. "Can't you guard me from farther away?"

“No.” Not so much as a muscle moves; he does not open his eyes, and I cannot even see his lips forming the word.

“I thought you said I’d be safe here.”

“And so you are. Because I am guarding you. Go back to sleep—we don’t ride for hours yet.”

I struggle to get comfortable again, but the cave floor is hard and my bedroll thin. “Don’t you need to sleep?”

“I was sleeping. Until you woke me. And if you’ll stop talking, I will sleep some more.”

For some reason I cannot explain, as I finally begin to drift off to sleep, I can feel a faint smile tugging at my mouth.

Chapter Sixteen

WHEN I WAKE, THE FIRST thing I notice is the growling of the hounds. I sit up quickly and turn toward the sound. The hellequin with the spiked vambraces is fighting—no, playing with?—the hellhounds. Either that or they are trying to kill him.

An older man with sorrowful eyes sits by one of the small fires next to the lanky youth I saw last night. The older man appears to be teaching the younger one how to do something with a knife. Many of the hellequin sit around such fires, oiling their harnesses or sharpening their weapons.

“It gives them something to do with their hands.” I nearly jump at the deep voice behind me. When I turn, I find Balthazaar still leaning against the wall, watching me with a heavy-lidded gaze. “They do not use their weapons any longer. They are simply pieces of their past they carry with them.”

“Do they not need sleep?” I ask.

“No.”

Which means that, despite what he said, he does not either, yet still he chose to sit by me through the night. I pray that I did not drool or snore. To cover up my embarrassment, I speak, although rather more tartly than I intend to. “I am sorry if I delayed your departure.”

“You did not. We won’t leave until night has fallen, so we were stuck here whether you slept or not.”

Unsure what to say to that, and acutely aware of his eyes on me, I pull my saddlebag closer. I reach inside, rummage for something to stick in my empty belly before it begins rumbling. My hand closes around one of the round, hard cheeses, and I pull it from the pack. I break it in two, then begin pulling the wax from one half. Like a ripple moving across a pond, the quiet hum and murmur around me ceases. When I look up, I see that nearly all the hellequin are watching me.

“Cheese,” the lanky youth says, somewhat wistfully.

He is so very young that it is hard to imagine what he could have done to earn time with the hellequin. Discomfited, I glance at Balthazaar. “Do they not eat either?”

He shakes his head. “Hellequin do not require food, but we can eat it if we like. For many, it is either a painful or pleasant reminder of our mortal years.”

Suddenly my throat closes up and my hunger evaporates. Not knowing what

else to do, I take the second half of the cheese and hold it out to the boy. “Would you like some?”

He looks at me with equal parts disbelief and longing, then cuts a questioning glance to Balthazaar. Whatever he sees there reassures him. He leaps to his feet, crosses the distance between us, then reaches out hesitantly to take the cheese. I only wish I had enough to give all of them, for the face of every man here holds some measure of hunger, although what exactly they hunger for, I will likely never know. “Thank you,” the boy says. He stares down at the cheese as if it were a sparkling jewel as he hurries back to his place by the fire. However, instead of shoving the cheese in his mouth as I expected, he breaks off a small piece and hands it to the older man who had been showing him how to carve wood. Other hellequin begin crowding near, and he breaks off more and more pieces, handing them out until all he has left is one bite of cheese. He pops it in his mouth, savoring it as he chews.

When we ride out that night, Balthazaar takes the van and the rest fall in behind him. The only exceptions are Miserere and two other hellequin who have been assigned to ride at my side. One is the lanky youth—Begard, he is called—and the other his companion of earlier, a former stonemason they call Malestroit. They are my protection, Balthazaar claims, but I cannot help but wonder if their true purpose is to prevent my escape.

Although he need not worry about that. Not yet. I am watched much too closely. Not only out of suspicion, but because I am something new. A diversion. Mayhap even a reminder of what they have lost. I see that in Malestroit’s sorrowful eyes every time he looks at me.

However, not all hellequin feel that way. Some cast bitter glances in my direction, as if it pains them to have me in their midst. Still others wear expressions of awe and try to draw near, as if my presence offers them some hope or plucks some chord of fond memory.

It is all most disconcerting, frankly.

As Fortuna canters through the forest surrounded by the hunt, trees tower on either side of us, obscuring the moon. We ride so fast I dare not look up at the stars for fear I will fall off my horse and be trampled. Not to mention that the roads chosen by the hellequin are rough and little used, often barely more than wagon ruts.

When the path opens up again, I find that the cluster of hellequin around me has grown. Miserere keeps to my left and Malestroit to my right, but others press in close.

“You have drawn a crowd, milady.” Begard’s voice is cheerful, as if I should be proud of such an accomplishment.

“So it appears,” I murmur, suddenly very glad for Balthazaar’s caution.

“There is no need to fear. Most are not as terrifying as they seem. You’ve met Miserere.” The boy glances to the giant who rides silently beside us and lowers his voice in an exaggerated manner. “He is not nearly so frightening as he looks.”

Unable to help myself, I too glance at Miserere, who stares straight ahead and pretends we do not exist. “I fear I may need more than your word on that for me to believe it,” I say.

Miserere’s grim mouth twitches. I would like to believe it is in amusement, but it is most likely in annoyance. Or anger.

Begard ignores him and continues with his prattle. “Malestroit here used to be a stonemason. He’s teaching me to whittle.”

“Gives him something to do with his hands besides steal things from others,” the stonemason explains. “A bad enough habit among the living, but especially stupid when surrounded by men such as these.”

Begard looks sheepish. “I am—used to be—a thief,” he says by way of explanation. While I am not surprised that he is a thief, I am surprised that such a small crime would earn him a place with the hellequin. To turn the subject from him—and his discomfort—I ask Begard who the second giant is.

“You must mean Sauvage.” The boy gives a mock shudder. “He does frighten me. A little.” He lowers his voice in earnest now. “He was a follower of Saint Camulos. He was called the Butcher of Quimper and became so overcome by battle lust that he destroyed entire villages. He has ridden with the hunt for at least two hundred years. Or so it is rumored. Mostly he keeps to himself.”

“Or the hounds,” Malestroit adds. “He does have a fondness for the hounds.”

“Surely that speaks well of him,” I say. “What of the man with the fancy armor and sharp features? Over there.” I tilt my head in his general direction, unwilling to point and draw attention to myself.

Begard’s young face is like a map, his expressions informing me just as thoroughly as his words how he feels about the men with whom he serves. “That is Maligne,” he says sullenly. “I don’t like him. He is cruel.”

“Only because you tried to steal his knife,” Malestroit points out. “He is not inclined to forgive that.”

Begard ignores this and whispers to me instead. “He swore an oath to the duke of Brittany during the first war of succession, then broke it. He is one of the forsworn.”

“Ah.” I had always known it was a terrible thing to break an oath, and I cannot help but wonder if I have broken some similar oath—albeit unknowingly—in leaving the convent.

Beside me, Miserere shifts on his horse and leans forward to scowl at Begard. “If you’re going to tattle on everyone else’s sins, boy, be sure to tell your own.”

Begard squirms in his saddle, then looks down to study the reins he holds in his hands. “I was a thief,” he says.

“So you said. This seems hard penance for such a crime,” I point out gently.

He grows even more miserable. “I . . . I lured a merchant and his wife to an isolated road so I could rob them. The merchant, he fought back, and I ended up killing him.”

Perhaps to distract attention from the younger boy, or perhaps as part of his own personal vow of penance, the stonemason speaks quietly into Begard’s melancholy silence. “As for me, I accidentally beat my only son to death in a fit of drunkenness.” His face is haggard with the memory, and clearly his own guilt and regret are worse than the punishment of riding with the hunt.

Unable to look at his sorrow-ravaged face any longer, I glance over to Miserere and wonder what sins he has committed. To my surprise, I find him looking at me. “I was an executioner,” he says, his gaze never wavering from my own. “With nearly a hundred deaths on my hands.”

“That seems hardly fair, as they were deaths sanctioned by the law.”

“They are still deaths,” he says, looking away.

“Begone! All of you!”

I jerk my head around at the sound of Balthazaar’s voice. He has left the lead and moved to my right, where Malestroit had been. “You are not nursemaids. You have duties to attend to.”

I wonder if Miserere minds very much being called a nursemaid and sneak a glance at him. By the pained look on his face, I can see that he does.

The others fall back, but Balthazaar says nothing as we ride side by side. His gaze searches the trees, as if he suspects there are souls lurking just beyond his reach. “I suppose I should ask what you know of the hellequin,” he finally says.

“Far more than I knew an hour ago,” I murmur.

“The boy talks too much.”

“On the contrary, I found it most helpful.”

“You are not avoiding my question, are you?” The weight of his gaze presses heavily on me, like a pile of stones.

“I know they are the souls of the damned who have pledged themselves to serve Mortain in order to earn their redemption.”

“You know more than most, it seems.”

“It is also said that when they ride out at night, they bring the chill and despair of the Underworld with them.”

“And do you feel the chill and despair of the Underworld, demoiselle?”

I glance around at the hellequin whose stories I have just heard. “Of a sort,” I say quietly.

“What?” he scoffs. “No words of demon spawn, of ambassadors of Satan himself? No stories of our cavorting across the countryside leaving sin and destruction in our wake?”

I know he intends his sharp manner to drive a wedge between us, to push me away. But there is pain hiding behind his bitterness. It is hidden, deeply hidden, perhaps even from him, but it is there. I know because Sybella tried to keep us away in precisely the same manner when she first came to the convent. The comparison gives me pause. Is that why he feels familiar to me? “No, for I do not follow the new church, but keep to the old ways instead.”

“What manner of maid is raised so steeped in the old faith that she is unafraid to ride with the hellequin’s hunt?”

“Who says I am unafraid?” I counter.

“I saw you with my men. You shared your food with them, but more than that, you saw their humanity and offered them compassion. There was no fear.”

My gaze drifts to the hellequin around us. “Some of them frighten me,” I murmur. “Miserere, Sauvage, that hooded fellow.”

“So how did you come to be raised in such a way that you can so easily overcome your own fears?”

I open my mouth to answer his question, then pause, all of my senses sharpening, just as they do when I step into the training yard with Sister Thomine. When he came upon me that first night, he said he knew the manner of my upbringing and owed a debt to those who raised me. But now he is acting as if he does *not* know the nature of my upbringing.

Or else he is trying to catch me in a lie.

While it had seemed possible that the hunt could actually be pursuing me, I did not give too much credence to the thought. But now, now I must consider that possibility once more. “I am from an old family, one of the oldest in Brittany,” I tell him. “A remote branch that keeps to the westernmost regions, where many still honor the old ways. My family is one of those, that is all.”

“But it is not.” His words cause my heart to stutter with concern. “You easily accept what some believe exists only in myth and legend. You are not only respectful of Mortain, but worshipful. Dedicated in a way that few are. Especially as the new church encroaches ever more on the old faith.”

He is right—even those who respect the old ways are not so enamored of Mortain. I must answer him but also steer him away from any hint that I am one of Mortain’s own handmaidens. “My mother’s sister was an initiate at the convent of Saint Mortain and she has written to us often over the years, her words glorifying the work that they do there. Because of that, the members of my family more than most, have a deep connection to Him.” I glance up at him to see if this will satisfy his curiosity.

His gaze grows heavy with intensity, as if he is trying to call forth all my secrets. “And you have never questioned your faith? Never doubted or turned your back on Him?”

It is not his question that gives me pause but the dark undercurrent in his words, which suggests something that I cannot fully discern. Anguish? Anger? “No,” I say simply. “I have not.” It is not a lie that I tell him, for it is only my faith in the abbess that has wavered.

We ride on, and the silence between us grows thick and weighted. Afraid he will ask more questions, I decide to ask some of my own. “Explain to me the nature of the hellequin and their duties so I may better understand them?”

He huffs out a breath of irritation. “I am no tutor.”

“I have heard it said that because of the hellequin’s own dark histories, they are easily corrupted by others’ will, especially those that call them back to the darkness of their own past.” I keep my voice low and fill it with all the sympathy I truly feel. “That once they stray, they are twice damned and thrust well beyond any chance of redemption or any afterlife at all.”

“That is at the heart of it.” He rolls his shoulders, as if he would shrug off the weight of this burden. It is a surprisingly human gesture. “We are broken and damned, the midden heap of Mortain’s grace and mercy. We are tasked with collecting the souls of the wicked so they may be brought to their final judgment and wreak no more havoc upon the living.” He pauses a moment before adding, “And we also collect the lost—those who cannot find their own way to the Underworld or simply refuse to leave the world of the living.”

“So not only a hunt,” I murmur. “But also a rescue mission.”

His lips twist in scorn. “Do not decorate it with flowers and hang a ribbon on it, demoiselle. We are not noble or gallant men. We have sworn ourselves to this service, but the honor that binds us to it is a tenuous thing at best.”

“Says the evil hellequin who saved me from his own men.” I watch him closely to see if he has any reaction to being reminded of the deal he made with me.

He stares at me for a long moment, but there is no flash of remorse or recognition or, indeed, anything at all.

“How are you chosen?” I ask, unwilling to endure the silence any longer.

“We volunteer. It is one last chance to atone for the darkest of our sins.” He looks up and squints through the trees as if he has spotted something fascinating up there. “We must move among the temptations of our mortal flesh each and every day. And each and every day, we must say yes to our continued penance, even as new temptations greet us with each setting sun. We must choose, not once, but again and again, in each hour that passes, to walk this path.” He turns to look at me and I am struck by the brief glimpse of hunger I see in his gaze. “And there are many temptations.”

Me, I realize dizzily. He considers me a temptation. And yet, he offered to hide me among his own men.

Or did he? What if, in truth, he suspects who I am and wishes to keep me close until he can find out for certain?

A short while later, the hounds begin to bay, and a ripple of excitement runs through the hellequin, as palpable as the night breeze on my face. Dark, feral grins break out as they kick their horses to a gallop. Their mounts seem to draw on some otherworldly reserves, and they surge forward, giant hooves pounding the earth beneath their feet until it sounds like a hailstorm.

Fortuna follows. Indeed, it is as if the wildness and ferocity of the other horses is some scent or eldritch sickness that she herself has caught. As I lift my face to the dark night, I wonder if I too might catch it.

The hounds bay again, this time sending a cascade of goose flesh down my arms. In front of me, the hunt splits into two, like water before a rock, spreading out, then encircling something. No—someone, I realize, as one of the riders shifts his position. Actually, several someones.

We have stopped in a small clearing surrounded by gnarled trees bent by the wind, their weighty branches drooping to the ground like long green beards. Now that the riders have stopped moving, my eyes are drawn to the three men inside the circle. Or rather, not men but something more otherworldly than that, for they do not seem solid or truly mortal—their edges are blurred somewhat and all the color leached from them, like a gown left to dry in the sun too long.

These cornered men show no defiance, only fear. Now that the men are surrounded and have no means of escape, the hellequin draw in close. But, much to my surprise, the hellequin are almost gentle with them, not so much pursuing them as herding them, urging them forward with their horses.

We continue on, but much more slowly, so that the men on foot may keep up.

It does not take long for us to reach a cromlech. It is not the same one we slept in last night, but another, even larger one, and I cannot help but wonder just how

many there are. Balthazaar dismounts near the entrance, as do Malestroit and Begard. Once we are inside, the hellequin gently herd the souls to the threshold to the Underworld. The souls stand rigid and terrified. It is Malestroit who speaks first. “You do not wish to linger here on earth past your season.”

The souls try to scramble back from the gaping darkness that seems to reach for them, but the hellequin press too close. “We’re not going through there,” one of them says. “We know what awaits.”

“Do you?” Balthazaar asks gently.

“Hellfire and damnation. Demons gnawing on our flesh for centuries” is the soul’s answer.

Begard steps forward, his cheerful face creased with earnestness. “No. It will not be like that. Let me show you.”

The soul looks from Begard to Balthazaar. “And if I refuse?”

“Then we will let you go, and you will be free to wander, lost and alone. And after you have wandered some more, we will find you and bring you back to this place, where once again you will be given a choice.”

“Here. I will go first,” Begard says, and he steps through the doorway, the darkness in the opening so absolute that it appears to consume him.

One of the souls stares after Begard hungrily, and with no more words or arguments, he follows him through the door. The other two seem to lose their resistance and stumble forward, almost as if they welcome the pull of that which they feared was lost to them.

And then they are gone, swallowed up by the darkness. In the moment of stillness that follows, the mood around me shifts almost imperceptibly. It takes me a moment to recognize that it is a feeling of accomplishment. The hellequin are eager to do their task, not just because it earns them redemption, but because it affirms there is rest for all souls—eventually.

Chapter Seventeen

AFTER ONCE AGAIN STICKING to me like a leech as I slept, Balthazaar completely ignores me once I am awake. Indeed, it is as if I have somehow contracted the plague and he is afraid of catching it. Which leads me to wonder just how many physical ills hellequin are vulnerable to. I shall have to ask him. If he ever gets close enough for me to speak with him again.

After very little preparation—I am the only one who bothers with such comforts as a bedroll and food—we are off, moving out into the night like an undulating serpent across the grass. We ride, slowly at first but gaining speed with each moment that passes until we are galloping into the cold night air. For a moment—just a moment—I give myself over to the sheer pleasure of being out in the world once more, lift my face to the night breeze and simply enjoy the pleasure of being alive and moving to fill my skin. A part of me cannot help but admit to the thrill to be had in such unrestrained wildness, riding faster than the wind itself, the entire pack moving like one graceful entity.

Spending so much time in the antechamber of the Underworld gives one an entirely new appreciation of life.

Again Balthazaar rides in the van and assigns his minions to watch over me. Either we do not set as grueling a pace as last night or I have already grown accustomed to it. We ride in silence but for the pounding of the horses' hooves. There is a buoyancy, a rush of something akin to joy, for all that it is naught but joy's thin, darker cousin, that drives home for me why the hellequin relish these rides. Not only does it bring them that much closer to redemption, but it allows them the chance to be free from the confines of their daily prison.

I too am glad to be free of the cromlech, for it disturbs me as much as it fascinates me. It is easy to feel one's spirit become dampened, quiet, as if it is making ready for the final journey to the Underworld.

Besides, since I do not know if Mortain hunts me or not, it seems foolish to tarry on His doorstep.

And yet, what choice do I have? A lone woman, even one of Mortain's own, cannot go against so many any more than a leaf can swim upstream. So like a leaf in a stream, I will let myself be carried along in the hellequin's current and hope that it will take me where I wish to go. Eventually.

The trees on either side of us brush by, seeming to give way before our approach. The sharp bite of winter still hangs in the air and our breath comes out

in puffs of small, white clouds, giving the riders an altogether otherworldly appearance.

Balthazaar falls back to ride beside me, and as if by some silent agreement or command, the others disperse. He says nothing. Does not so much as look at me, but simply rides at my side, his demonic horse crowding me and Fortuna.

As we journey in silence, his moodiness seems to fall away from him so that by the time we slow to give our horses a break, he looks far less forbidding. Relieved, I finally allow myself to ask one of the scores of questions clattering in my head. “How could you tell the souls you caught last night were only lost and not wicked? Do you see marques, like daughters of Mortain do?”

He brings his head around and pierces me with a fierce gaze. “How do you know of the marques? That is knowledge only those who serve Mortain should have.”

Merde. In my eagerness for answers, I let my fool tongue run away with me. “Do not be angry. My mother’s sister meant no harm in telling us. She was just awed by the gifts and mercy Mortain bestows upon the world and those who serve Him that she could not contain herself.” I hold his stony gaze for a moment, and then another, to impress upon him that I am telling the truth.

When Balthazaar finally looks away, I allow myself a silent sigh of relief, then quickly change the subject. “Can you coax a soul to follow you while it is still in its mortal body?”

“Only Mortain can do that.”

“Have you ever seen Mortain?”

His scowl deepens, and I cannot help but wonder what fault he finds with *this* question. “Yes. I have seen Him, but He is the god of Death, not some knight to be swooned over.”

“I am not swooning over Him! I have heard stories all my life and want to know what is true and what is not.”

We are saved from further arguing when the hounds begin to bay. Within moments, the entire hunt picks up its pace. Our path takes us darting between trees and leaping over streamlets, galloping past newly tilled fields and small stone cottages with the windows tightly shuttered and the doors barred.

The hounds’ braying grows even more frantic and Sauvage takes the lead. I do not know if it is because he is the most terrifying or if it is simply his turn. Instead of going farther into the woods, the hunt veers to the left. That is when I see the two men—souls. They are racing toward the wayside cross that sits where our path intersects with the main road.

The hunt increases its speed, the hounds pulling ahead, teeth bared. Their manner is so different from last night that I can only assume that their prey is

different as well. Not innocent, perhaps, but wicked.

The riders in the front of the pack, led by Sauvage, get out ahead of the souls, effectively blocking their path to the stone cross. Their hope of sanctuary cut off, the souls stop running and turn to face the arriving hellequin. The hounds do not lunge at them, as I feared they would, but instead hang back, milling about the horses' legs, growling as they keep their feral gazes fixed on their quarry.

While their eyes are wide with terror, they also exhibit a large helping of defiance. I look around, waiting to see which hellequin will talk to them, the way it was done last night, but none of them dismount. Instead, Sauvage takes a rope from his saddle, swings it out and around and then down over the two men, capturing them. He jerks hard, yanking them off their feet, then waits. After a moment, the two rise uncertainly, glaring at the hellequin. Sauvage jerks on the rope once more, but not so hard that the men fall again, only hard enough to get them moving. Thus roped and surrounded by grinning hellequin, they are escorted to the nearest cromlech.

It is not hard to wonder where rumors of demon spawn come from.

When we reach the cromlech, the hellequin dismount. Sauvage, with Balthazaar close on his heels, shoves the men through the entrance to the cromlech, and the rest of the hunt follows. They drive them toward the door to the Underworld, where the darkness waits, beating like a pulse.

Then, surprising both me and the souls, Sauvage removes the rope. They stand free once more. "It is time for you to pass from this world to the next," Balthazaar says.

One of the prisoners spits off to the side. "The Church says you will lead us to hell."

"The Church is wrong. Hell does not reside beyond that door."

"If you want me to go through there, you're going to have to carry me yourself."

"I will not. If you cross, you must do so by your own free choice."

"What if I do not?"

"Then we will hunt you again and again, until the end of time, if necessary, and each time, we will bring you back to the mouth of the Underworld until you grow tired of the hunt and surrender to what must be."

While the one man argues, the second one glances over at the blackness that fills the doorway. He must see something there that comforts him, for without so much as a word to his companion, he steps through the door.

Gaping in surprise, the other man stares after him, as if awaiting screams or cries for help. None come. The darkness that lurks in the narrow passageway seems to swell forward, almost as if reaching for him. Instead of fleeing in

terror, the soul remains still, and something on his face shifts, the fear replaced by . . . wonder? Relief? He steps forward to greet the darkness willingly, even eagerly.

I look at the hellequin around me, yearning sitting heavy upon them, and for the first time, I understand the hunger I see on their faces. They cannot wait for their turn to be welcomed into their final resting place.

There are tears in my eyes when I turn and walk away, nearly ramming into Balthazaar. “I’m sorry,” I murmur, keeping my gaze downcast. “I did not see you there.” He is so close, I can feel the rise and fall of his breath. I hold myself still, waiting for him to say something.

Instead of speaking, he reaches out to capture one of the tears falling down my cheek. “Why are you crying?” His voice grows soft, intimate even, and I cannot help myself—I look up so I may see his face. “They will not be harmed,” he says gently. “It was their own fear reflected back at them, not because of something we had done.”

“I know,” I whisper. “I am just overwhelmed by the immensity of Mortain’s grace. That even if we are lost or wandering, He will find us—always, He will find us—and try to bring us home.”

“Yes,” Balthazaar says. “He will.” His finger lingers against my cheek a moment before he turns and walks away.

As I watch him depart, I wonder if the hellequin are Mortain’s way of ensuring I find my way home, wherever that may be, and if Balthazaar’s words are a warning or a promise.

The next night is much the same, and I realize I have fallen into a routine with the hellequin. That unsettles me, for it speaks of acceptance, of resignation. I have become distracted by the wonder of Mortain’s grace in action, by these inhabitants of the Underworld come to life before me, and by the men’s own tragic histories.

So distracted that it takes me a full week before I wonder why we have not yet reached Guérande. That night, when Balthazaar falls back to ride beside me, I confront him. “What is taking so long? We should have reached Guérande by now.”

“We *will* reach Guérande,” Balthazaar says stubbornly. “We are just crisscrossing the countryside as we go. It is how we hunt, and I never said we would not hunt on the way.”

“No, but you did not explain you would take over a week to make a three-day trip either.”

He stares down at his hands holding the reins. “Is what you have waiting for you there so very important?” It is the faint, almost undetectable note of wistfulness in his voice that gives me pause. “A lover perhaps?” he continues.

“I have no lover.” I am further intrigued when I see his grip on the reins loosen—in relief? “But I do have important business I must conduct there. I did not expect to linger on the road so long.”

He looks up at my face then. “If there is one thing we hellequin have learned, demoiselle, it is that life is short and should be savored. It is best if you do not spend all your time wishing you were somewhere else. We will reach Guérande when we reach it.” And then he is gone, riding back to the front of the pack and motioning Miserere to take his place at my side.

As I watch him go, frustration and longing fill my chest, pressing heavily against my ribs. While I still want to get to Guérande and confront the abbess, the inner workings of Mortain and His world have appeared before me, almost as if He has willed it. Would it not be best to make the most of this short span of time when I am free? This is living without restraint like I have always dreamed of, even though the circumstances are far, far different than I ever imagined. Should I not just embrace this opportunity, accept that it may even be Mortain’s own hand that brought me here? Would not this depth of experience and additional knowledge give me even more fodder for my confrontation with the abbess?

And it is not as if my meeting with the abbess will bear anything but bitter fruit. In fact, there is a good chance she will do everything in her power to send me back to the convent. Back to fulfill the very destiny I am running from. And I do not yet know if I will go.

As long as I keep my true identity hidden—no more slips such as the stupid question about the marques—I should be fine. Besides, Balthazaar does not seem to be in too big a hurry to be rid of me.

Surely these are the reasons I decide not to pursue the matter further. Not because of a pair of tortured dark eyes that feel as if they brush against my soul every time they look at me.

Chapter Eighteen

THE NEXT NIGHT'S HUNT PROVES fruitless, and the hellequin's disappointment is as heavy and ominous as an impending thunderstorm. Twice, the mood quickened, as if they had scented prey, but it came to naught. Indeed, this lack of success in finding so much as a rabbit to catch for my own small supper has cast a pall over the entire group. It is not yet dawn when we return, but none of the hellequin seem ready to retire for the night. Instead, they build a fire, a larger one than normal, and a dozen or so of them gather round. I start to slip away to leave them to their private misery, but Balthazaar calls out to me.

"Come," he says, holding out a hand. "You have said you honor the old ways and worship Mortain. Come tell us of your faith. Mayhap it will remind us of ours."

Unwilling to deny them this small comfort, I accept his hand. It is large and firm and feels wholly of this world, except for the faint chill that seeps through his glove. As he leads me to the fire, my mind scrambles for what to tell them of Mortain. Which words can I share without giving away my true identity?

The others make room for me, and though they are outlaws and sinners and have all manner of black hearts, their acceptance gladdens me, which is surely a hundred kinds of foolish.

I settle myself upon the hard rocky floor and stare into the flames, for they are easier to look at than the desolate faces around me. "What can I tell you? I was raised to see Mortain as the first among the Nine, for without Death, there could be no life. Just as the roots of living trees must reach down past the loam and soil to find sustenance from the Underworld, so too are we sustained by Death. Of a certainty, He has sustained me through many . . . trials." I look up at the hellequin, at their rough, broken faces. "Although my trials were much different from yours, they were hard enough in their own way, and I would have faltered without Mortain to lend me His strength."

Even though I am not looking at him, I can feel Balthazaar's nearness, much as a moth senses the heat of a flame. "People fear Him—wrongly. They see punishment and starkness in Death, yet there is beauty as well. The small black beetles that burrow deep in the earth to die every winter, only to be reborn in the spring. The tree branches that turn to barren bone, yet unfurl with new leaves. Those are the promises that reside in Death.

"The Mortain I believe in is not scary or terrifying. People's terror comes

from their own fear, or tales told by the Church rather than from anything Mortain has done. People are afraid of what they do not understand, and since they have abandoned the old ways, they no longer understand Death and His true place—His true purpose—in this world.”

Only when I am done talking do I allow myself to glance in Balthazaar’s direction. His head is tilted to the side and he studies me intently, as if peering through my flesh and sinew to my soul. “You love Him,” he says, his voice filled with wonder.

I duck my head, embarrassed. “He is a god, and I but honor Him.” But Balthazaar is right: I do love Him. And in that moment, I know that I do not wish to leave His service. I want only to understand it—understand what He wants from me and trust that however I spend my life, it is His will coupled with mine, not simply the convent’s. I lift my gaze back to Balthazaar. “If you do not see Him as I do, how do you come to pledge yourself to His service?” I ask.

The silence that follows my question is as thick and heavy as the stone upon which I sit, and I fear no one will answer until, at last, Begard speaks.

“Through true remorse,” he says, staring into the flames. “In the moment of your death, the desire to redeem yourself becomes a physical thing, like a rope you can use to pull yourself back from the edge of drowning.”

Miserere shakes his head, his eyes fixed on the flickering shadows on the cavern wall. “At the moment of your death, you are filled with a fierce need to claw your way back up the very sword that pierced you and bellow that it is not over. You are not finished yet. You still need time to atone for all that you have done.”

Something at the edge of the group shifts, and I look up to find Sauvage standing there, his hand buried in the fur of one of the giant hound’s neck. “It is all those you have killed, silently looking at you with their dead, haunted eyes, that chase you back into life, willing to pay any price to avoid looking at them for all eternity.”

Silence descends upon us once more. I wish for Balthazaar to tell his tale, for I am desperate to know what sin he has committed to earn this penance. Almost as if hearing my wish, he looks up at me with a face that seems as if it were carved out of sorrow and despair. I want to reach across the distance between us and run a finger along one of his dark brows, as if in so doing I could wipe away the bleakness I see in his eyes. Instead, I pull my fingers tightly against my palm and turn my gaze to the fire.

Over the next few days, all the exhilaration and thrill of hunting gives way to the sobering fact that we have been five nights now with no luck. Balthazaar in

particular takes it hard.

I am unsure as to what the absence of souls means, but the hellequin are unsettled by it. Their moods grow even darker, and the small bits of joking and camaraderie that they enjoyed have all but disappeared. Balthazaar, Miserere, and Sauvage spend long hours in conversation, conversation they are careful to keep from my ears.

Is the scarcity of souls some dire portent? A sign of the influence the new church has over our land? Or is it more personal than that—without souls to collect, the hellequin will not be able to earn their redemption?

The mood after tonight's hunt is the grimmest yet and I find myself wishing I had some way to ease their frustration. But I do not. Indeed, I barely have the ability to ease my own sense of futility, which bubbles through my veins like one of Sister Serafina's poisons.

While the hellequin busy themselves—somewhat morosely—with their meager evening rituals, it occurs to me how time must weigh heavily on them, with no sleep or chores or even pleasures to relieve the waiting. But I must do something to relieve the waiting or else I will twitch right out of my skin. Being surrounded by these strong, brutal men reminds me that I have skills I must keep up, skills I must keep honed as sharply as the edges of my blades.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I slip toward the back of the cromlech unobserved. While I want to be well away from the others so they cannot see—or mock—me, Balthazaar's warning against venturing too near the threshold to the Underworld is firmly etched in my mind.

When I judge that I am well out of the view of the others, I slip my bow and quiver off my back, then roll my shoulders to loosen the muscles and joints. I have not done anything but ride for nearly two weeks. Moving through my training exercises will not only help keep my skills sharp, but also relieve the pent-up frustration I am feeling.

As I begin the familiar movements, a sense of calm settles over me, as if the exercises themselves pull me back into myself, reminding me of who and what I am. I wonder if the abbess has been informed yet of my absence, and if so, what she has done about it. If nothing else, my current circumstances afford me a most excellent cover, for she would never in a thousand years think to look for me here.

I move on to the more complex set of exercises, the ones that take all my concentration.

“Does that not work better with an opponent?” The deep, gravelly voice pulls me from the sequence, causing me to stumble.

I glance over at Miserere, who watches me, face implacable, arms folded. I reply without thinking. "But I do not wish to hurt any of you."

Miserere's mouth twitches, and I hear a guffaw or two of laughter.

"If you need a rock or tree to batter yourself against, he is your man," Begard says cheerfully, almost as if he knows this from personal experience.

Miserere steps forward. There is no anticipation in his manner, or revulsion, or even resignation. He simply moves, like a boulder that has sprouted legs.

I eye him warily. I meant my words as a jest, not a challenge. However, I will not—cannot—back down. Not with all of them watching. At the very least, maybe when they see my level of skill, they will think twice before crossing me.

Just as I motion Miserere forward, a large, black glove appears on his arm and shoves him aside. "If the lady needs someone to spar with her, I will do it." Balthazaar looks not at me but at the other men, meeting each one's gaze and holding it for a long moment. His brows are drawn together in a thunderous ridge, and his mouth is set in a hard, unforgiving line. Unease snakes through me.

It is one thing to bash upon someone like Miserere, whom I have no hope of beating or even hurting. But fighting Balthazaar is far, far different. It feels too . . . intimate.

And then he is standing in front of me, arms relaxed at his sides. "They are all watching." He speaks quietly, and I cannot tell if that is resignation I hear in his voice or a taunt.

"Well, then, let's not disappoint them." Before I have finished my sentence, I launch forward, trying to catch him off-guard. In a rapid series of strikes, I come at him, but he blocks every blow, his eyes watching me intently the entire time. Indeed, the hunger that is always there is even more present, and it is more unsettling than his strength. I allow that feeling of unease to show upon my face, then use the moment of his surprise to spin myself around to bring a resounding kick to his legs, trying to knock him off balance.

He does not budge. But the hunger deepens and an almost feral smile appears on his face, as if he thinks some primal challenge is being offered and he has decided to accept.

We are just sparring, I remind myself. Nothing more.

I try every way I know to lever my body against his, to upset his balance or cause him to shift, even a bit. But every time we touch, it feels far too much like a caress. Every time our bodies slam into each other, it feels like an unspoken promise. Is this some hellequin trick? Some spell they are able to cast with their dark natures? If so, it is a most unfair way to fight. However, no matter how much I try or from what angle I come at him, I realize I will never catch him

unaware as I did that first time, and that is the only way I can best him, by getting in under his guard.

Annoyed, I rush him again, then feint to the side and spin so that I am behind him. I push myself against his body—pressing myself against him precisely as he did against me that first night we met—and get a chokehold around his neck. I feel everything inside him still, then he relaxes so that he sags into me. I am so unnerved by the sensation of it that I pause. Only for a second, but it is enough.

The next moment I am flying over his shoulder in a dizzying rush. I brace myself for my landing on the hard rock floor, knowing it will knock the wind out of me.

Except I never reach it. Instead, Balthazaar catches me and eases me back to my feet, almost as if we were dancing. My breath is coming fast now, but the bastard is not even breathing hard. And his arms are still around me. “If you wanted them watching you, they are,” he whispers in my ear. “Every move, every breath that passes your lips, has their full attention.”

I bring my arms up suddenly to break his hold, then leap away, annoyed that I am only able to do so because he let me. We are still close, too close, I realize, but before I can step back, he speaks once more. “What was your intent with this sparring of yours? To entice them? To entice *me*?”

At his accusation, a hot flush of mortification floods my body, for I was not trying to entice anyone. I reach out and shove him—hard—surprised when he gives way. “If that is the case, then it is their fault and not mine. I wished only to keep my own skills honed.” I follow up with another shove, which he again allows. “Simply because your thoughts are base does not mean I must accept the taint you would lay at my feet.” And then, realizing he is no longer as guarded as he was, I sweep my leg wide, knocking his out from under him, satisfied when he lands flat on his back in the dirt.

Holding my head high, I turn and begin walking to my bedroll. The other hellequin say nothing, but they move out of my way.

“If you so much as snicker, I will kill you all,” I hear him tell the others.

None of them laugh, but my own lips twitch in satisfaction.

It takes me a long while to fall asleep, as fury and embarrassment simmer in my limbs. However, I must do so at last because the next thing I know, I come awake. Even though it is unseasonably cold, I am warm, blissfully warm. Someone must have built a fire nearby. Except there is no red glow or light flickering against the cave wall. That is when I realize there is something solid at my back. Slowly, I turn over to find Balthazaar stretched out on the floor beside

me. He is lying flat, the entire length of his side pressed up against me, his hands propped under his head. “Go back to sleep,” he mutters.

“You are making me too hot,” I mutter back.

“I am keeping you from freezing.”

“I do not need your help.”

He does not respond, but he does not get up and leave either. Deciding I am too tired to insist, I force my mind away from the complex, infuriating man beside me. Just as I am drifting off to sleep, he speaks again, so softly I cannot be certain it is not a dream.

“I am sorry. You make me ashamed of what we are, of what little we can offer you, and I lashed out at you when what I really wanted was to punish my own dark thoughts.”

Then, softer than a melting snowflake, something brushes against my cheek—his finger, I realize. It is a shockingly gentle gesture and dissolves what little anger I still harbored. I could not stay angry at him any more than I could stay angry with Sybella when she lashed out at us when the pain inside her became too great to bear. I do not know what personal demons Balthazaar struggles with, but I know pain when I see it.

When next I wake, two things occur to me with sudden clarity. Indeed, the ideas are so simple that I am sheepish I did not think of them before. Surely it was the shock of finding myself among the hellequin that so addled my wits.

But no longer.

I could take Balthazaar as a lover. If I am no longer a virgin, that will put an end to this seeress nonsense the abbess keeps insisting on.

Besides, I cannot help but feel as if riding with the hellequin is doing more to serve Mortain than sitting with Sister Vereda in some stone chamber. I could have a role here with these men. I am able to lighten their mood, to ease their despair just a tiny bit. What if I could be a glimmer of light on their long, dark quest for redemption?

Perhaps that is even why Mortain led me into their path.

The next night, when Balthazaar lies down next to me, I turn my entire body so that I am facing him. He grows so still, it is as if he has become part of the stone floor upon which we lie. I say nothing, hoping he will instinctively know what I want, but he makes no move, does not even, I think, breathe. *Merde.*

“Balthazaar?”

There is a faint sigh—a movement or exhalation, I cannot tell. Slowly, as if approaching some wild, untamed creature, I reach out and lay my hand upon his chest. His muscles bunch up beneath my fingers, and, almost as if against his will, his head turns toward mine. When our gazes meet through the darkness, it is as intimate as a touch and my heart begins to beat more deeply.

“What are you doing?” His voice is strained and hardly sounds like his own.

“I thought we could . . .” I stop and swallow. Now that the moment is upon me, I fear my nerve will fail. I close my eyes and remember the look on his face when we were sparring, remember the way his hands lingered on my body. “I know you desire me. I . . . I can see it when you look at me.” For all of Sister Beatriz’s lessons, I am doing this wrong, and a slow, hot flush of embarrassment washes over me.

He grabs my hand in his, and the feel of his naked fingers against mine sends a shock all the way down to my belly. We have rarely touched, and then only when he was wearing gloves. He brings my hand to his mouth and presses his lips upon it. A brief, fleeting gesture that is all too soon over. Then he tucks my hand under my chin. “This is not what you want. Not truly.” His voice is gruff and filled with an aching loneliness, a loneliness that I know I can ease.

“But it is.” I reach for him again, only this time I let my fingers drift up to his hair and touch the soft, dark strands of it. “I want to be with you,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes for a long moment and leans into my touch. My heart lifts, thinking this means he will agree. But then he pulls himself away and puts an arm’s length of distance between us. “That is not allowed.” His voice is rough, as if the words are being dragged along shards of glass. “And even if it were, you are too young, too good, to pledge yourself to the road I must travel. To pledge yourself to *me*.” Then, before I can argue further, he rises to his feet and strides away, leaving me cold and alone in the dark.

When I wake, Balthazaar is not at my side, and my heart plummets as I remember last night. Sitting up, I cast a casual glance around the cave, trying to locate him.

He sits toward the back, almost out of view, staring at something he holds in his lap. I glance away so he will not feel the weight of my gaze, but I am able to keep sight of him from the corner of my eye. As I stand, he hurriedly shoves whatever he is looking at back into his saddlebag and rises to his feet.

I avoid looking at him, or even acknowledging him, while we make ready to ride. Indeed, I manage to avoid him the entire night, my efforts greatly aided by his equal desire to avoid me. When the hunt returns to the cromlech, he still sleeps near me, but does not lie down until long after I am asleep, and he rises

before I wake. He spends hours staring at whatever he keeps in his saddlebag, as if trying to coax an answer from it. After two days of this, my curiosity becomes piqued.

Perhaps he is holding some token of the sins he committed when he was human, something he is using to keep his resolve strong. Perhaps giving in to mortal temptation such as I offered him will only prolong his punishment or even remove his chance for redemption altogether.

Perhaps whatever he keeps in that saddlebag will answer all these questions that plague me.

Chapter Nineteen

AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, the next night is a busy one, with lost and wandering souls so thick upon the ground that the hellequin are able to scoop them up like fishermen with a net. “Something is wrong,” Balthazaar says when the men have captured their fourth soul. “There should not be so many in one place.”

“Unless they have all been killed at once,” Sauvage says. “Then it would make sense.” He shrugs his massive shoulders. “Maybe there has been a battle. Or a fire.”

A battle. “Where are we?” I ask.

Balthazaar barely spares me a glance. “About six leagues north of Vannes.”

“Which means we are close to the port cities, a sure target if and when the French decide to make a move on Brittany.”

He looks at me blankly.

“The impending war?” I remind him with impatience. “It is possible the French have decided to engage us, and some battle we have not yet heard of has taken place.” Not that we would ever hear of it, seeing that we pass almost no one at night and those we do pass are not inclined to stop and share gossip.

“She is right,” Sauvage says. I am so surprised I almost ask him to repeat himself, but silence my tongue before the words can escape.

Balthazaar nods in agreement as another shout goes up. The hellequin have found yet more souls. “Come,” Balthazaar says. “Let us see if we can ask one of them why there are so many.” He puts his heels to his horse and we all ride forward.

When we are close enough to the others, Balthazaar and Sauvage rein in their horses and dismount. The souls must have been those of soldiers, for they do not cower or shrink in fear from the approaching hellequin.

Now, I think. Now is my chance, when everyone is busy with the souls. I slip out of my saddle onto the ground, then wait, stomping my feet as if to stay warm in case anyone should notice me.

As if I am merely stretching my legs, I saunter over to Balthazaar’s abandoned horse. The creature has grown used to my scent after our weeks riding together. Even though he tosses his mane and blows loudly, we both understand it is simply for show.

I carefully unlatch the strap that holds the saddlebag closed, glancing around as I do to be certain none of the men are watching. I reach into the saddlebag and

grope blindly, certain my hands will recognize the object, for I have seen enough of it from a distance to discern the shape of it.

There! My hand closes around something long and thin. When I draw it out, I see that it is an arrow. I frown. Balthazaar does not even possess a bow.

Unease slithers across my shoulders. I turn to angle the arrow so the light of the moon falls upon it. A jolt of recognition slams through me.

It is *my* arrow. There is no mistaking the supple yew wood of the shaft, the black crow feathers I used for the fletching, and the single dove feather that is my own signature mark.

My heart starts to race, and slowly I bring the tip up so I may see the arrowhead itself.

It is stained dark with old blood.

My blood. Blood that I smeared upon it the night of the midwinter ceremony.

Every muscle in my body clenches. I shove the arrow into the saddlebag and begin backing away, struggling to keep my steps slow and measured.

I wait a beat, then another, before allowing myself to seek out Balthazaar's figure. When I see that he is still with the others, gently trying to coax answers from the confused souls they have captured, I allow myself to breathe again. I have time. My snooping was not spotted. I clench my hands into fists, then open them, trying to work some of the tension from my body.

I do not know what this means, except that nothing is as it seems and I now feel myself to be in grave peril. I can only assume the arrow means the hellequin *are* hunting me as I originally feared, although why Balthazaar has not made a move against me, I do not know. He must be playing some long game I do not yet recognize.

Or perhaps before he could send me on to the Underworld, he found himself drawn to me and thought to take his ease. For he *was* drawn to me—the sparks between us crackled and snapped from our first meeting.

But then why did he reject my offer? Was it a way to use my own sin of pride against me, to rub salt into the wound of wanting him? A punishment of his own before turning me over to the judgment of Mortain?

I shake my head, trying to disentangle myself from all the questions that threaten to cloud my wits. There will be plenty of time for me to ponder my foolish mistakes once I am free. For I must escape before he connects me to that arrow or, if he has already made that connection, before he decides to move.

The good news is that the hellequin have grown fully accustomed to my presence. They trust me now and are less inclined to watch my every move as they did when I first joined them.

Morning is almost here. It is the perfect time to make my escape. I need evade capture only until daybreak. Then they will have to return to one of their cromlechs and wait until nightfall again.

I glance up at the sky and try to determine how long until dawn. Less than an hour, I think. If I do not move soon, I will be forced to spend another night with them—with him—and I do not know if I can keep my newfound knowledge hidden.

To test if anyone is paying attention to me, I remount Fortuna, then urge her to take a few steps away from the group. No one spares me a glance; they are too intent on the conversation taking place between the others.

Now. The word flares up in my mind like a beacon, and I can only hope it is a sign from some god other than the god of mistakes. In slow and careful steps, I allow Fortuna to keep drifting farther and farther from the others. Still no one notices. I urge her to the right, into the trees, an excuse of needing to relieve my bladder ready at my lips, or a claim of spotting yet another wandering lost soul. Still no one follows.

Heartened now, I let Fortuna pick up her pace, threading through the thickest of the trees, which will slow down any pursuit.

The forest is quiet all around me, soaking up the sound of our passing like a thick blanket. I must put some serious distance between the hellequin and me, but to do that I will have to gallop. Once I do, there will be no way to hide that I am attempting to escape. My heart inches up into my throat.

After a moment's hesitation, I finally put my heels to Fortuna's flanks and urge her to fly. And fly she does. As if she can somehow sense my own urgency, she races through the trees, dodging them nimbly. Or perhaps it is all the nights she spent riding with the hunt that have given her such speed. Either way, I am heartened, as each step takes me farther and farther away from the hellequin. From the incrimination of my own arrow. From the pain of Balthazaar's rejection and lies.

We run for close to a quarter of an hour before I have the sense that I am being followed. I turn my head to the side, straining to hear, but my ears are full of the thudding of Fortuna's hooves and her heavy, rhythmic breathing.

She will need to rest soon.

I glance up at the eastern sky, which is just beginning to lighten. Sunrise is not far off.

I lean low over Fortuna's neck, grab hold of her mane, and whisper in her ear for her to run faster if she can, and if she can't, well, then may the gods themselves help us. I find I cannot pray to Mortain, not when He may have sent

the hellequin to find me. At the very least, it is like pulling Him into some sordid family quarrel.

And then it reaches me: the distant thunder of horses' hooves. After spending weeks in the hellequin's company, I find the sound is nearly as familiar to me as that of my own breathing.

Fortuna has no more to give. Her sides are streaked in sweat, and her lungs are heaving like a blacksmith's bellows. I glance around, but there are no buildings, no houses, no convenient churches nearby in which to beg shelter. There is nothing but trees and forest as far as I can see. I glance up at the treetops, wondering . . .

Without pausing to think it through lest I lose my nerve, I kick my feet out of my stirrups and loop the reins loosely around the saddle horn. "Keep running," I whisper to Fortuna. "But slow down if you must. Just lead them away from me."

Then I reach down, grab hold of the saddle, and use it to steady myself as I slowly draw my legs up.

The ground below races by. I ignore it, and the sharp rocks and logs that lie in wait should I fail. I pull my legs under me, find my balance, and slowly begin to ease myself to a standing position, letting my body adjust to the rhythm of Fortuna's gait.

It has been months since I've done this, but the movements come back to me easily. I match my rhythm to that of the horse, finding my balance, and gripping tightly with my feet.

Then I wait for the perfect branch. One that will be low enough that I can reach out, grab it, then lever myself up onto it.

I remain in a half crouch while we pass scores of trees, but their branches are all too high or too narrow or not thick enough.

The sounds of the hunt are louder now. Soon they will be within sight, and once they are, my trick will not be of any use. I utter a quick, desperate prayer to Mortain: *I know they are Yours, but so am I. Please do not let me be chased down like a hunted deer.*

A dozen strides later, right after a slight bend on the path, I see a thick, low-hanging branch. I have no time to think, to consider, to judge if it will work. It *must* work. I straighten my legs, reach up, then brace myself as the jolt of the contact reverberates through my body. Then my legs are dangling in the air and I see Fortuna continue to run on without me.

There is no time to congratulate myself. I hoist myself up onto the branch, swing my legs sideways, then wrap them around the limb and shimmy toward the trunk. I reach it and pull myself to the far side just as the first of the hellequin come into view.

It is Sauvage, riding in the van, his face compressed in single-minded intent. I press my entire body flat against the tree and watch them stream beneath me, surprised to see Balthazaar bringing up the rear.

His hood is pulled close, so I cannot see his face. Even so, there is a grimness, a ferocity about his manner that makes my heart clutch painfully. *He is not your concern*, I tell myself. He has made that perfectly clear.

I wait, holding so still I scarcely allow myself to draw breath. Only when I can no longer hear even the echo of their hoofbeats do I let myself draw a lungful of air. They did not find me. There is a chance—a small one—that Fortuna will be able to outrun them without the weight of a rider on her back. And if not, well, they will not hurt her, for she is nothing to them. Even so, I will probably never see her again. Someone might find her, take her for his own. It is possible she might return to the night rower's stables; I have no idea how strong her homing instincts are.

Then I remember my saddlebag and the journal hidden deep inside, as well as the Tears, and the strange black box. I cringe to think of the convent learning what I took with me. Even worse is the idea of those things falling into some stranger's hands: the local prelate, a landed yeoman, or some random innkeeper who finds Fortuna nibbling at his oats. But it cannot be helped.

Slowly, I lower myself so that I am sitting on the base of the branch with my back to the tree's wide trunk. Now that the hellequin have passed, all my muscles are trembling, as if finally acknowledging the danger I was in. Or perhaps they are merely exhausted.

I glance once more at the eastern sky, which is now tinged with definite shades of gray and pink. Dawn has arrived. I make myself comfortable and settle in to wait.

I must doze, for a dream comes to me.

I dream of a great, white boar. In my dream I am lying on the forest floor in a bed of decaying leaves. I am cold and my body aches, and I am unable to sleep. At first, I hear a snuffling noise, as if some great creature has laid its snout near the ground to inhale all the ripe forest scents. But a moment later, I understand—the creature is searching for something.

It is searching for me.

A feral, gamy tang fills my nostrils, and my heart catches in my throat, for by the sound of it, it is a huge thing. I start to push myself up, meaning to run, but I realize I must grow still instead. I hug the ground, hoping the creature will not find me. But still it snuffles and searches. My heart beats so hard with fear that I am certain it will pound its way out of my chest. Or that the creature will hear it.

Boars this size are rare, and white boars rarer still, for they are sacred to Arduinna.

Closer it draws, and closer. I can feel the heat from its body now, feel the faint moisture of its breath as it leans closer, closer. Like a frightened child, I keep my eyes closed and shiver on the forest floor, unable to face my fate.

Then a coolness surrounds me, and before I can think to pull away, the press of lips upon my own shocks me into consciousness. A low, deep voice thrums near my ear, pulling me from the fog of sleep: "You will be safe now." I jerk awake, nearly toppling from my precarious shelter in the tree.

Chapter Twenty

I GRAB MY BRANCH and hold on tight until the fog of sleep clears. I blink my eyes and see that dawn has broken, sending long pale arms of sunlight streaming in all directions. My ears fill with the soft sounds around me: the rustling of small creatures in the underbrush and the faint beginning of birdsong. Day is well and truly here, and there are no signs of the hellequin.

I remember my dream and a shudder of misgiving moves through me. Were those the press of *his* lips I felt?

Dreamed, I correct, not *felt*. I lift my fingers to my mouth, remembering the distinct feel and weight of those lips. The voice said I would be safe now even as it filled my mind with visions of boars. Was it some trick? Some dark hellequin skill, an ability to insert dreams into their victims' minds?

Or only my own fevered imagination, awash in my fears?

I shove the disturbing thoughts away and rise to my feet, clutching a branch so I do not tumble to a painful death after I have worked so hard to escape.

The hellequin said we were only a few leagues north of Vannes, a large town with thick sturdy walls. But I have no horse. That makes it easily a two-day walk—if I'm lucky. I hold still for another moment, checking for the sound of galloping horses or snuffling boars, but hear nothing. I climb down the tree, careful not to tear my gown so that it will not be wearable, as it is now the only one I possess.

When my feet are firmly on the ground, I pause and find my bearings. If I keep the rising sun on my left, I will be heading south and should reconnect with the main road. I strike out quickly. With my lack of absolute certainty that the hellequin cannot ride during the day and my newfound fear of boars, I am determined to find the road as soon as possible.

I miss Fortuna already, not simply because riding her was faster than walking, but because she has been my one constant through these past few weeks. I hold on to half a hope that I might come upon her in the woods, that she might have run herself out and is now patiently waiting for me to find her. But there is no sign of her dappled gray bulk anywhere.

I have been walking nearly an hour when I hear it—a distinctive snuffling sound that is all too familiar from my recent dream. I glance behind me but see nothing. I cannot outrun a boar, but perhaps I can appear harmless enough that it

will not charge. Just in case, I look to the surrounding trees for another branch I can use to pull myself to safety, but there is none within reach.

At the rustle of leaves just behind me, my heart begins beating so frantically I fear it will break one of my ribs. I quicken my pace, but if I go any faster, I will be running, and that will only inflame the creature.

In front of me, from what I estimate to be the direction of the road, I hear riders approaching. Judging from the sound, there are only four—no, three—of them, not an entire pack. And they *are* coming from the road. Not hellequin, then, but simple travelers. Travelers I may attach myself to until the next town.

I cannot help myself; I run, stumbling over roots, rocks, and my own feet so that I nearly tumble down the embankment to the road below. I stop, breathless, in front of the riders. We all stare at one another in a long moment of surprise.

They are women, although it is hard to tell at first for they wear no traditional garb. Their arms and legs are encased in tight leather, and their overgowns are of rough brown fur. Each has a quiver of arrows at her shoulder and a knife in her belt. There are three of them, and they rein in their mounts. “Greetings,” the middle rider says. She appears to be the oldest, as her light brown hair is shot through with gray. Her bearing is as erect and regal as if she were wearing a crown.

Before I can return the greeting, I see that they are leading a fourth horse—a dappled gray. “Fortuna!” I dodge around the others, deftly avoiding their horses’ hooves, and reach Fortuna’s side. I pat her neck and check her over for signs of injury.

“I take it you know each other?”

“She is my horse.”

“It is poor thanks to such a noble creature, to let her wander loose and riderless so that she might trip on her reins.” The speaker is tall, taller than the others and nearly as tall as Sister Thomine, who is the tallest woman I have ever met. She wears her hair in a long dark brown braid that swings as she dismounts. In that moment I realize they must be followers of Arduinna. And even though they are known to be protectors of women, this knowledge does not comfort me.

“I did not do that on purpose.” I do not try to hide my indignation. “And I *did* tie her reins off so she wouldn’t trip on them. But truly, I had no choice.”

The tall woman tilts her head. “What happened to you that you must abandon your horse in such a way and travel on foot?”

I stare at her, trying to decide what to tell them. Arduinnites are scarcer than hen’s teeth and I have seen one only once, and that was by accident. We’d been riding with Sister Widona on the mainland near a forest and caught a glimpse of a strange-looking woman—although we did not know it was a woman at first.

Sister Widona nodded a curt greeting, then hurried us away. Once we were out of earshot, she explained that those who follow Arduinna bear no love for those of us who follow Mortain, since it was He who had robbed Arduinna of her sister.

Sister Widona's words clang in my head like a great loud bell and I mentally kick myself that I did not think to ask just how deep that animosity went.

So what, then, do I tell her? Which is worse, being a daughter of Mortain or being some headstrong maiden who has behaved in a foolish manner? The uncomfortable thought occurs to me that I could be both.

The youngest of them dismounts and begins to approach me. I am assailed by the smell of leather and fur, and the tang of blood. "Are you all right?" she asks. "Have you been hurt?"

"I . . . no."

The tallest one looks me over with haughty eyes. "You show no signs of a struggle."

Judgment drips heavily from her words, and at first I find myself wishing I had injured myself more thoroughly as I climbed out of that bedamned tree. But then a small spark of anger ignites within me. I do not deserve her censure. I shrug my cloak away from my body, flash my daggers at her. "Perhaps it is because my pursuers were put off by these."

The oldest one, still on her horse, speaks. "Do not take offense. It is our way, to help maids in distress or those who have been hurt or dishonored."

"I do not know that casting doubts upon their honor is a way to win their trust," I mutter, still ruffled by the tall one's manner.

"You expect us to believe that a lone maid held off pursuers with a handful of knives?"

"Well, that and I disappeared up a tree."

The eldest one's lips twitch, and the youngest one smiles outright. "How do you come to be traveling on the road alone?" she asks.

"I have business in Guérande."

"And you travel with no attendant or guard?" the tall one asks, disbelief still heavy in her voice.

The youngest one steps in front of me protectively. "Why don't we ensure she is unharmed before we begin questioning her." She is slighter than the others. Her voice sounds young to my ears, and I place her at a year or two younger than myself.

The tall one continues to study me with narrowed eyes and I wonder what I have done to raise her ire. "She has already said she was fine." She begins

walking toward me. When she reaches my side, she stops walking, leans her head forward, and sniffs. “You reek of man.”

“Aeva!” the younger one protests. Then, almost as if unable to help herself, she too sniffs, then frowns. “You smell of death as well,” she says, puzzled.

“Death?” I ask, both annoyed and startled.

The tall one—Aeva, she was called—wrinkles her nose in distaste. “It is the stench of the hellequin that clings to her.”

She can smell them? “That would be because it was the hellequin who were pursuing me.”

The youngest one’s lips part in surprise, but Aeva simply sneers. “Are you certain you were pursued and you are not simply a hellequin’s lightskirt?”

Even if I could not hear the thick contempt in her voice, the worried look on the youngest girl’s face would have alerted me that it was far better to be the victim of a hellequin than his lightskirt. It is not the least bit difficult to sound insulted, for I am sorely irked by their manner. “I am no one’s lightskirt.”

Although not for want of trying, I realize, and I am suddenly ashamed by my actions. At the convent, we are not taught that it is wrong to lie with a man, but surely it is wrong to lie with one merely to avoid an unwanted fate.

“Then why do you reek of death?”

“I did not say I had not been close to one, only that I was not his lightskirt.” At my words, the tension in her body relaxes somewhat. “But neither was I his victim, for I escaped just before dawn and waited high in a tree for daybreak. And then I found you.”

“It was only the guidance of the Great White Boar herself that brought us here,” the oldest one says.

“I dreamed of her,” I tell them.

Aeva’s head whips around. “You lie.”

“I do *not* lie. I dreamed of a great boar, and that she was . . .” I cannot bring myself to say she kissed me with her great white snout, nor am I certain that is even what happened. “And she was protecting me.”

The three women exchange glances and the youngest looks pointedly at Aeva. “That does match Floris’s vision.”

My interest sharpens. “Is Floris your seeress?”

“No,” the oldest one says. “I am Floris, one of Arduinna’s priestesses. I too saw the Great White Boar last night, and she led me to you.”

Aeva studies me most skeptically, as if she is still trying to sort out how I came to be in their midst. “Did you make an offering to Arduinna?” she asks.

“No. The idea never occurred to me, as I have not been raised to be familiar with her ways.”

“No matter.” The youngest one reaches out and squeezes my arm. “It is a most auspicious omen. What is your name? I am called Tola.”

She is so friendly and her blue eyes dance so cheerfully that I cannot help but smile back. “I am Annith.”

“Well, Annith,” Floris says, “we are pleased to hear that you are unharmed, and even more pleased to hear that the Great White Boar has taken you under her protection, for indeed, it will be perilous going from here. You will have to postpone your trip to Guérande, I’m afraid.”

“What?” All the goodwill I had been feeling toward these women in the past few seconds evaporates. “You cannot stop me from traveling on my business.”

“Well, that is a matter of dispute,” she says, sounding faintly amused. “But it is not we who have caused the delay. The French troops have landed at Vannes and taken the city. These shores are crawling with them like fleas on a hound. In truth, that is who we thought to rescue you from—French soldiers.”

Chapter Twenty-One

IT IS EASY ENOUGH to fall in with them. At least for now. They will offer me protection from the invading French, and although they dislike the daughters of Mortain, they despise the hellequin even more. That hatred of the hellequin makes them the perfect ones to offer me protection.

Surely the sudden appearance of Arduinna's followers on the road in my time of need is no accident. Indeed, it feels as if Mortain is placing small steppingstones at my feet, one at a time, so that I may have a chance to wrest my own fate out of the abbess's greedy hands.

Even so, I must resist the urge to keep looking over my shoulder. The hellequin do not hunt in the daylight, I remind myself at least a dozen times. The others make note of my unease but say nothing, and I hope that it gives the stamp of truth to my story.

We have not been on the road but two hours before we come upon a cart. Two hedge priests sit in the front, and it is draped in black. Our group moves to the side to give them room to pass. As they do, I cannot help but look into the back of it, wondering who has made their final journey into death. Perhaps it is the first of the French soldiers' victims.

But at the sight of the bright red hair spread out against the black sheeting, my stomach curls into a tight ball of dread. "Stop!" The word springs out of my mouth before I even realize I have spoken. Surprised by the command of my voice, the hedge priests reluctantly halt, then scowl at me while the Arduinnites shoot me curious glances. I dismount from Fortuna and toss the reins at Tola, who catches them easily.

As I draw near the bone cart, time seems to slow as if it is trapped in a thick slog of mud. *Please not Matelaine. Please, please, please.* The prayer hammers through my body with every heartbeat.

At last, I reach the side of the cart and look down. The girl's face is covered by a shroud. Slowly, I reach for the edge of the black linen.

"Don't touch her!" one of the hedge priests says in outrage, but I do not even pause. I grip the fine linen and pull it away from her face.

Matelaine's face.

At the sight of her, I feel as if a shard of glass has wedged itself into my heart. She is still and whiter than bone, her face stark against the black shroud and red hair. Her hands have been laid upon her chest, and in the right one she clutches

an ivory chess piece. “Where are you taking her?” My voice sounds dull and hollow, even to my own ears.

“Back to the convent of Saint Mortain. Do you know her?” the second hedge priest asks more gently.

I nod, my eyes never leaving her face. “She is my sister.” As I stare down at her, the pain from that shard of glass spreads out, filling my lungs, my chest, my arms with such a sense of wrongness that it is all I can do not to throw back my head and howl with rage and fury. She should never have been sent out.

And the abbess knew it. The abbess has betrayed the very tenets of the convent. The nuns are meant to foster and care for His daughters as they would their own, sending them out only when they are truly ready.

It is also, I realize with a sour sickness in my belly, my fault as well, for whatever the reason the abbess has held me back, it is at the root of her decision to send Matelaine. If I had been stronger, faster, more determined, argued my case better, I could have prevented this. I turn on the priest. “What happened?”

The kinder one answers. “We do not know. We were only given the body to transport back to the island.”

I feel a hand on my shoulder and spin around in surprise. It is the oldest of the Arduinnites—Floris. “Is she your sister?” Her brown eyes are full of compassion.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“What do you wish to do?”

Her question reminds me that I have choices. Part of me wishes to crawl into the cart and hold Matelaine close for the entire journey back to the convent. To whisper all the words of friendship in her ear that I was too busy to utter in real life. To present her body to the nuns who are still there and scream at them, *See what you have done? By your silence, your compliance?* The unspoken words in my throat are as hot and painful as red coals from a fire.

My own plans and ambitions crumble like winter’s first frost under a heavy boot. A choking anger continues to build inside me, and rage spreads so quickly through my body that it is a wonder I do not erupt into flames.

Slowly, I turn to face Floris. “I wish to travel on and avenge her death by confronting those who have done this to her.”

She holds my gaze for a long moment, and I see a measure of approval in them. “Are you also a daughter of Mortain?”

I look away. “Yes. I am sorry I did not tell you. I know there is a history of animosity between us. I will no longer travel with you if you’d prefer.”

“If you are avenging this girl, then you are on Arduinna’s business now, so you are welcome to travel with us. Plus, a lone woman is too easy to harass; a

group of four women who are warriors and assassins, less so.”

We make camp just before nightfall. I suggest we spend the night near a church so we can be assured of the protection of consecrated ground, but they refuse, and Aeva outright laughs. “We have no love of or use for the Church.”

“But the hellequin claimed they would hunt me forever,” I explain. “I do not wish to bring their vengeance down upon you as well.” Not to mention incite some sort of civil war among the gods and their minions.

“They could not know you would find shelter with us,” Floris says. “And even if they did, the hellequin will not dare approach the followers of Arduinna.”

“But just to be certain, we will ward our camp,” Tola adds cheerfully.

Aeva turns on her, eyes sparking with annoyance. “You talk too much of things that are for our ears only.” When Tola simply shrugs, Aeva reaches for a handful of kindling and flings it onto the fire. “If you have so little care for the secrets that lie between her god and ours, why not simply get down at her feet and rub yourself against her ankles like an overfriendly cat?”

“Enough!” It is the first time I have heard Floris raise her voice. “It is Tola’s choice who she makes friends with, not yours.”

Unable to help myself, I glance over at the older woman. “You do not forbid it?”

She shakes her head at my question. “It is not ours to forbid. Every one of us must decide for herself.”

After another long moment of silence, I speak again. “Why is there so much animosity between Mortain and Arduinna?” I ask. “As the old stories tell it, Arduinna gave her blessing to Mortain and Amourna’s pairing.”

Aeva shoots me a scornful glance, and my hand itches to slap the look off her face. “We who serve Arduinna are made, not chosen and showered with otherworldly gifts like the daughters of Mortain. Every skill we possess, every feat we master, we acquire through our own sweat and determination. Not because we were sired by a god.”

I lean forward, wishing we were standing so I could back her up against a tree to shake her arrogance. “First, you will be comforted to learn that not all daughters of Mortain are blessed with His unique gifts and talents. I am one of those who have been given none, and have had to work hard for every skill I’ve acquired—often at great personal cost.” Our gazes hold for a long moment, then she looks away. I take a deep breath to calm myself, then turn to Floris. “How do followers come to serve Arduinna if they are not her children?” Although as soon as I utter the words, I realize how foolish that sounds, for no woman, not

even a goddess, can give birth to hundreds of daughters. Not to mention she is reported to be a virgin goddess at that.

Floris stands up to add another branch to the fire. “When a woman feels love’s painful bite, that is when she prays to Arduinna. Every heart that has been broken, every lover who has been jilted, every soul that has been twisted by jealousy belongs to her. All girl children born of such a union—whether the jealous vindictive side of love or the heart-wrenching unrequited side—are Arduinna’s own daughters. They may never know it, but *she* does, and she watches over them. If they choose to dedicate themselves to her service, they are welcomed with open arms.

“And to answer your original question on the animosity between our gods, it is because your god played our goddess false,” she says softly.

The silence that follows grows thick, and they all exchange glances while I stare stupidly at her. Aeva looks smug. “Ah, you’ve not heard that story, have you?”

“No, I have not.”

“Well, you will not hear it from us.” Aeva sends the others such a searing gaze that even Floris does not contradict her. Then she rises to her feet in disgust. “I am going to do something useful, like hunt for our dinner, instead of huddling around and gossiping with our enemies.”

I raise my eyebrows and turn to Floris. “I apologize. I did not realize I was an enemy. I have no desire to put any of you in an uncomfortable—”

Floris holds up her hands to halt my words. “You are not an enemy. Aeva simply sees things more rigidly than most. Now, here, if you would kindly clear a place for our bedrolls.”

It is a simple task, even a mindless one, but I do not care, for my head is already overfull. As I pick up rocks and twigs from the ground, both Tola and Floris cut marks and sigils into the earth with their bone-handled knives. I am consumed with curiosity—we at the convent have no such magic, or at least none that I have heard of—but I do not wish to intrude on a private ritual that they are using in order to protect me, so I allow myself only occasional glances.

I finish my task before they finish theirs and look around for something else to do. Dusk is falling fast now, and a few squirrels and rabbits venture forth for a last forage before the night. The rabbits are thin, but thin is still better than nothing. Moving slowly so as not to startle them, I pick up my bow and two arrows. When they lift their heads, sniffing the air, I hold perfectly still so they will not sense me. As soon as they go back to their grazing, I fit an arrow to the bow and aim. There is an explosion of movement as the creatures take flight, but I am pleased to see that the largest of the rabbits lies still on the ground. I will

much prefer eating a dinner that I have caught myself than relying on Aeva's bitter hospitality.

That night, as we eat, Tola keeps looking at me, and I know she wishes to ask me questions. I am grateful when she does not. Aeva, however, shows no such restraint. "So, you are a daughter of Mortain, and yet the hellequin pursued you?"

I keep my attention firmly on the rabbit haunch I am gnawing. "I did not tell them who I was."

"Why not?"

I should lie and turn her questions from me, but seeing Matelaine today reminded me that my reasons for leaving were justified. "Out of fear that it was me they were after."

The frankness of that answer silences even the belligerent Aeva. At least for a moment. She opens her mouth to ask something else, but Floris puts her hand on the other woman's arm. "Surely that is a convent matter and none of our concern."

Aeva swallows back whatever question she was considering. It might just be my imagination, but I think I discern a new measure of respect in her manner.

That night, I find it nearly impossible to sleep in spite of my exhaustion. Every time I close my eyes, I see Matelaine's cold, dead face, and I want to rail at myself for being so long detained by the hellequin. If I had gotten to Guérande earlier, could I have prevented her death?

Just as I finally start to fall asleep, the ground begins to rumble and I come fully awake.

The hunt.

I freeze, as if holding still will keep them from finding me. The rumble grows louder, and the ground trembles against my cheek as they draw closer. I turn to look at the others and find Tola's eyes open. "Do not worry," she whispers. "The wards will hold."

And they do. But I can see the dark ghostly figures riding just on the other side of them. One rider draws to a halt and stares at our camp. Even though I cannot see who it is from this distance, my skin recognizes the dark, brooding caress of his gaze, and I shiver.

The following day, we draw close enough to Vannes to see the spires of its churches. We also run into the first of the French soldiers. They have commandeered a local farmer's ox cart as well as what looks like the very last of his slim winter food stores. Since the new crops will not be in for weeks yet, they may well have just sentenced the family to death by starvation.

There are six of them, two on the driver's bench and four more flanking the cart to guard it. Luckily, we left the main road over an hour ago and have been traveling alongside it, hidden in the smattering of trees that rise up on either side of the road. The Arduinnites exchange a glance and draw their bows. Anticipation prickles along my skin as I realize what they intend to do. I draw my bow as well, for I will not stand idly by and hand Aeva an opportunity to question my skill or commitment.

Floris gives me a faint nod, then motions in silence to assign each of us a soldier. I am to take one of the men in the rear.

It is no different from the targets at the convent, I tell myself. But that is a lie. It is altogether different, for these men are flesh and blood, their bodies still pulsing with life.

I take a deep breath and sight along the arrow. The French soldier is thin and dirty and is boasting to his fellow Frenchmen about how the farmer nearly pissed himself in terror as he teased him with his sword. In that second, everything shifts, and it *is* precisely like shooting at the targets.

My vision narrows until the entire world is reduced to the French soldier. I squint against the pale winter sun, block out the soft chirping of the birds, and calculate the force of the light breeze.

But when I am ready to take the shot, for a brief moment my fingers refuse to let loose the arrow. I curse inwardly, then wrench my fingers from the bowstring and let the arrow fly. So no one will suspect that I hesitated, I quickly nock a second arrow and fire it as well. The air is filled with a brief series of thuds, and I watch as my arrow strikes the forward guard seconds before Aeva's does. She whips her head around and glares at me. "He was mine!"

I shrug. "He was going for his knife. I had no idea how accurate he would be at throwing it."

Aeva looks at me with a mixture of grudging admiration and annoyance.

Floris begins issuing orders. "Tola, turn the cart around and see if you can get it back to its owner. Aeva, go with her. You might suggest they hide their supplies better, unless they wish to eat nothing more than new grass and dirt clods." I avert my eyes, not wanting to watch as Aeva and Floris toss the bodies around like old sacks of grain, and I must fight to keep the sour churning in my belly from making me ill. It is the excitement, I tell myself. Excitement that I have finally made my first kill.

Even though this is what I have been trained to do, it does not feel nearly as joyous or righteous as I thought it would. I must remind myself that these are French soldiers who have killed any number of Bretons—and would do so again, even if only by confiscating all of their food.

Once Tola has the cart turned around, Aeva scrambles up onto the bench beside her. We arrange a place and time to meet later. As they head down the road, Floris sends me a sideways glance. “That was fine shooting.”

“Thank you. I have had years of practice.”

“You beat Aeva to her second shot,” she points out.

An apology begins to form on my lips, but instead I say, “I thought the element of surprise was important.”

Floris nods solemnly. “It was, but Aeva does not like being bested.”

I turn and meet Floris’s gaze head-on. “Neither do I.”

She smiles widely, then changes the subject. “It could be hours before they return, so you and I are going to do a little scouting to see if the French have hunkered down in the city or spread themselves throughout the countryside.”

We spend the better part of the afternoon riding through copses and crawling on our bellies through shrubs and brambles to get close enough to assess the enemy’s position. More than once I find myself wishing for leather leggings and thick hide to armor myself against the sharp twigs, thorns, and brambles we encounter.

It is a most productive afternoon, even if it is a disheartening one. The French man the city gates as well as its walls. Additional guards have been set out along all three roads leading into the city. The largest of the farms and manor houses nearby have been seized, and I can only hope the soldiers were merciful to those whose homes they have stolen.

As the sun dips lower in the sky, we make our way back to the assigned meeting spot to see if Tola and Aeva have returned. They have, although they’ve been waiting for only minutes.

As Floris tells the others of what we found, I try to decide how best to get around Vannes and continue on to Guérande. Will the roads outside the city be blocked as well? And if so, how far north will I have to travel to avoid the French troops?

That night, we steer our horses well north of the city, toward a heavily wooded area. As we draw near, I hear the sounds of voices and movement and horses. I look questioningly at Floris. “It is our main encampment,” she says. “For we are not here by accident, but by design. We are tasked with protecting the innocent, just as the hellequin are tasked with escorting souls from this world.”

The road brings us upward in a series of switchbacks until we are at the top of a small rise. It is a good defensive spot, for we can see in all directions. As we clear the final switchback, the Arduinnites’ camp comes into full view.

There are maybe a hundred Arduinnites in the camp, all of them dressed in tight leather leggings and rough-looking tunics. There are a scattering of tents set up, a handful of large ones and a number of smaller ones. To the south of the camp they have erected a fence around a large pastured area where they keep a herd of some of the most beautiful horses I have ever seen. I turn to Floris.

“Aren’t you afraid the French scouts will find you?”

Aeva smiles, fierce and chilling. “Let them. Not one of them will leave here alive.”

Floris gives a small nod of agreement. “Tola, you will share your tent with Annith. Go fetch it from the supply wagons, and once you get it set up, find me.” With that, she rides off to one of the larger tents. I watch as she dismounts, hands the reins to a waiting young Arduinnite who cannot be more than twelve years old, then enters the tent.

Before we do as Floris ordered, Tola and I take our horses to the paddock area and see them settled. I hoist my saddlebag over one shoulder, snag my bedroll, then grab my bow with my other hand before following Tola to where three large supply wagons have been parked. She rifles through one of them and then pulls out a rolled-up tent and a couple of blankets.

She picks out a spot that is halfway between the perimeter of the camp and the center. The tent is simple in its design and made of ox hide. It is not fancy and barely large enough for two, but it will keep out the wind and the moisture.

Even so, I do not intend to be in it for long.

When Floris and Aeva rejoin us, I tell them precisely that. “Thank you for allowing me to travel with you this far, but you have duties that keep you here, so I will leave in the morning and journey the rest of the way to Guérande on my own.”

“How? You yourself saw that every road was watched by the French troops.”

“I will travel due north far enough to avoid them, then give them wide berth before heading south again toward Guérande.”

Floris tilts her head and studies me. “But the northern road is blocked.”

“Then I will not use the road.”

“But what of the hellequin?”

“I will not let them stop me. I shall look for walled cities and churches in which to pass the nights.”

“Can you be so very certain there will be one on every leg of your journey?” Her voice is gentle as she points out how much I am leaving to chance.

“Of course not, but I will manage.” I consider asking them to teach me how to draw those wards—Tola would, with a little persuasion.

Aeva folds her arms and looks at me in disgust. “You would abandon all these innocents and leave them to the French to avenge one who is already dead?”

“Aeva!” Floris’s voice is sharp. “That is her choice to make, not yours.”

I meet Aeva’s gaze steadily. “All those innocents have the followers of Arduinna to see to their safety. Matelaine has only me to avenge her death and see that such a thing never happens to one of Mortain’s daughters again.”

Aeva barks out a laugh. “You would protect Mortain’s daughters against death?”

“No. I would protect them against the betrayal that led to her death.”

They all fall silent then, but Aeva’s words have planted a small seed of guilt in me, and it begins growing, for there is truth in what she says. Confronting the abbess sooner rather than later will not bring Matelaine back from the dead. More importantly, I must think carefully about letting my own headstrong stubbornness propel me straight into the arms of the hellequin. Who will avenge Matelaine if they capture me?

“At least stay another night,” Floris suggests, “so our scouts can report back on the French positions. That way, you’ll be able to avoid them, if not the hellequin.”

Impatiently, Tola tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Could we not show her the wards, so she could protect herself?”

Aeva’s answer is fast and unequivocal. “No! She is not one of us and has no right to our secrets.”

“Thank you,” I tell her coolly, “but I do not wish anyone to betray their secrets. However, getting captured or killed in the attempt to avenge Matelaine will only ensure that the truth dies with me, so I will stay another day or two and think on other possible plans.” I turn to Floris. “If you will have me.”

“But of course. You are welcome to stay as long as you like.” She flashes a quick smile. “You are also more than welcome to fight with us. It may help some of that pain you are feeling.”

The suggestion startles me. “Is that allowed?”

Aeva snorts. “She will not sully herself by riding out with us. She will stay and cower in our camp while we do the hard work.”

“I am getting tired of your constant slurs and insults,” I tell her.

“Then do something about it. Something besides sitting secluded behind your thick stone walls, venturing out only when Death deigns to pay a visit, not understanding that dying is the easy part.”

“The easy part?”

“Enough, Aeva! All of us who serve our gods have our own roles to play. And there are men who would argue with your belief that their deaths were easy.”

Floris's eyes grow dark with some remembered pain, and I look away to give her privacy.

I am being offered a chance. I do not know if it comes from Mortain or Arduinna—although why she would offer me such a thing, I cannot fathom. But no more can I reason out why Mortain would send hellequin to ride after me, then allow me to use my skills to evade them. But just because I cannot understand the reasoning of the gods does not mean I will pass up this opportunity. I wanted a life outside those stone walls that Aeva scorns; I scorned them myself in much the same way when I feared I would be imprisoned behind them all the rest of my days. This may be my only chance. I do not know how things will go with the abbess when I find her in Guérande, but I feel like a starving child who must eat all the sweets now, before they are taken away for good. “Yes.” The word falls into the silence, causing everyone to look at me. “Yes, I will ride with you and aid your cause.”

“Well.” Aeva's eyes rake over my traveling gown. “You cannot fight with us in that.”

“Of course not.” Tola takes my hand and all but drags me away from the other women. “I will see to getting her properly equipped.”

If fighting my way through the French soldiers is the only road to the abbess, then so be it. I will fight my way through them, soldier by bedamned soldier.

After pulling me back to the supply wagons, Tola rummages through their contents, then hands me a pair of leather leggings, a soft leather tunic, and a belt. I disappear into our small tent, slip out of my gown, and shimmy into my new clothes. The leggings fit like a second skin, and the leather tunic is both thicker and more supple than my gown. I cannot help but wish for a mirror to see what I look like in these strange new clothes, but of course there is none. Feeling self-conscious, I step out of the tent. Tola nods in approval. “See? You will move much more freely in those.”

And so I do. Next, Tola offers to braid my hair. I sit on a nearby log and toss my hair over my shoulders so she can more easily reach it. As her fingers busy themselves making rows and rows of small braids, she chatters about which horse is her favorite and of her excitement about our mission. Suddenly, she stops and is quiet for a long moment. “What?” I finally ask. “What is it?”

She traces her finger down along the nape of my neck, just below the hairline. “Where did you get this mark?”

“What mark?”

“You did not know that you had it?”

“No. What does it look like?”

“It is nothing, never mind. It must just be a birthmark of some sort.” And then she resumes braiding my hair.

Chapter Twenty-Two

EVEN WHEN THEY ARE in such a large encampment, the Arduinnites stick to small groups, or clans, as they call them, of anywhere from three women to a dozen. Campfires decorate the ground like the fireflies of summer, their flames twinkling yellow and orange in the encroaching night.

As I draw near our campfire, Tola and Floris stop their conversation and turn to me. Tola beams as proudly as a new mother, and I feel suddenly shy in my new attire. Floris smiles warmly, and even Aeva gives a begrudging grunt of—could it be?—approval. Four quail are on a spit over the fire, and my mouth waters at the scent of roasting meat.

Floris and Tola, while always friendly enough, seem especially relaxed in my presence tonight. Perhaps that is simply because they are surrounded by such a large number of their sisters. Whatever the reason, I welcome it, for I have questions I wish to ask, and it will be much easier if I do not have to wade through suspicion or hostility.

Once we are eating and all their attention is turned to their food, I begin. “Floris, you said that you are a priestess of Arduinna. How are her priestesses chosen?” I cut a quick glance at Aeva, bracing myself for a protest, but none comes.

“Followers of Arduinna can choose to be priestesses if they are willing to submit to the required nine years of training. Once they have mastered that, they take turns serving the goddess at different times of the year, then resume their normal duties when they are not.” She tilts her head curiously. “Is that not how your convent does it?”

“No, we are fashioned more in accordance with the offices of the new church. We have an abbess who oversees all, and then a seeress who helps us interpret Mortain’s will.” Before she can think to wonder how our seeresses are chosen, I hurry to ask my next question. “Who rules over all of you? With so very many groups, surely you must need some way to settle disagreements.”

Floris tosses the last of the quail bones into the fire and leans back, making herself comfortable. “Of course. If it cannot be settled by the clan leader, it is taken up with the high priestess and her council of priestesses on duty.”

“And if that does not solve it? Say, if the priestesses could not all agree, or if they were overruled by the high priestess? What recourse would be available to the others?”

Floris studies me closely. “Then we would put it to a vote and all of us would have a voice in the matter.” I ignore the dozen of questions shining in her eyes and turn my attention to my dinner. While I regret having to hint that there might be disagreement at our convent, it is most helpful to learn how others who follow the Nine solve such disputes.

Over fifty of us ride out to engage the French, but in small groups of four or five each. Arduinna’s work is not about full-scale battle, but rather about protecting the innocents and the lowly that others are all too quick to destroy in the process of war.

My heart is heavy that I am not doing my own god’s work, even as my spirits lift at the thought of finally putting my skills to use in the service of a god.

I am also pleased that I fit right in with the Arduinnites who ride at my side. An observer would never know I was not one of them, or even the newest among them. Floris is leading our group, and besides me it contains Aeva, Tola, and another Arduinnite, Odila, who is nearly as old as Floris. Fortuna too fits right in with these mounts, the only difference being in the style of saddles used.

We are not venturing into the city proper today. Instead, we are going to approach the outlying farms and homes in the hopes of protecting them from further scavenging and raids.

The farmer whose cart Tola and Aeva returned said that the French had arrived four days ago and that yesterday was the first time they had come in search of food. It is our hope that other farms have not yet been ransacked.

The first farm we pass is abandoned. Closest to the town, the family who lived here did not waste any time packing up all their belongings and livestock and moving on.

The second farm is inhabited by a more stubborn fellow; he greets us with a pitchfork in one hand and a club of wood in the other. “Peace,” Floris says, holding up her hand. “We come only to be certain you are safe from the French.”

“Just let them try and take my sheep. I didn’t keep them all through the winter to feed a bunch of French pigs.”

Floris manages, just barely, not to smile. “We are glad to hear it. However, there are hundreds of them and only one of you, so if you have family you can go stay wi—”

He spits off to the side. “I’ll not be chased off my own land. Who sent you?”
“Arduinna, the patron saint of innocents.”

“If that man is innocent, I’ll eat my bow,” mutters Aeva.

In the end, we cannot convince him to go elsewhere, but at least he has no wife or children who can be harmed.

As we draw closer to the French checkpoint, Floris motions Aeva and Odila to dismount. They leave their horses with us and creep forward, quickly disappearing in the brush beside the road. Tola nearly quivers in anticipation. Floris glances her way. “It will be your turn next time.”

We listen carefully but hear nothing. Good. That means the soldiers will not hear them either. Nearly a quarter of an hour later, two muffled thumps disturb the silence, and a host of birds takes panicked flight. When no more sounds follow, Floris gives a nod of approval.

It is not enjoyable, this crawling around in the brush, sneaking up on people unaware, and ambushing them. I much prefer how we who serve Mortain do it—by facing our victims and being certain they know full well they are being held to account. But this is war, and war has its own set of rules, for all that I did not study them.

The next day our mission proves harder, for word of our ambush has been reported back to the French, and they have tripled the manpower at their checkpoints. But they do more than increase their sentries—they begin pillaging the countryside in earnest. We spot four different groups riding out in all directions, eager to find whatever food and provender they can before we block off their access.

On this day I kill three more men, all of them French soldiers. I am grateful that the bow is Arduinna’s favored weapon, for it is easier for me to kill from a distance than up close, and I am glad that the sour sickness does not return to my belly with each kill.

Well, not as strongly as the first time, anyway.

We harry the French at every turn, disrupting their supply chains and forays for food, protecting the innocent when they are threatened, and recruiting the able-bodied to our cause.

Floris is right: it is a good way to release some of the pain of Matelaine’s death. It is hard work, not only physically but mentally, for it requires patience and cunning to wait out the enemy, anticipate their actions, then organize others to act, others who are undisciplined and afraid—afraid of both the French *and* the Arduinnites, for they are the stuff of legends.

In the following days, I kill seven more soldiers. None of them is marked, but I do not feel the sick roiling in my gut like I did with the first one. While I never grow to love killing, I must admit that doing it before these men can harm others, whether by starving them or raping them or burning down their farms, feels justified, especially when there is no marque to guide me.

It makes it easier still when they rush to attack us, for then the killing becomes a mere reflex of self-protection.

On the tenth day, one of the Arduinnite scouts comes riding into camp and leaps from her horse before it has even come to a stop. "The Breton army has arrived!" she shouts, and a cheer goes up.

It takes them a week, but the Breton troops, flying Marshal Rieux's flag, are able to drive the French from Vannes. It is from those Breton troops that we learn that the duchess is no longer at Guérande. Indeed, she took her entire court with her to Rennes back in February.

"Rennes," I repeat stupidly. I could likely have reached Rennes simply by bearing directly north for three or four leagues, not even needing to worry about the bedamned French. Frustration at the futility of the wait fills me, and Floris and Tola look at me oddly.

"Then I must go to Rennes. I will leave today."

Floris nods. "It is time."

Seeing my surprise at her easy acquiescence, Tola leans close to murmur in my ear. "She had another vision," she explains.

Floris lifts her head and peers off to the north. "Someone at the duchess's palace has put out the sacred offering requesting Arduinna's help, and we must honor it. Therefore, we will be traveling with you to Rennes."

Chapter Twenty-Three

FLORIS, AEVA, AND TOLA ACCOMPANY me only as far as the bridge that leads to the Rennes city gates. “Tell the duchess we have heeded her call and will aid her in any way we can,” Floris says. “We will await her instructions in our camp.”

“You won’t come with me to the palace?”

“No,” Aeva says. “We avoid cities whenever possible. They are too confining.”

“We will pitch our main camp over there.” Floris points to the north, where the line of trees meets the valley. “The rest of our forces should be here in a few days.”

“How will the duchess get a message to you?”

Floris smiles. “Through you, of course. It is not as if we will be in hiding. You may come find us whenever you like.” She turns her gaze to the people entering and leaving the city, a great number of whom are soldiers. “Whenever there are this many troops around, there are sure to be innocents who need to be protected.” Her lip curls faintly in disgust. “You may be certain we will have plenty to keep us busy.”

I bid them farewell and thank them for all their help. I cannot find the words to tell them it has been so much more than simply allowing me to travel with them. I feel as if they have opened my eyes to an entirely new way of being, of existing in a group, and it has given me much to think upon.

I have grown accustomed to their company and feel nearly naked without them as I turn Fortuna toward the city. Her hooves thud hollowly across the wooden bridge.

The city’s gray stone walls stretch out as far as the eye can see, like a mother’s arms keeping her children safe. Sentries and lookouts patrol the catwalks atop the walls, and guards stand at the gate itself. They are not stopping people going in or out, but their eyes are sharp as they scan the crowd for trouble.

As well they should, for there are people everywhere. In truth, I never imagined so many could live in one place behind one set of walls. Or that they would want to.

And Floris was right—the city appears to be overrun by soldiers. They outnumber the townspeople by five to one, at least. Most do not seem to be on duty but merely wander the streets in groups. There is a bored, restless air to the

men that makes me wonder if the sentries should not train their sights on the inside of their walls rather than outside of them.

I pull my thoughts away from the soldiers and take in Rennes itself. It is large and far grander than Vannes, although I saw little enough of that town, and in the poorest of circumstances. These cobbled streets are lined with shops and brightly painted two- and three-story timbered houses. The spire of a grand cathedral rises from the middle of the city like a beacon.

My ogling draws the notice of others—well, that and my strange attire, for while I have thrown a skirt over my leggings, I am still dressed mostly in the manner of the Arduinnites. Three soldiers lounging near a smithy eye me, and I urge Fortuna down a different street before they can think to create mischief. While I would not mind fighting them, the whole place has the feel of a pile of kindling, and I do not wish to be a spark.

When I approach the sentry at the palace, he gives me a lazy grin that I meet with a cool smile. “I am here to see the abbess of Saint Mortain.”

I enjoy it more than I should when the grin drops from his face and he stands up straighter. “Your name?”

“Tell her that Annith is here.”

He nods curtly, motions a page over from the small cluster of boys who linger just inside the door, and gives him instructions. The page, a bright-eyed boy whose mischievous grin reminds me of Audri, makes a perfunctory bow, then hurries off into the interior of the castle. I am sent to the antechamber to cool my heels, and I try not to gawk and gape as if I have just rolled off the turnip cart.

Sister Beatriz told us often of the grandeur we would encounter when our duties brought us to the ducal court, but, as I have learned again and again these past weeks, there is a difference between hearing about something and experiencing it. Sister Beatriz was no poet, so her words did not come close to painting the true picture.

The antechamber alone is as big as our chapel and chapter house combined, and it is richly appointed, with bright, colorful tapestries that do much to absorb the chill that comes in through the main doors. The wood paneling is intricately carved, and I long to run my fingers over it to feel the rich texture of the wood.

But even more dizzying is the number of people in the room, which is equal to the population of a small village. Over a dozen sentries and men-at-arms, a handful of pages, and clusters of well-dressed citizens and even more elegantly dressed nobles mingle about. This is the only thing Sister Beatriz did a fair job of preparing us for—the finery these nobles wear, for their garments are as brightly decorated and elaborate as she told us they would be. I also notice that most of

them stand with their heads together, absorbed in tense conversation. Have they already heard of the French attack on Vannes? Or is there some other news that has them nervous?

I see the page scampering back to us before the sentry does, his eyes wide, his brows raised. “Her ladyship says to send Annith along immediately. I am to escort her myself.” He says this last bit with no small amount of pride.

The sentry casts a curious glance at me before nodding his head and ushering me on. I hurry to catch up to the page, who apparently does not believe in walking when scampering will do.

Now that I am actually seconds away from facing the abbess, my palms grow clammy. I marvel that I have faced—and survived—the dangers of the hellequin and the French, and yet it is the thought of this conversation that makes my hands sweat. I will not give in to this fear.

I have been blooded in my first battle, and my second and my third.

I have lived now in the real world, with all its mess and turmoil, all its wildness and all its beauty, and I can never unsee what I have seen, I can never unknow what I now know. More importantly, something deep inside me has awakened, and now that I have moved through the world fully aware, it is impossible to let myself be lulled back to sleep. Perhaps that is why the abbess held me back. Perhaps, for some reason I cannot even begin to fathom, she was afraid of this very thing.

After leading me down one main corridor, then another, the page comes to a stop in front of a thick oak door and raps smartly upon it. “It’s the Lady Annith, your ladyship.”

“Send her in.” The abbess’s voice is clear as a bell, even through the door.

“It’s *Reverend Mother*,” I whisper at him.

He frowns at me. “What?”

“A woman in her position is not called your ladyship, but Reverend Mother.”

His cheeks flare pink for a moment. “Why didn’t anybody tell me?” With a snort of disgust, he shakes his head and trots off down the hall. I take a deep breath, put my hand to the door, and go in.

The abbess is waiting for me in the chair behind her desk, sitting stiff and upright. Her face is pale, her nostrils pinched, the skin drawn tight across her fine features. Indeed, her barely checked fury has the weight and substance of a living thing. “Reverend Mother.” I execute a precise curtsy.

She does not bother with the formalities. “What is the meaning of this, Annith? What are you doing here in Rennes?”

“I have come to inform you that Matelaine is dead.”

The pinched anger in her face does not soften. There is no flicker of surprise or remorse or sorrow. “While I am sorry to hear that, there was no reason for you to bring the news yourself. A message would have sufficed. You are simply using this as an excuse to avoid a duty you do not wish to perform.”

The memory of Matelaine and her cold, still body lying on the hard wooden planks of the bone cart rises up, twisting my heart until it bleeds anew. My hands clench into fists and I shove them into my skirt so she will not see. “No. A simple message would *not* have sufficed, for I wanted to look you in the face when I accused you of being responsible for her death. It is because of your negligence and stubbornness that she is dead.”

A gasp escapes her lips—one sharp intake of breath that lets me know my words have reached her. “What do you mean?”

As the raw wound of Matelaine’s death reopens, all the hot, bitter pain comes flowing out. “You sent her out before she was ready. You knew it was too soon; Sister Thomine warned you. I warned you, but still you sent—”

“Silence!” Her voice cuts through my words like a knife. She places both hands flat on the desk and pushes herself to her feet. “How dare you? How dare you come in here screeching like a fishwife, berating me!”

I take a step toward the desk, enjoying the way her eyes widen in surprise. “I dare because Matelaine cannot do it herself. You have betrayed her, betrayed the sanctuary and trust between the convent and its novitiate, and I would know the reason why.”

“Trust! Let us speak of trust and how you have disobeyed me outright. You have left the convent and your duties without permission. Have you given no thought to the others whom your actions might place in jeopardy? Have you given any thought at all to leaving the convent with no one to See Mortain’s will? It is I who accuse you of betraying my trust.”

I dismiss her accusations with a curt wave of my hand. “I have no gift for Seeing and you know it. Why did you send Matelaine when she was not ready? What is the true reason you held me back?”

The abbess closes her eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath. When she opens them again, she is calmer, less angry. She smiles then, a coaxing, beatific smile. It feels as if she is casting out a sticky net, hoping to entrap me with her beguiling ways. But it is poisoned bait she offers—I recognize that now. “Dear Annith. While I admire your loyalty to those you care about, you must understand that as abbess, I have duties far above any one individual’s safety or comfort. I must use all the resources available in the best way possible to ensure Mortain’s will is done. You know that. It is just your disappointment and envy

talking.” Her voice is gentle, sympathetic even, and it wraps itself around me in an attempt to lull me back to sleep.

For a sharp, painful moment, I miss a world where everything made sense. “I *was* disappointed, envious even, but now that is only a small part of what I feel. By not sending me out when I should have gone, you have given me a role in Matelaine’s death, and to atone for that, I will see you held accountable for your deeds.”

She is the first to look away. She tries to hide it in a gesture—she casts her hand wide, as if in exasperation, but her eyes shift, and I know this small victory is mine. “Do you truly think I treat the novitiates any differently than abbesses throughout the centuries have? Do you think the Dragonette would have flinched from using what tools were at hand?”

“Your methods may be kinder, but what you have done is a betrayal all the same. At least with the Dragonette, we would not have been fooled by a false sense of kindness and regard. We were not tricked into believing she had our best interests at heart.”

Except for me. I *had* been that stupid and blind, and even now, I still don’t know if the Dragonette cared for me more than the others or hated me beyond reason.

The abbess’s lips press flat and her pupils grow small, two small black pinpricks in orbs of blue silk. “Is this how you thank me for all those years of kindness to you? For all that I have done on your behalf?”

“I do not want your kindness if the cost is others’ lives. Even if you are willing to pay such a price, I am not.” And that is at the heart of it. The rottenness at the core of her fondness for me.

She holds her hand up, as if warding off a blow. “Enough. I do not have time to bring a wayward novice to heel. There are too many real problems that threaten to destroy the very fabric of our country and our faith. I have half a mind to strap you to a cart and have you hauled back to the convent.” She is quiet a long moment and I wonder if she sees something in my face that makes her reconsider such an action. “But for now,” she continues, “I will have you escorted to chambers, where you will remain until I come for you.”

She steps from behind her desk and brushes past me. I wonder what she would do if I reached out and grabbed her sleeve and demanded she answer me. My hand twitches, but I cannot bring myself to do it.

She jerks open the door to call for a page.

“Where are Ismae and Sybella?” I ask.

At my question, she freezes, then slowly turns to face me. “Ismae is here, attending the duchess. Sybella . . . Sybella is out on an assignment. In fact, I

must prepare you—it is possible she will not return. Even if she were to survive the task Mortain has set for her, her own death wish has been heavy upon her of late, and I cannot vouch for what she might be thinking.”

A new wave of fury swells up within me, but before I can act on it, the page arrives. Ignoring me, she turns to him. “See that Lady Annith is given a chamber in the western wing, then tell the maids to arrange a bath.” She turns back to me and rakes her searing gaze over me. “You reek of poorly tanned leather and wood smoke.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

ALONE IN THE CHAMBER AND feeling as boneless as an eel, I lower myself onto one of the short stools.

I did it. I faced the abbess and called her to account. The very core of my being is a-tremble with the ramifications of that.

Ever since I was a child, I knew in my marrow that if I did not wish to be cast from the only home I had ever known—to lose the only small crumbs of affection I had ever received—then I had to do and be exactly what the nuns wished.

And now I have sent everything tumbling madly into disarray.

The knock on the door nearly causes my heart to fly out of my chest. Gripping my skirt in my fists, I stand up, raise my chin, and hope that the tangle of emotions I am feeling will not show on my face. “Come in.”

It is only two maidservants bearing a copper tub. I leave them to fill it and go to stare out the window, their gentle prattle falling over me like a soft rain.

The abbess may well try and force me to return to the convent, silent and in disgrace, but I will not go back. Not like that. Indeed, I can see no way I can ever return to the convent, for the abbess will not let me return in victory, and I refuse to do so in defeat.

“Does my lady wish assistance with her bath?” It takes me a bewildered moment to focus on the maid’s voice.

“No, thank you. I can tend to it myself.” Once I am alone, I step out of my skirt, then remove the leather leggings I wore under it, wrinkling my nose. The abbess is right; I do reek.

I slip out of my shift, check to make sure the linen towel and small pot of soap are within reach, then lower myself into the steaming water. I try to quiet my mind, to simply be satisfied that I am here. I have made it to Rennes and presented my grievances to the abbess. Considering all the dangers and detours I have faced on this journey, I have achieved far more than I had ever hoped for.

I turn to the business of scrubbing away weeks’ worth of travel. When I am done, I step out of the tub and reach for the linen towel. I am nearly dry when I realize the only clean gown I have to wear has been wadded up in my satchel for well over a month. I grimace at the idea of donning the wilted, wrinkled thing—especially having seen all the finery worn at court—but there is nothing for it. I cannot prance about in naught but a linen towel.

I have just slipped my one clean shift over my head and tugged it into place when there is a small commotion at the door. Expecting the abbess to come in and resume her earlier argument, I whirl around just as it is thrown open. It is not the abbess, but—

“Ismae!” My entire body lights up like a candle, and before I know what I am doing, I cross the room and throw my arms around her.

She takes a moment to shut the door behind her with her foot, then hugs me back. “It is you. The page kept insisting he had escorted someone named Annith, and I kept insisting he must be mistaken.”

Keeping her hands firmly clasped on my arms, she pulls back to study me. She is the same Ismae, but different too. There is an ease to her face and manner, but a new sharpness as well. “I take it by your warm greeting you are not angry with me?”

“No!” I hug her once more, savoring the warm, solid feel of her in my arms, safe and alive and unharmed, then force myself to release her lest she think I have turned into a clinging vine. “Angry with you? Why ever would I be angry with you?”

“When you did not answer my last two letters, I thought perhaps the abbess had told you of how I had veered from the course she had set for me.”

“But I answered the last letter I received from you. It was the one asking about lovers. Were there more after that?”

“Yes. Did you not receive the message I wrote begging you to tell me the antidote to Arduinna’s snare?”

Her question punches me like a fist, for it could only mean that the abbess confiscated the letters. “No, but surely you know the antidote? It is one of your gifts!”

Ismae looks down at her hands as if she still cannot believe it. “I do now, but I did not know until it was nearly too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Oh! We have so very much to catch up on! But first, what are you doing here? How did you get here? And does the abbess know?”

I roll my eyes and grimace. “Oh, she knows. And is most upset, which is not unexpected. As for the rest, it is a long and complicated story.”

She studies me a moment longer, then gives my arms a squeeze. “Go. Sit. I will see some refreshment is brought and you can tell me your long and complicated story.”

“I would like that,” I say. As Ismae goes to the door and gives instructions to someone outside, I take my gown from the satchel and pull it over my head. Ismae turns around just then and grimaces. “You cannot wear that. Not in that

state.” As she yanks the door open once more and calls to the servant to bring a fresh gown from her chamber as well as the refreshments, I marvel at the changes in her. Not just the physical changes, although those are marked, but the changes in her very manner, how she moves through the world and talks to others. The hesitant girl who was always waiting for permission and unsure of her station now has the bearing and confidence of one of our most experienced initiates. She is a full-fledged handmaiden of Death and living the life I have always imagined for myself. The joy I feel at seeing her once more dims slightly at my own uncertain future with the convent. “You’ve changed,” I say when she returns from the door.

She smiles. “As have you.” We both sit, and her polished demeanor falls away as she leans forward, her eyes wide and incredulous. “Did you truly leave the convent against the abbess’s wishes?”

“I did. Oh, Ismae. There is so much to tell you of, and very little of it good. Matelaine”—my voice gets stuck in my throat and I can hardly get the words out—“Matelaine is dead.” Much to my surprise, I feel tears form, tears I have not been able to shed since I saw the younger girl’s body. I swipe at my cheek, needing to get the rest of it out. “The abbess refused to send me out, refused to even consider it, and instead sent Matelaine, and now she is dead.”

“But she was only fifteen!”

“I said as much to the abbess, but she closed her ears to my arguments and instead told me I was to be the convent’s seeress.”

“But that makes no sense! You have not shown any talent for visions, not since I’ve known you. Not to mention you are the most skilled of all of us.”

I decide to say nothing just yet of my youthful visions, as I do not know if they are important. “It does not make any sense. It is a betrayal of the covenant the convent makes with the novitiates—that they will be properly trained and prepared before being sent out, or else they are just fodder.” I take a deep breath, relieved immeasurably to have shared all this with someone I trust. “And that is why I am here—to insist she face the tragedy her actions have caused and hold her to account before she starts sending even younger girls out, because clearly she will not send me.” I look down at my hands, which are twisted in my lap.

Ismae shakes her head. “I have never understood why I was sent to the Breton court and you were not.”

“Perhaps Mortain knew that your poison gifts would be needed?” I am not certain I believe that, but it cannot be discounted as a possibility.

Ismae nods slowly. “Perhaps.”

“When you met with the abbess, just before you left, could you tell if it was she who made the decision? Or had Sister Vereda Seen you at court?”

She shrugs helplessly. “The abbess informed me of the assignment after Duval burst into her office and confronted her. Whether Sister Vereda had seen it before then or not, I do not know.”

“Well, if it was Mortain’s decision, it is hard to argue with, but I still cannot help but wonder why. Have I displeased Him in some way? Failed in my devotion or obedience?”

“I cannot imagine that you have.”

“And yet the abbess choosing not to send me makes no more sense.”

“She has always been exceptionally fond of you,” Ismae points out.

I cannot help it—I snort. “Only because I excelled at my duties and was extremely biddable. And”—honesty compels me to admit—“because I think she felt sorry for me.”

“Felt sorry for you? Why on earth would she?” The disbelief is clear in Ismae’s voice, disbelief that anything in my sheltered life at the convent could have earned me someone’s pity.

I rise to my feet and busy myself with trying to smooth the wrinkles out of my gown. She deserves an answer, but it is so very hard to speak of those memories, to share them with anyone, that I am nearly overcome by a need to flee the room. “The previous abbess—the one our current abbess replaced—singled me out for special . . . attention.”

Ismae’s eyes narrow in concern. “What sort of attention?”

A faint hum of panic skips along my limbs, making me feel as if I have said too much already. “It is of no importance—it was a long time ago. But tell me, what of Sybella? The abbess said she was out on a dangerous mission and that I must prepare myself for the possibility that she might not return.”

Ismae’s face darkens. She pushes to her feet and begins pacing. “Oh, Annith. The abbess has done most poorly by Sybella. She has sent her back to the very family that nearly destroyed her.”

All the blood drains from my face, and I must grasp the bedpost to steady myself. Even now, I had not suspected such a gross betrayal. I had assumed there was some assignment for which Sybella’s unique skills would prove useful. But this? To return her to the source of her madness before she has fully healed?

“And her family—it is even worse than we had imagined. Annith, she is Count d’Albret’s own daughter.”

“Count d’Albret! The one who nearly raped the duchess?”

Ismae nods. “The very same. And he has a much darker history than even the most vile rumors about him reveal. Duval never trusted the man, which is why he was so against the match. But now that we have heard from Sybella’s own

lips how Count d'Albret has treated his wives . . ." She shudders, then meets my gaze, her eyes stark and filled with horror. "He has killed them. All of them."

"How many have there been?" I whisper.

"Six. The duchess would have been the seventh."

My knees suddenly weak, I lower myself onto the bed behind me. To think of Sybella growing up in such a household, with murders being committed throughout her young life. It is truly a miracle that she was not warped and damaged beyond recovery.

It also makes the abbess's decision to send her back all the more heinous, and anger surges through me once more. "And that's where she is now?"

"Yes and no. Three months ago, when the duchess faced d'Albret and Marshal Rieux before Nantes, d'Albret planned a trap. It was only through the valiant efforts of her small guard that she was able to get to safety. One of those guards was the Beast of Waroch."

"I know of him. He is rumored to be the fiercest warrior our country has ever known. And wasn't it he who rallied the duke's forces and allowed us to win the Mad War?"

"Yes. Precisely. And with the duchess's marshal turning against her, she had few troops left to her. Beast's ability to raise and motivate fighting men became even more critical to our mission. Under pressure, the abbess agreed to arrange for Sybella to free him. He was so wounded that she had to accompany him to Rennes herself."

"Then where is she now?"

"Annith, the abbess tried to send her back to d'Albret's household yet again! Even knowing her role in aiding Beast had been discovered, the abbess was determined to send her back." Ismae looks away. "So I took matters into my own hands and told Beast what was going to happen." She smiles faintly. "Then he took matters into his."

"I don't understand. Why would he intervene on her behalf? Because she had rescued him from the prison."

An amused smile plays about Ismae's lips. "Not only that. He has developed a great—fondness—for her, one that she returns, for all that she has tried to deny it. So he diverted her from that mission and took her with him when he went to give aid to the British troops at Morlaix, thus keeping her away from the abbess."

Her expression grows stricken again. "But we received word from Beast last week. Sybella's sisters have been threatened if she does not return to the family. She and Beast have gone back to Nantes to get them out, but so far we have

heard nothing else.” She looks up at me, tears glinting in her eyes. “Oh, Annith. I am so afraid for her, so afraid of what this will cost her.”

It is all I can do not to go hunt the abbess down, and strangle her with my own hands. “What can we do? Can we send someone to help?”

She shakes her head. “There is nothing we can do that will not put her in greater danger, so now we must wait and pray.” She takes a deep breath, then sits on the stool across from me. “From the moment I was first sent out, nothing was as I had been prepared for. There was none of the black and white that the convent had used to paint the world for us. The people, the politics, the world itself, were much more nuanced, with who was right and who was wrong often simply a matter of where one stood.

“I still do not know if she purposefully withheld Duval’s identity from me when she sent me to court or if she thought I knew who he was. And Chancellor Crunard? Well, he is no longer chancellor. He now sits in a prison cell in the bowels of the palace at Guérande. Chancellor Crunard, the abbess’s liaison, had been feeding her false information for at least as far back as my first assignment, and possibly longer.”

I suddenly remember the abbess’s new habit of visiting the rookery to collect her own messages. Could that be why?

We are interrupted by a knock on the door, and two maids bustle in carrying trays of food, the smell causing my mouth to water as I realize just how long it’s been since I’ve eaten. While they set the food down on a small table, a third maid comes in carrying a dark blue gown. “Where shall I put this, my lady?”

“On the bed for now,” Ismae tells her, and once again I marvel at her composure and comportment.

When we are alone again, Ismae busies herself cutting bread from the loaf and slicing the cheese. She lifts her shoulders in an apologetic gesture. “So what you tell me does not surprise me. As I say, I have learned much here in the outside world, and very little of it makes me inclined to trust the abbess.” She sets the knife down, as if she has just made a decision. “Annith, I have come face to face with Mortain. I have seen Him as clearly as I see you now, and He spoke with me.”

Even as her words send me reeling, they also fill me with hope. Not wanting Ismae to see my tumultuous feelings, I stand and slip the gown the maid brought over my head. For years I had thought I was the only one of His daughters to have seen Him. Even though the vision might have been a childhood fancy, it still held out the alluring promise that I was the only one to whom He had shown Himself. But if others have seen Him, then that means my own vision does not consign me to the position of seeress. “What did He say?” I finally ask.

“That He loves us.” Her voice is soft and full of wonder. “No matter how we serve Him, the depth of His love, the fullness of His grace, is far bigger than anything we can imagine. Or, apparently,” she adds dryly, “the convent.”

Ismae’s words wrap themselves around my heart, reminding me of the god I serve and my love for Him. As if embarrassed by her own words, Ismae picks up her knife and returns to slicing the bread. “Do you know the nature of Matelaine’s assignment?” she asks. “Maybe some answers lie there.”

“I was not able to overhear that part of it. All I know is that her target was in Guérande.”

“Guérande?” Ismae looks up sharply. “When was she sent out?”

“At the end of January.”

Abandoning the bread, Ismae begins pacing, stroking her chin while she thinks—a gesture I have never seen her use before. “That makes no sense,” she says, stopping in front of the window. “By that time, the duchess and her party had left the city to go appeal to Marshal Rieux and Count d’Albret in Nantes and try and heal their break from her. The only person of any import left in the city was Chancellor Crunard, and surely he would have told her that—Oh!” Her head snaps up and she looks at me. “Chancellor Crunard.”

“If, as you suggested earlier, he was feeding the convent false information, mayhap that was why Matelaine was sent to him. But, Ismae, I am not convinced that Matelaine’s assignment was ordered by Mortain.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Sister Vereda had been too ill to see anything of true import for weeks.”

“So you think the abbess ordered it of her own volition?”

“I fear so, yes. And from what you have told me, it makes even more sense now, for surely the abbess would want to punish someone who betrayed her.”

“Or else she wished to silence him so he could not reveal the depth of her involvement with him and his politics.”

Ismae’s words cut through me with the force of a spear, for I had not thought about such a large-scale betrayal on the part of the abbess—I had thought only of how she had betrayed her sacred duty to her charges. But this, this would go against the very principles of her office. I shake my head, as if I can dislodge the thought. “No,” I whisper. “That cannot be. She would not betray Mortain Himself.”

“Mayhap it does not sound so far-fetched to me because I do not know her as well as you do. However, I have learned much from Duval on how to look at people unencumbered by our feelings for them. These are naught but the same

suspicious I would have of anyone in her position.” Ismae’s mouth twists in a wry smile.

“And rightly so,” I say, even though my heart is not in the words. I have known the abbess too long, known her when she was simply Sister Etienne, the nun who was kinder to me than most. She was one of the few decent people who inhabited my childhood; I am not sure if I can bear for her to turn into a true villain. Misguided, yes. Blinded by some emotion, yes. But to knowingly betray Mortain Himself? Unthinkable.

Sensing my distress, Ismae changes the subject. “But more importantly,” she says, “in the short term, we must try to anticipate her next move and do whatever we can to block it.”

“She will no doubt send me back to the convent, although I do not intend to go willingly.”

Ismae cocks her head, her eyes twinkling. “You would make her tie you to a cart?”

Unsmiling, I look up and meet her gaze. “I would.”

The twinkle fades from her eyes, and her lips purse slightly. “You have changed,” she says at last. “Far more than I would have guessed.”

While I do not know if she means her words as a compliment, I find that they please me all the same. “I have.”

“Well.” She pushes away from the window and comes to finish lacing up my gown for me. “We shall simply have to see to it that she does not send you packing.”

“How can we stop her?”

The grin that lights up Ismae’s face is full of cheerful disobedience. “I have been at court for months and serve as close attendant to the duchess. I have connections of my own now.” She gives one final tug upon the laces, then ties them off. “Do not worry. We will get to the bottom of this. For now, you should rest. Or go explore the palace, if you’d rather.”

“Thank you, I may do that.”

She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, then hurries from the room.

I wish I could find the same confidence she has gotten hold of, for in truth, I cannot imagine what she plans will be so easy.

Aware of the exhaustion coursing through my limbs, I stretch out on the bed and try to get some much needed rest, but my mind is too full of all the possible disastrous futures that lie before me. Unbidden, my thoughts turn to Balthazaar and I am appalled to realize I miss him. No—I do not miss him. Or if I do, it is only in the same way I miss not having Sister Thomine handy for sparring practice. I enjoyed our banter. When I was with him, I did not have even the

slightest inclination to mince my words or pretend to be something I was not, and that is incredibly freeing. *That* is what I enjoy. Nothing more.

With a sigh of frustration, I get up from the bed and begin pacing in front of the dwindling fire. It does nothing to lessen my restlessness. Now that I have experienced the sweet taste of rebellion, it chafes me to sit here in my chambers doing precisely what the abbess ordered me to.

I do not *want* to obey her orders anymore—not even in the simplest of ways. If she told me to leap out of the path of a rushing cart, I would be tempted to stay rooted to the spot, simply to defy her. No matter how exhausted I am, I cannot sit quietly in my room simply because she has ordered it. I grab my cloak, wrap it around my shoulders, and slip from the room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I ACCOST THE FIRST SENTRY I find and ask if the palace has a chapel.

“The new chapel is in the north wing. If you follow this hallway—”

“You said *new* chapel. Does that mean there is an old one as well?” An older chapel is far more likely to honor the Nine.

The guard squints at me as if puzzled by my question. “Well, yes, my lady, but hardly anyone uses it anymore. And the new chapel is every bit as fine as the cathedral in town.”

I bow my head. “That may be true, but I am convent-raised and prefer to do my praying in more humble surroundings.”

He looks almost put out, as if I have somehow insulted him by declining to view his fine new chapel. However, in the end, he gives me the directions I seek, if a bit reluctantly.

The moment I step through the chapel doors, I can feel how very old it is. Close upon the sense of the chapel’s age comes the peace I have been hoping for. It descends upon me like gently falling snow, soft and cool, and I wish to roll in it in sheer gratitude. I know that when I look, I will find the nine niches just below the altar, because it is ever thus—when I am in Mortain’s presence, I find a peace and contentment I can find nowhere else.

The chapel is dimly lit by a handful of candles and much of the room is in shadow, but I appear to be the only one here. Moving forward, I sink gratefully onto one of the kneeling benches. My gaze goes immediately to the first niche, and I am pleased to find the small carving of Death residing there. But I am distracted by a small lump in the third recess, Arduinna’s niche. It is a small loaf or cake of some sort. The Arduinnites were correct—someone has made an offering, calling upon Arduinna’s protection here in Rennes. The duchess? Or perhaps it is some poor beleaguered maid who is beset by unwanted suitors.

I will puzzle that out later. For now, I allow myself to close my eyes. Before even a whisper of prayer can pass my lips, a vision of poor Matelaine’s face fills my mind. The sorrow and outrage I feel anew is like a kick to my chest.

It may have been my selfish desire to lead my own life that propelled me from the convent, but Matelaine’s fate has taken this far beyond my own differences and disagreements with the abbess and turned it into something far more serious.

I do not have a specific prayer I wish to recite to Mortain. I never do. It has always been my custom to simply open my heart to Him so He may see and

know all that I am feeling—the good along with the bad, my grand thoughts as well as my small ones. I do that now, and peace washes through me, clearing me of my doubts and renewing my sense of purpose.

For all that I am physically strong and skilled, I have always doubted my own heart. How could I not? It is what the nuns trained us to do, part of the way they broke down our will so they could sort through the pieces like a broken jug and reshape it to their own needs. All of us have let them—but me more than most. Indeed, once I realized what they were attempting to do, I wrenched the task from their hands and set about it myself—all in my desire to be the best novitiate who had ever walked those halls.

That desire now seems a shallow one, something that I have been taught to want rather than something that sprang from my own heart.

I now realize I do not even know what it is that my own heart yearns for. Once that would have terrified me—to be so formless and shapeless—but now I find it freeing. I have removed the convent's chosen desire from my heart, like plucking a long-embedded splinter from my flesh. I have rejected the path they told me Mortain wants of me. Instead of fear, I feel . . . hunger. Hunger to fill my heart once again, but this time with what I want. I now recognize that my wants are not selfish simply because they are mine. Indeed, many of my wants are worthy ones, even noble: justice for Matelaine, safety for the other girls, honesty from the abbess, and to restore the integrity of the convent.

Ismae has managed to forge her own path between the convent and her duty to Mortain. No, not duty, but devotion, for she serves Him now with much more than simple duty. It gives me great hope that I may be able to find such a path for myself.

Thus encouraged, I murmur my gratitude to Mortain and rise to my feet. As I straighten my skirt, I hear a faint rustling off to my right. Startled, I whirl around and peer into the flickering shadows. A man stirs. Was he there all along? Or did he come in while I was deep in prayer?

He crosses himself and rises creakily to his feet. He wears a humble brown robe and a hempen rope at his waist with the nine wooden beads that mark him as a follower of the old saints. He is shorter than I. His hair is fluffy and white and dances about his head like a halo in the warm candlelight. He brings his hands together in front of his chest and bows his head in my direction.

“Greetings, daughter. I did not mean to startle you.”

“I was not startled.”

The glimmer of amusement in his blue eyes gives me to believe he recognizes my small lie for what it is.

“You were completely lost in prayer,” he murmurs. “I could not bring myself to interrupt.”

For some reason I feel awkward and tongue-tied in his presence, although I cannot name why and it seems a most ridiculous reaction. It is not as if he could discern my thoughts and prayers. “It matters not, Father—”

“Efram. I am Father Efram.” He takes a step toward me. “Have you a heavy heart, child?”

I sense curiosity rather than concern in his question. “No, Father. I pray so that I may better understand my own thoughts.”

His face breaks into a smile, as if my answer has pleased him greatly. I wonder if that means he will try to tell me what he thinks my thoughts should be, and I think better of him when he does not. He continues to smile, letting the silence grow, and I cannot tell if it is meant to be a comfortable silence or an awkward one he thinks I will try to fill. If it’s the latter, he will lose at that game, for I have had far too much practice at it.

In the end, he is the first to speak. “I’ve never seen one of Arduinna’s followers dressed so . . . elegantly,” he says.

I stare blankly at him for a moment before understanding dawns. “Oh, but I’m not one of Arduinna’s followers!”

His white eyebrows draw together in puzzlement. “You aren’t? My mistake, then.”

But my curiosity is piqued. “Why did you think that I was?”

His eyes flicker to the small offering in the niche.

“I did not leave that,” I hasten to assure him.

“I know. I thought perhaps you’d come in answer to it. You have the look of one of Arduinna’s. A certain ferocity of expression.”

Well, I am feeling fierce enough, I suppose. “I do not serve Arduinna. I serve Mortain.”

He grows very still, his head tilted to the side, studying me even more intently, if that is possible. “Do you, now?” he mutters. “Well, that is truly interesting.” He smiles once more, puts his hands together, bows again, then takes his leave.

Once he has left, I sneak a furtive sniff at my arm, just to be certain the scents of wood smoke and poorly tanned leather do not cling to me still.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE NEXT DAY, DRESSED IN another one of Ismae's gowns, I am taken to the solar to meet the duchess. I have not seen the abbess since my arrival, and have done nothing but explore the palace and talk with Ismae. A part of me itches with impatience, while another part of me has always known any challenge to the abbess would be as long and slow and drawn-out as a protracted game of chess.

But this morning, my stomach is in knots over my meeting with the duchess, for in truth, I deserve no such honor. I half fear the abbess will have already informed her of all my transgressions and laid a pall of disgrace over me.

The young page who has led me to the duchess's quarters tells the sentry at the door who I am, then tears off down the hall to whatever duty awaits him next.

When I enter the solar, it is every bit as grand as I have been led to believe, and I am pleased that I do not stare and point like a small child. Carved oak paneling with thick velvet drapes and elaborate tapestries decorate the wall. Clear, mullioned windows sparkle in the morning sun, filling the room with cheerful light. But it is the ladies in waiting who draw my full attention, for they are not sitting at their embroidery but instead are clustered together, their heads bowed in concern. At my approach, they all look up. One of them gives me a halfhearted smile. "The duchess is not available right now," she tells me.

I frown in puzzlement. "My apologies. I thought the page said that she'd sent for me."

One of them looks me over with open curiosity. "Are you called Annith?" A woman gives her a quelling look. "What? She did say that if the Lady Annith arrived, we were to show her into the young princess's chambers."

By the poisonous looks the others are giving her, I am guessing that this sign of favor makes them uneasy. "Thank you," I say pointedly. "I look forward to serving both the duchess and the princess in any way I can."

"This way," the helpful one says, then leads me toward a door that opens off the main room. "Ignore the others," she whispers. "They are merely out of sorts because they have nothing they can offer to help."

"To help with what?" I ask.

The girl's face settles into sadness. "The princess Isabeau. She has taken a turn for the worse, I'm afraid, and even Ismae's famous tinctures are not helping." When we reach the door, she raps once, then calls out, "Lady Annith is

here, Your Grace.” She smiles at me, then returns to the group of waiting women.

The door opens and I find myself staring down at a small young woman, younger even than Matelaine was. She has intelligent brown eyes, rich sable-colored hair, and a high wide brow that is at the moment creased in worry. With a start, I realize that I am staring at the duchess herself. I sink into a low curtsy. “Your Grace,” I murmur.

“Lady Annith.” She offers her hand for me to kiss, which I do, then she bids me rise. “I am glad to make your acquaintance, especially after all that Ismae has told me, although I am sorry to have to do it in this way.”

I glance over to where Ismae sits by the bed, then back at the duchess. “And what way is that, Your Grace?”

“I’m afraid I have invited you here for the most selfish of reasons. My young sister is gravely ill, and Ismae thought you might have some new ideas on cures to try. She said you successfully nursed one of the elder nuns at your convent.” The desperate hope shining in her face nearly breaks my heart, for such desperation exists only when the outcome appears truly bleak.

“But of course, Your Grace. I am happy to offer any aid or comfort I can, although I think you will find Ismae is as much a master of tinctures and simples as anyone.”

“Maybe so,” she says. “But she also said you have sleeves full of tricks and charms to keep young children entertained, and those talents would be most welcome as well.”

A part of me wants to laugh. Here I am, at the right hand of the ruler of all Brittany, free of the convent’s walls at last, and it is my ability to charm young children that she is most interested in.

As she leads me to the bed where her sister and Ismae are, I try to reconcile this poised woman in front of me with the picture of the thirteen-year-old duchess I have carried in my head for so long. This girl is no child. She is unlike any thirteen-year-old I have ever known, although in truth, the thirteen-year-olds I have known are nothing like normal girls, either peasants or nobles. They—we—cannot be. We are not trained for normal—we are trained to be assassins and spies and rulers of kingdoms. To serve our god and serve our country with every shred of skill and intelligence we possess. There is little time for childhood in lives such as ours. With a sharp pang in my heart, I recognize that this is wrong somehow—that too much is asked of those we demand such sacrifices from.

The duchess reaches the bed, and Ismae stands up to make room for her. “Isabeau? Are you awake? There is someone here I think you would like to meet.”

The pale girl lying on the bed is a child, but it is easy to see that her illness has robbed her of much of her childhood. Her face lights up at the duchess's words and her eyes move in my direction, the excitement in them dimming somewhat when she sees me.

I curtsy deeply and give her my warmest smile, the one I use to coax Loisse out of the sulks. "Hello, Princess."

Before the duchess can continue the introduction, the princess asks, "Did Arduinna send you?"

I blink in surprise. "No." As her hopeful expression disappears altogether, I wonder if I may have found the person responsible for the offering in the chapel. Although how she could have gotten it down there in her state is a mystery. "I serve at the convent of Saint Mortain, like Ismae," I tell her, but that does not revive her interest.

She turns to her sister. "I am tired," she whispers.

The duchess leans over and smoothes a stray hair from the child's brow. "I know, dear heart. Sleep now, and we will play more later."

She gives a faint nod, and her eyes flutter closed. The three of us slip quietly from the room, and the duchess herself closes the door, careful to leave it open just a crack.

"What is the nature of her illness?" I ask.

"She has been beset with lung fever since she was young. It comes and goes in bouts, sometimes severe. It has been getting worse these past few months, and there is little that brings her relief." When the duchess looks away to compose herself, I glance over at Ismae. She gives a brief shake of her head. The young princess is dying, albeit slowly.

"I will think back on all that we did for Sister Vereda," I assure both of them. "And see if there is anything Ismae has not yet tried. If nothing else, I should have some stories and games I can entertain her with."

"Any of that would be most appreciated, demoiselle."

Isabeau's question if I was sent by Arduinna reminds me of the message I bear. "Your Grace, I traveled to Rennes among a group of the followers of Arduinna. They asked that I bring you a message from them."

She blinks in surprise, then looks at Ismae, who shrugs in ignorance. "I would be pleased to hear it."

"They wanted you to know that they have responded to your summons and are here in the city, ready to offer you whatever support they can."

The duchess frowns. "But I have not summoned them. In truth, I did not know that I *could* summon them."

“I do not think they came as subjects to a ruler, or even as a religious order, but because a sacred offering was made asking Arduinna’s help.”

The duchess looks at Ismae. “Did you make such an offering?”

Ismae shakes her head. “No.”

“Nor have I,” says the duchess.

I look back toward the sleeping Isabeau. Now I am nearly certain it is the young princess who has requested Arduinna’s aid, although I do not wish to expose her secret just yet. At least, not until I better understand what is going on here. “Either way, they have much to offer. While their numbers are not great, one hundred or so at the outside, they are strong and fierce warriors with a special fondness for the innocent. Perhaps there is some service they can perform for you.”

“I am sure there is, or will be soon enough. I am not in a position to turn down even the smallest offer of help at this point.”

In the quiet that follows, the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps thuds in the hallway beyond, just before a sharp knock on the solar door. Ismae and I exchange a glance. “Is it the abbess?” I murmur.

She shrugs. “Mayhap. If so, let me be the one to talk.”

For a brief moment I am dizzy with how completely our positions have changed. In the past, Ismae always insisted that I be the one to run interference with the abbess, and now she is doing so for me.

One of the ladies in waiting goes to open the door, and relief flutters in my belly. Not the abbess, but a nobleman. He is tall and broad of shoulder with gray eyes that glow with intelligence and . . . glee? The glee has so transformed his face that it takes me a moment to recognize him as the man Ismae left with all those months ago.

“Duval?” Ismae takes a step toward him. “Is everything all right?”

He gives a vague nod of greeting—or perhaps it is an apology for interrupting. “Beast and Sybella have returned. They have just arrived in the courtyard.”

Only the decorum of the duchess’s chamber keeps Ismae from emitting a joyous whoop. The duchess clasps her hands together and closes her eyes, as if in brief prayer. “Praise God and His Nine saints,” she whispers.

“If you will excuse us, Your Grace?” Duval asks.

She quickly waves us away. “Of course. And hurry back, for I want a full report!”

“Come!” Ismae reaches out to grab my arm as she follows Duval out of the chamber.

As we rush through the hallway, I cannot imagine three less dignified-looking individuals. It is clear Duval wishes to break into a run, and Ismae and I have

both hiked up our skirts so that we may keep up with him. He checks himself slightly so that when we reach the exit, at least we do not gallop out the door.

Once outside in the courtyard, I see no sign of Sybella. The yard is a-bustle with ostlers and grooms and footmen making ready to unload a cart holding a passel of charcoal-burners and their children. A groom is talking to one of the charcoal-burners on horseback. Considering the horseman's size and bulk, I am surprised the sentries have allowed him to pass through the gate. He is at least a head taller than most of the guards and half again as broad in the shoulder. His face is battered and scarred. Indeed, he looks like one of the ancient, weathered standing stones come to life.

I hang back, but Ismae keeps running forward, and one of the mounted charbonnerie—a woman—leaps off her horse. She is dressed in a drab gown somewhere between brown and gray, and her hair is caught up in a linen coif. Even with the charcoal smudged on her face, she is beautiful—it is Sybella!

The fear that has been gnawing at my heart since the moment I heard of her whereabouts leaves my body with such a sickening rush that I must pause and take a deep breath to steady myself.

Ismae throws her arms around Sybella, and I am surprised at the ferocity with which Sybella returns the hug. I have never known her to be free with affectionate gestures. Of a sudden, I feel shy around her, around both of them, for they have changed so much, and I feel as if I have been left behind to calcify and harden like a barnacle on the hull of one of the convent's boats.

When Ismae turns and motions me forward, Sybella's eyes widen in recognition, her entire manner shifting like quicksilver. Her face grows white, making her dark eyes stark in her lovely face. She strides toward me, grasps my shoulders, and gives me a little shake. "Why are you here?"

A thick knot rises up in my throat, choking back my joyous greeting. "It is a long story," I finally manage to get out. "One I would rather not share in the courtyard in front of a score of people."

She studies me closely, the fierce look still on her face. "Did the abbess order you here?"

"Saints, no! I have traveled here on my own, and she is much angered by it."

Sybella's entire body relaxes, and then she smiles and throws her arms around me in a hug that near cracks my ribs. "Good. Although it does not matter—even if she had called you here, the reason for the assignment no longer exists."

"It is done?" Ismae asks.

A dark, triumphant smile twists Sybella's shapely mouth, accompanied by a shadow of pain. "It is done."

I look from one to the other, and suddenly it is as if no time at all has passed and they are sharing some worldly knowledge or joke that I cannot fathom. Sybella turns to me. “Count d’Albret, traitor to the duchy, is dead. Or as good as.” No hint of the hand she may have played in his death or the full implications of that shows on her face. “Now we must make arrangements for my sisters, for the journey was not an easy one and Louise in particular is in poor health.”

Ismae studies the two younger girls in the wagon, her lips pursed in thought. “The palace is growing more crowded every day as more and more Breton barons rally to the duchess’s side. We may end up needing to share a room at some point, so I think your sisters would be safest at the Brigantian convent. In truth, young Isabeau should have been moved there as well, but the duchess cannot bear to be parted from her side.”

“That will be fine. They would probably be most at ease there, anyway. And Tephania will stay with them.”

Ismae blinks and I am selfishly pleased that one of Sybella’s revelations has managed to surprise her, as I am tired of being the only one reeling in shock. “Tephania?”

“A dear and loyal friend who has attached herself to my sisters.”

I find the idea that Sybella has found a dear and loyal friend almost as hard to believe as the idea that she has sisters, but Ismae is not daunted. “Good.” Ismae motions one of the numerous pages over and sends him with a message to the Brigantian convent.

Once he has scampered away, Sybella asks, “How is Isabeau?”

Ismae closes her eyes briefly and shakes her head. “Not good. Between my own small knowledge and the sisters of Brigantia, everything is being done, but it is not anywhere near enough. Even so, I’m sure she will be glad of some younger girls for company, so your sisters may visit whenever you wish them to.”

I feel as if I have stepped onto the shores of some mysterious foreign land where everything is unfamiliar. As if fate wishes to make this even more apparent, the nobleman Duval approaches with the lumbering standing stone of a charbonnerie beside him. He must easily be the ugliest man I have ever seen. He is as tall as a tree, and twice as wide, with muscles that look like boulders. His nose looks like a mashed turnip, and his eyes gleam in a disturbingly feral manner. Much to my surprise, Ismae—who has only ever viewed men as targets for her assassin skills—turns and throws her arms around him. *Merde*. I have never seen such hugging from these two.

“Thank you,” she says fiercely. When she pulls back, Sybella is staring at her with narrowed eyes. “Did you put him up to that . . . stunt?” But there is little

heat in her words.

Ismae steps away from the man and shrugs. “I told him what you had been assigned to do and that you were leaving—that is all.”

Sybella opens her mouth to say something, but Ismae ignores her and decides to pull out her manners like a long-forgotten handkerchief. “Annith, allow me to present to you Sir Benebic de Waroch, otherwise known as Beast. You may have heard of his exploits.”

“I believe I have,” I say as I drop a curtsy. “It is an honor, Sir Waroch.”

“Beast.” His deep voice rumbles across the space between us. Then he surprises me by taking my hand and bowing as prettily as any courtier. “The honor is all mine, my lady.”

Ismae puts her hand on my shoulder and turns me slightly toward the other nobleman. “And this is Lord Gavriel Duval, half brother to the duchess and one of her closest advisors.”

“And Ismae’s lover.” Sybella’s whisper in my ear just as I sink into a curtsy causes my head to snap up. So that is why she wrote to me asking whether or not the convent allowed initiates to have lovers.

“This is Annith,” Ismae continues. “One of Sybella’s and my sisters from the convent.”

“Good,” Duval says with a firm nod. “We can always use another assassin as this hornets’ nest thickens.”

I am warmed by his quick easy acceptance of me as well as by his obvious pleasure at having another assassin at court. I will need to gather as much support as possible to avoid being summarily sent packing by the abbess.

A small tempest erupts behind me. It is not movement or even noise—it is more as if a windstorm of violent displeasure has arrived. I am not at all surprised when I turn around and see the abbess. Her face is bone-white and her brows drawn down into two furious slashes. “Sybella.”

Sybella’s face goes eerily still, then she slowly turns to the other woman. “Reverend Mother.” Her voice is as flat as a blade of trampled grass.

The abbess waits for a moment, expecting Sybella to come to her. When Sybella does not, the abbess’s jaw twitches, but she lifts her skirts and descends the stairs so that whatever she is about to say will not be heard by the entire courtyard full of people. It does not work, however, for all of them can sense the storm brewing in their midst, and they all stop to watch.

Her eyes are as frigid as ice. “You disobeyed me?” Her voice is terrible in its softness, as if she has slipped velvet over a hammer just before she intends to use it.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the abbess's, Sybella grips either side of her shabby gown and dips into a perfect, reverent curtsy. When she rises, she lifts her chin, ever so slightly. "Count d'Albret is dead. My duty to the convent is fulfilled, and I will no longer serve you."

I gasp; I cannot help it. Beside me, Ismae stiffens, but the abbess does not so much as blink. Indeed, I think I discern a small glint of triumph in her gaze. "You no longer wish to serve as Death's handmaiden, then? You no longer wish to be a daughter of Mortain?"

"Oh, I am His daughter, and I plan to serve Him all the rest of my days. I simply do not need you or the convent in order to do so." And with that, she loops one of her arms through Ismae's and the other one through my own and pulls us away from the abbess. I can feel the roar of victory thrumming through her as she leads us toward the palace door.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ONCE WE ARE INSIDE, Ismae leads us toward a different part of the palace than I have been in before. She stops in the hall to order a servant to have a bath prepared in the room. As the maid hurries away, Sybella gives me a sly, knowing smile. “Has she told you of her lover?”

I spear Ismae with an accusing look. “No, she has not.”

Greatly discomfited, Ismae blushes and glances around to see if anyone overheard, but we are alone. “He is *not* my lover.”

Sybella raises one perfectly arched eyebrow. “So, you have not lain with him and—”

“He is my betrothed.”

Sybella and I both stop walking, our linked arms forcing Ismae to stop as well. “Your what?” I ask at the same time that Sybella says, “Praise the Nine! He’s convinced you, then?”

“Shh!” Ismae glances around once more, then lengthens her stride, pulling us along behind her like a farmer dragging stubborn sheep to market. Finally, she reaches for one of the closed doors, opens it, and fair shoves us inside. “Yes.” She blows out a breath. “He’s convinced me. We’ve agreed that if—when—the duchess has this French threat well behind her, we will marry.”

So many questions crowd my tongue that they become entangled and all I can manage is a sputtered “You? Married?” I cannot believe this of Ismae, Ismae who hated men so much that it was the very promise of killing them that had her embracing her role at the convent.

She turns to me. “I told you we have much to catch up on.”

“But wait.” I put my hand on her arm. “Aren’t you already married? I mean, to the pig farmer?”

“No. The abbess had that annulled my first year at the convent.”

“B-but . . .” I still cannot wrap my mind around this. “You said you would never—”

Ismae huffs out a sigh. “You do not need to remind me what I said. I have had plenty of occasions to eat those words.”

“But what of your other concerns?” Sybella asks quietly as she begins unwinding the linen coif from her head. “Your worry of giving someone so much power over you?”

Ismae crosses to the fireplace, takes up the poker leaning against the wall, and

stirs the embers to life. “I trust him,” she says. “It is that simple.”

Sybella barks out a laugh, but it is not as sharp as it once would have been. “Trust is never simple.”

“Do you trust Beast?”

Sybella pauses in her undressing. “With my life,” she says.

Ismae had warned me, but seeing Sybella’s face soften with love as she speaks of Beast drives home the force of her feelings for him in a visceral way.

Ismae glances at me in sorrow and then looks down. “I am sorry, but like Sybella, I cannot in good conscience serve the convent any longer. Not after what the abbess has put her through, and not after what you have told me. I will continue to serve Mortain all the rest of my days, but I am not beholden to the convent, only to my god and myself.”

“As His mercy,” Sybella murmurs.

Ismae’s head snaps up. “What did you say?”

Sybella looks over to meet her gaze. “You will serve as His mercy, and I His justice. Those are the roles He has chosen for us.”

“How do you know this?”

Sybella shrugs. “I too came face to face with our Father, and it was exactly as you said. He loves us with a love beyond our imagining, a love of such acceptance and grace that nothing we do—not even turning away from Him—can destroy it.”

The world tilts dizzily as I am assailed by an entire host of conflicting emotions. Joy, that Sybella has clearly found such peace and happiness. Relief, that yet another one of His handmaidens has seen Him, thus removing the possible significance of my own brief sighting years ago. But I am also filled with a nearly unbearable sense of loss. My seeing Him is no longer a sign of any uniqueness on my part. Not only that, but my two friends have been given roles as His instruments here on earth, whereas I have yet to receive a single order from Him.

The knock at the door pulls me from my self-pity, and a bevy of maidservants enter, carrying a tub and kettles full of steaming water. As they bustle about their duties, I turn my mind to the puzzle of the convent. It is a relief to see that Ismae and Sybella are plagued by the same doubts and concerns that I have, but they are willing to walk away from it. I do not see how I can abandon Florette and Lisabet and Aveline and Loisse to the abbess’s machinations. Besides, Ismae and Sybella each have something—*someone*—to walk to.

A sudden pang of loss twists sharply in my side, and an image of Balthazaar’s dark, brooding eyes fills my mind. I should not miss him so. Not only is he likely hunting me, but his long penance hints at crimes too terrible to speak of.

He is a creature of the Underworld, trapped on his path to redemption for who knows how long. There is no future for us, and even the present puts me in jeopardy. And yet I do miss him. He fits so comfortably into the contours of my own silences and doubts.

When the tub is finally full, Ismae dismisses the maids and the room is once again silent. She turns to Sybella. “Enough of such small talk. I want to know how your mission went.”

A cloud passes over Sybella’s face, then she slips her arms out of her gown and lets it fall to the floor. She pulls her shift over her head then walks to the tub. I marvel at how easily she moves in her nakedness; she always has.

“Tell us,” Ismae says once she has settled in the water.

Sybella’s eyes grow bleak and she busies herself with the soap and sponge. “It is done,” she says. “Count d’Albret is as good as dead—would be dead, but Mortain Himself refused to accept him into the Underworld, a promise He made to my mother and others whom d’Albret has killed. D’Albret’s black soul has been sundered from his body, which will wither and rot like a corpse for Mortain Himself only knows how long. So the duchess is safe from him.”

“And you?”

I do not understand the gentleness in Ismae’s voice, for Sybella has never been squeamish and I cannot imagine why she would be racked with regret. But Sybella’s smile looks so fragile that I fear she might shatter.

“I will be fine. I got to my sisters in time, so they are safe. But Pierre is still alive and will no doubt take up the d’Albret mantle.”

Ismae frowns in puzzlement. “I thought Julian was the next eldest?”

“He was, but he too is dead.” For a moment, she looks like the old Sybella, brittle and damaged, but then her face settles into a determined look. “However, the d’Albret plans will not stop with their death. They have been negotiating with the French camped but a few leagues from Nantes for some time. I do not know the full extent of their plans, but if they are allying themselves with the French in any way, it cannot be good for the duchess.”

Ismae purses her lips in thought while Sybella dunks her head under the water to rinse the soap from her hair. “Could they simply have been playing both sides against the middle, or perhaps using false promises to hold the French at bay?”

“Anything is possible, but we should prepare for the worst just the same. Now, enough talk of my grim duty. I want to hear of Annith’s adventures and how she comes to be in Rennes in spite of the abbess’s wishes.” She rises up out of the water, reaches for the linen towel, and begins to dry herself off.

And so I find myself telling my story for Sybella while she dresses. By the time I am done, she is smiling at me with pride, as if she herself had been

responsible for my daring. Which—I realize with a jolt of understanding—she partially is. In giving me love, Ismae and Sybella have given me strength.

“And what did our fair abbess say when she found you here, under her very nose?”

“She was as furious as you’d expect, but it seemed that there was more than just anger there. I want to say fear, except that emotion is not one I would ever ascribe to her.”

“Nor I.” Ismae gives a firm shake of her head. “But when I told her of my meeting with Mortain, told her that I believe the convent, at least some of the time, misunderstands His wishes, she grew furious with me, and I too thought there was fear lying at the heart of it.”

“What?” I stare at her in alarm. “The convent misunderstands Mortain’s will? Why do you think such a thing?”

Her gaze softens. “After seeing so very much death in this world, death not directed by the convent, I have come to learn that everyone who dies bears His marque, and that the marque alone does not indicate that someone must die at one of our hands. Every man who died on the field in front of Nantes bore a marque, and of a certainty, I was not meant to kill them all.”

Her words strike the very breath from my lungs and all I can do is stare at her as my mind struggles to make sense of this, to find a way to make it fit in with the precepts that I hold so dear. “Maybe that is why the seeress is so important?” I finally suggest. “Because that is the only way to tell which of those marked are meant to die at the convent’s command?”

“That is what I had hoped as well, but I received orders after you informed me that Sister Vereda had fallen ill, and if those orders did not come from one of her visions, then whose visions did they come from? Yours?”

I shake my head. “It was not mine, for I have not yet Seen a thing. Certainly nothing I would be willing to stake a man’s life upon.”

There is another knock on the door—in truth, there is no end to the comings and goings here at court. Ismae hurries over to open it, then talks quietly to whoever is there.

I turn to where Sybella is drying her hair by the fire. “Why were you so angry when you first saw me?”

She closes her eyes briefly, then opens them. “I’m sorry for that. It wasn’t that I was not happy to see you.” She focuses intently on rubbing the wet strands of her hair with the towel. “The abbess said that if I would not return to d’Albret’s household and feed her information as required, then she would send you in my stead.” She looks up at me then, her entire face glowing with intensity. “I could not risk that. You are too good and pure. I could not have you tainted with the

stain of my family. I could not bear that.” It is as near to a declaration of love from Sybella as I have ever heard, and I hold it close, trying not to feel slighted that she doubted I could handle myself in such a situation, a situation I have trained for longer than she.

Although perhaps that is not true. From what Ismae has told me of Sybella’s family, no manner of training could prepare one for their dark and twisted deeds. “Thank you,” I say softly. “For caring enough to return to the lion’s den yourself.”

Uncomfortable as ever with my sincerity, she waves my words aside just as Ismae steps away from the door. “We have been summoned to the duchess’s council chamber,” she says, and for a moment, I once again feel outside the circle of our friendship. I turn away so they will not see my longing and disappointment, but Ismae reaches out and tweaks the sleeve of my gown.

“The duchess asked for you as well. The council wishes to hear not only Sybella’s account of what happened at Nantes but your message from the Arduinnites.” She winks, and I cannot help but smile back. With the duchess’s help, Ismae has outmaneuvered the abbess.

At least for the moment.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

AS SOON AS I STEP into the council chamber, I feel the abbess's cold gaze upon me. Were the meeting even slightly less formal, I feel certain she would take me aside and reprimand me for my presence here.

I pretend she does not exist. It is a trick Sybella used in the past to drive the abbess nearly mad with fury, and I hope to use it to similar effect.

As Sybella tells the Privy Council what she told Ismae and me of what transpired in Nantes, I study the councilors and try to get a sense of their characters.

Across from Lord Duval sits a barrel of a man who looks as stalwart as a thickly rooted tree. He is dressed in soldier's garb and I guess him to be Dunois, captain of the duchess's armies. Next to him is a tall, slender man with gray hair at his temples. His eyes are kind, his smile sad, and a chain of office glints around his neck that marks him as the duchess's new chancellor, Lord Montauban, and captain of Rennes, the city that has given her such needed refuge.

Across from him sits a bishop in scarlet robes with fat jeweled rings upon his fingers. I am somewhat startled to see Father Efram sitting beside him. He wears no trappings of high-church office, and I cannot help but wonder what his role is here. Next to him is a man whose sharp features put me in mind of the ospreys who hunt off the rocky shores near the convent, but I can glean no hint of his identity from his appearance.

More than once, my gaze is drawn to the Beast of Waroch. His sheer ugliness is nearly an affront in such polished company, not to mention shocking next to the beauty that Sybella possesses. And yet . . .

And yet the ferocity of his exterior matches the scarred ferocity of her soul, and I believe, against all appearances, that they will suit wonderfully. Any doubts I may have had are quickly dispelled by the quiet pride in the man's feral eyes as he watches and listens to Sybella give her account. I can almost feel the weight of his regard for her reach across the table and wrap itself around her like a protective arm.

I also slip occasional glances at this Duval fellow who has stolen Ismae's heart. I would never believe they had once fought like cats and dogs in the reverend mother's office if I had not seen it with my own eyes. Although Duval

spends less time gazing at Ismae than Beast does at Sybella, I can still feel the bond between them, like steady, nurturing roots from some invisible tree.

When Sybella has finished her tale, the room falls into a stunned but respectful silence. After a moment, Duval turns to Beast. “Tell us of the battle for Morlaix.”

Something in the way that Beast squares his massive shoulders makes me believe that he would prefer to be back on the battlefield rather than speaking before the council. “The abbess of Saint Mer was most helpful,” he begins, his voice deep and graveled. “As were the people of Morlaix, and the charbonnerie.” The bishop sniffs his disdain at the mention of the charcoal-burners, for they followed the Dark Matrona when the Church cast her out. Father Efram, however, folds his hands and smiles beatifically, as if especially pleased with beloved children.

“In truth,” Beast says, somewhat sharply, “it was the charbonnerie and their way with fire that allowed us to take the town’s cannon back from the French and use the weapons against them.

“We sent another group to the winch house where the great chain that guards the mouth of the bay was secured. They seized control of the winch and lowered the chain. Once the dual threats of the cannon fire and the barricade had been removed, the British ships were able to pass.”

“And just in time.” Sybella picks up the tale. “For our group was small and there were a great number of French troops in the city. Once again, the charbonnerie were crucial, as they devised a most clever scheme to smoke the bulk of the enemy’s troops out of the barracks right over the city walls, which rendered their numbers manageable.”

With the grace and timing an accomplished dancer would envy, Beast now resumes talking, as if he and Sybella had planned this. “Once the British troops disembarked, it was all but over.” He falls silent for a moment before continuing. “Four brave charbonnerie lost their lives for the cause, as did six of our own men. But make no mistake, we would not have prevailed had it not been for the charbonnerie.”

Father Efram smiles and spreads his hands wide. “It is almost as if it were willed by God and His Nine.”

Beast appears to notice the old man for the first time and gives him a bemused look. “I do not believe we have met before . . .”

The bishop in red sniffs again, and Duval passes a hand across his mouth. I do not know him well enough to be sure that he is hiding a smile, but that is what I suspect. “Allow me to introduce Father Efram. He was once the bishop here in Rennes—”

“A long time ago,” the current bishop mutters.

“—but is retired now. His wisdom has proved most helpful,” Duval adds, pointedly not looking at the current bishop.

The duchess leans forward. “Sir Waroch, Lady Sybella. The charbonnerie have fulfilled their part of the bargain, and now I would fulfill mine. They were promised a place at our table, and I would honor that. Do you have suggestions?”

Beast and Sybella exchange a thoughtful look, considering. “I believe they simply wish to continue their way of life, Your Grace, but without being reviled.”

“That is just as well, as our treasury is utterly depleted and we have nothing with which to pay them,” Chancellor Montauban says dryly.

“It was never about money,” Sybella says sharply.

Montauban bows his head. “I know that, my lady. It was but an attempt to lighten the mood of a grim situation.”

Sybella blinks in surprise at his apology, then smiles prettily to let him know it has been accepted.

“What they need is to be treated with honor and respect,” Beast says.

“What if,” Duval muses, pulling on his chin, “what if we created a military order just for them, like an honor guard, but of the realm rather than of the duchess’s person? That would both elevate their status and recognize their past deeds.”

“Continuing deeds,” Beast corrects. “They have no intention of withdrawing their assistance. They are, if anything, even more committed than before.”

“An order.” The old priest presses the tips of his fingers together. “I like that. May I suggest calling it the Order of the Flame?” He shrugs apologetically. “If no one has any other proposals.”

Duval looks at Beast and Sybella, who turn to the duchess. She nods. “It is perfect. It speaks to their unique gifts and form of service. Lord Duval, see that it is so. And we will have a ceremony to honor them.”

Poor Chancellor Montauban winces. “How extravagant a ceremony did you have in mind, Your Grace?”

“I take it by your dour look that our coffers do not hold even so much as crumbs?” Duval asks.

Montauban shakes his head. “I am afraid not. The funds received for the duchess’s jewels have already been used to pay the mercenary troops *some* of what we owe them in order to prevent them from sacking the city from the inside.”

“Our soldiers have not been paid in a long while either,” Captain Dunois says. “It does not sit well with them that the mercenaries have been paid first. More than one fight has broken out because of it.”

Duval spears the man with a look and gives a curt shake of his head. He does not wish to discuss this now, whether due to the duchess’s presence or some other reason, I do not know.

For the first time the duchess looks over at the hawklike man. “Any word from my lord husband?” She stumbles over the word *husband*, and I realize the man she addresses must be the Holy Roman emperor’s vassal Jean de Chalon.

“Your Grace, I am sorry, but he is most beset by increasing problems of his own—and not by chance. The French regent has increased the troops along his borders, thus necessitating he stay engaged there. That they have managed to make a barrier of themselves between you two is but an added benefit.”

The duchess tries to keep her face impassive, but her color drains away at this news. As if to shore up her own hopes, she says, “There are others who will fight by our side.” She looks to me. “Lady Annith, please tell what the Arduinnites have offered.”

As I relay their offer of aid, all eyes in the room turn to me. “Surely they are mere legend!” Chalon exclaims when I have finished.

Beast raises one craggy eyebrow at him. “That is also what you claimed of the charbonnerie.”

The bishop leans forward, the look on his face a mixture of outrage and disbelief. “But they are women!”

The abbess, who has been as still and silent as a statue this entire time, slowly turns her cold gaze on the bishop. “As, may I remind you, are we who serve Mortain.”

The bishop swallows once, twice, and all but squirms in his chair. Captain Dunois casts a sympathetic glance at the man before speaking. “Surely their numbers are too small to be of great use to us.”

Beast shifts in his seat so that he can see the man. “I think the charbonnerie would disagree with that assessment.”

“As would the Arduinnites,” I say. “Though their numbers are small, they did great damage to the French at Vannes.”

“We will accept whatever aid our countrymen are willing to give.” The duchess’s voice is loud and firm. Then she turns to Duval. “Will the defeats at Morlaix, Vannes, and Guingamp deter the French regent?”

“If that doesn’t, your marriage should,” Chalon mutters.

Duval addresses the duchess. “We can hope it deters them,” he says. “And at least we do not have d’Albret and his troops to worry about any longer.”

Sybella shifts in her seat. “Do not be so certain of that, Lord Duval.”

His gaze moves to her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that whatever d’Albret was planning will not necessarily end with his death. He had been negotiating with the French, who are camped only a short way down the Loire from Nantes. I was not able to learn what he had planned, but if his men are working with the French, I am sure it will not benefit the duchess in any way.”

“Do you think they have learned of the marriage by proxy to the Holy Roman emperor?” Chalon asks.

“Of a certainty, d’Albret knew. Whether he—or someone else—got that information to the French regent is anyone’s guess.”

“With as many spies as they have at court, I have no doubt they’ve learned it by now,” Duval mutters.

“More importantly,” Captain Dunois says to no one in particular, “will it cause them to take action?”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

WHEN THE COUNCIL DISPERSES, THE duchess requests that Ismae attend her, and Sybella excuses herself so she can check on her sisters at Saint Brigantia's convent to see that they are comfortably settled in. As I watch them all go, my heart aches with the all too familiar sensation of being passed by. Only this time, it is not some thrilling assignment I am being left out of but life itself, and I feel as lonely and trapped as I did back at the convent.

Ismae now has someone with whom to build a life outside the convent walls. So does Sybella, and while I do not know much about the Beast of Waroch, I can see the great joy and peace he brings her, and that alone is enough to make me love him greatly.

But what of me? What role is it my destiny to play? For the only thing that would have made being seeress bearable was seeing Sybella and Ismae when I had visions of their assignments and hearing the tales of their adventures. I could at least have lived vicariously through them.

But now—now it does not look like they will ever set foot on that small island again.

Even though I am a hundred leagues away from the convent, I can suddenly feel the walls pressing in on me as surely as if I were in the seeress's chamber itself. Or perhaps after several weeks on the open road I have simply grown accustomed to being outdoors. Either way, if I do not get some fresh air, I fear I will suffocate.

I go to my room to grab a cloak, wrap it around my shoulders, and return to the palace corridors.

Even though I have no idea where I am going, I stride off purposefully, ignoring the few curious gazes directed my way. Surely if I just keep walking, I will get to a door of some kind.

However, there is no doorway at the end of this hall. Instead, it ends in another hall, forcing me to choose right or left. I go left, assuming that will lead to the outer edges of the palace. However, I do not find a doorway, but a staircase. I follow the narrow stone steps up and up and up again until, at last, there is a door. But it is guarded by sentries.

Remembering Ismae's claim that as one of Mortain's own, I can go where I please, I give the men-at-arms a serene nod and motion for them to open the door. Much to my surprise, they do. When I walk through, I find that I am at last

outside. I take a deep breath of fresh air and try to get my bearings. I am not in the front of the palace, as I had hoped, but instead have come out the back, where the palace abuts the city wall. There is another set of stairs, which I climb until I gain the ramparts.

As I stand on the battlements looking out over the valley beyond the city wall, something deep inside me uncoils. I lift my face to the cool night breeze that whips at my hair and my cloak. I think of the Arduinnites, their camp hidden out there among the trees. I think of the hellequin and their desolate existence brightened only by the distant promise of redemption and the individual gifts they bring to their duties. I marvel at all I have learned, which hardens my resolve. I will not let the abbess, or self pity, defeat me.

The awareness that I am not alone comes to me slowly, like waking from a particularly deep sleep. Someone is nearby, in the shadows where the wall meets the rampart. I can feel him watching me. It cannot be a sentry, for he would not have stood so still for so long without making himself known. Uncertain whether my lack of fear is a sign of wisdom or folly, I fold my arms in front of me so that the daggers at my wrists are within easy reach, then turn around to face the shadows, pressing against the stone wall behind me. "Show yourself."

A darkness within the shadows begins to move slightly, causing me to catch my breath until I see that it is only a black cloak rippling as a man steps forward.

Recognition slams into me, causing my heart to clatter against my ribs and all the blood to drain from my face.

Balthazaar.

Even as joy—silver and bright—skips lightly through my veins, I reach for the knife at my wrist, for that joy is overlaid with a dark, heavy thrum of apprehension. "What are you doing here?" How I manage to sound so calm with so many emotions coursing through me, I do not know, but I am grateful all the same.

Instead of grabbing me or attacking me, Balthazaar barks out a laugh, the sound cutting through the darkness like a blade. "I have asked myself that a thousand times, calling myself a fool for every one of them, and yet, here I am."

And though we stand in the shadows, it is not too dark for me to see the pain that this admission of his own desire causes him. Good, I think, for if I must flounder and flail with whatever it is that lies between us, at least I do not suffer alone.

"So the hellequin do not hunt me?"

He grows so still it seems as if even his cloak has stopped moving. "Why would you think we were hunting you?"

Did he not carry my own arrow in his saddlebag? What if I had been mistaken? What if it simply looked like one of my own? Perhaps it was my guilt and uncertainty that led me to believe it was mine. Or perhaps it was truly mine and I am too cowardly to force the issue. I turn and look out over the valley. “You told me they would if I were to leave. You said I would only be safe in their midst.”

There is a faint clank of chain mail as he folds his arms across his chest and leans back against the wall. “If their blood was up and they were in the throes of a hunt, they might not stop to consider long enough to realize that they *weren't* hunting you.” He tilts his head, considering me. “Have you done something that would cause us to hunt you?” There is a faint thread of amusement in his voice, which pricks my temper.

“No, but neither am I who you think I am. I am Mortain’s daughter, one of His handmaidens.” I watch his face closely, looking for any glint of recognition that would show he has been hunting me and has now found what he seeks.

Even though he is still mostly in shadow, the weight of his regard presses down on me. “Why are you telling me this now?”

Why, indeed? Because I no longer believe he is hunting me? Because I feel inexplicably safe with him? Or is it simply because I am three times a fool? “For the same reason you followed me to Rennes, most likely,” I mutter.

He clenches his fists, his eyes darkening into twin pools of blackness as all traces of amusement disappear. “Why did you run away?” It is hard to tell if that is a note of anguish I detect in his voice or if it is merely my own longings reflected back at me.

Briefly, I consider telling him of the arrow I saw, but for some reason it feels like admitting that I was doing something wrong, although I was not. “I had business elsewhere. I told you that many times, and many times you promised we were drawing closer. And yet, we never reached Guérande. My business could not wait any longer.”

He takes a step toward me and my heart begins to beat faster. “If you were traveling to Guérande, why are you now in Rennes?”

“I was so long on the road that the person I needed to see had traveled here, and so I followed.” I tell myself he is only studying me so intently to see if I am lying, but that is not what I feel in his gaze. What I feel is his need and desire and longing, crashing against me like waves against the shore, calling to those same unwanted feelings I hold for him. And always that inexplicable connection that draws me to him.

Sister Arnette once showed us a special rock that had the power to draw iron shavings to it. I remember how the dust and splinters of metal moved inexorably

toward the rock. Even though I know he is dangerous, I am drawn to Balthazaar just as those shavings were to the lodestone. “Is it allowed for you to be here?” I force my voice to lightness, determined to hide my own traitorous emotions from him. “I thought cities were barred to your kind.”

“We cannot hunt or ride through the cities, but as you can see, I am able to enter them.”

There are so very many reasons why I should not trust him. Why I should tell him to leave, order him away. He has done things—horrible things—that have earned him this relentless penance. He and his hellequin are naught but outlaws and thugs, barely cobbling together a shred of decency among them as they desperately try to atone for their worldly sins. Truly, the midden heap of Mortain’s grace. While I, I am sworn to a life in service to Mortain. Surely our being together is like the daughter of the gaoler courting the prisoner.

But none of those arguments amount to anything when weighed against the pain and despair that sits so heavily upon him, and the knowledge that I, in some way, am able to ease that, just as his presence fills some dark lonely need of my own.

He moves nearer then until all I can see is him—his mail-covered chest, his dark eyes boring into mine as if he could read the depths of my soul. His gaze is too overwhelming, so I focus on the dark stubble along his jaw and wonder what it would feel like against my hand, my fingers clenching into a fist so that I do not reach out and run them along his cheek.

The night breeze shifts, bringing a gust of cool air with it, and I shiver. Balthazaar raises his hands slowly, places them on my arms, and draws me into the shelter of his body. And still I cannot bring myself to meet his gaze, for it moves across my face like a caress. I fear if I look up, naked hunger will sit as plainly on my face as it does on his. I am content to simply stand in his arms, letting them act as a buffer between me and the rest of the world for these few stolen moments.

And then he moves, lowering his head to mine. With a sharp thrill, I realize he is going to kiss me. I tilt my head up to meet his lips and wonder if they will be cool like the night air or warm like his eyes when he thinks I am not watching.

But before our lips meet, there is a crunch of a boot heel on the catwalk behind us. I leap away guiltily, but he reaches out and grabs my arm. “Say you will return,” he says. “Tomorrow night.”

I pull my arm from his grip and glance over my shoulder. Two guards are making their rounds. Surely they will see the hellequin, and no good can come of that. “I will. If not tomorrow, then the night after.” But when I turn to tell the hellequin he must leave now, he is already gone.

After bidding the guards good night, I slowly make my way down the steps to the palace. My heart does a most inappropriate and ill-advised jig as I walk back to my chambers. Balthazaar has followed me here. It is not like Ismae's new life with the noble Duval, or even Sybella's new place at the heroic Beast's side. But it is a green shoot of a life beyond the convent, and it is wholly mine. For tonight, that is enough.

Chapter Thirty

THE NEXT MORNING, BEFORE THE sun is even up, there is a knock on my chamber door. It is a page, who informs me that the abbess insists that I attend upon her right away. The summons jolts me fully awake. As I hurry to dress, my mind runs over all the arguments I did not have a chance to make during our first meeting. I will explain to her that I know how seeresses are chosen—it does not have to be me. That it is her decision, not Mortain's.

Then I will force her to tell me what flaw or lack she sees in me that prevents her from sending me out, and I will insist I be given a chance to fix it. If she denies there is any such thing behind her decision, then I will ask if it was she who tore the page with my name from the convent register, and if so, why?

When I am ushered into the abbess's chambers, a sort of calm settles over me. Now that I am out from behind the convent walls, the power she has held over me for so long has dissipated, like smoke in a room once the door is opened.

"Annith." Her cool voice reaches out across the room.

I dip a curtsy. "Yes, Reverend Mother?"

She lets the silence between us build. Whether that is because she is choosing her words carefully or because she hopes to unnerve me with her silence, I do not know or care.

To show her I am not unnerved, I glance to the crows on their perches behind her desk. There are three perches but only two crows, and I wonder if she has sent one to the convent with news of my arrival.

"You may sit." The abbess's voice is tinged with a hint of warmth, which I do not trust at all.

"Thank you, Reverend Mother, but I prefer to stand." That way she will have to strain her neck to look up at me.

Her mouth tightens slightly in annoyance before she forces all emotion from her face. "It is your choice." She leans back in her chair and studies me. "What do you want from me, Annith? To know that I am sorry—heartbroken—about young Matelaine's death? For of course I am. Her death pains me as does the death of any of our handmaidens. I grieve much as a mother does over her children." Her face is soft, a look of gentle understanding in her eyes, and her brows are drawn together in an imitation of concern.

"And what of Sybella's death? Would you have grieved for her if she had died on that mission you sent her on? A mission no seeress had countenanced?"

“Sybella is no concern of yours—”

“You are wrong.” The words fly from my mouth like small, sharp rocks. “She is one of my greatest concerns. As is Ismae and Florette and all the girls that I have been raised with. And you sent Sybella back to that . . . that monster.”

“What makes you think it wasn’t Mortain’s will that she be sent there? How can you be so certain that is not expressly why Mortain put her on this earth—to bring d’Albret down? No one else could have gotten close to him—no one else would ever have been able to gain a position of such trust.”

“But what of her trust in you? She came to us half mad with despair and grief, and she had barely healed before you sent her back into that lion’s den. And Matelaine, she had been there less than two years, not nearly enough time to have learned half of what she needed to know. And Ismae? You sent her out blind, not even telling her who she was being assigned to.”

“I did not want his identity to prejudice any conclusions she might draw.”

“And what of Ismae’s letters?”

The abbess blinks. “What letters?”

“The ones she sent to me that I never received. The one asking if I knew the antidote to a poison.”

Our gazes hold for a long moment before I lean forward and plant my hands on her desk. “You never even told her of the entirety of her gift. How she was able to draw poison from others’ skin, just like Sister Serafina.”

“I had to be certain she was able to fulfill her duties for Mortain without remorse or second thoughts. I feared that her kind heart would cause her to use it without permission, and those fears proved founded when she wrote to you.”

“You had no right to take my letters—”

“No right? What rights do you think you have but those that are granted to you by me? All that you have, the clothes on your back, the food that has filled your belly, and any rights, are at my discretion. You seem to have forgotten that.”

“I forget nothing.”

“And so I ask again, what do you want from me?”

“I want to know that you have the novitiates’ best interests at heart. That you are not picking and choosing who to send based on some whim or personal favorite.”

The abbess snorts. “Do not flatter yourself. I do not care for you *that* much. I have been kind to you, that is all.”

While the words she speaks have the weight of truth to them, I do not believe them all the same. She has cared more for me than for the others, for all that she

wishes to deny it now. “I want an explanation for why I have not been sent out, then.”

“Must I carve it upon the skin of your arm? You have been chosen to be the convent’s seeress. Where did you think they came from if not from the ranks of our initiates? We plucked them from a magical tree?”

“Except I have had a chance to research this matter and now know that there are many others qualified to be the convent’s seeress. Anyone who is a virgin, or who is past childbearing years and swears celibacy. I am not the only one who can serve in this manner. Why are you so set on me?”

“How do you know that I am? Is not the first mission a novitiate is given one meant to prove her absolute obedience and loyalty? A task designed to demonstrate she can be trusted to carry out her duties?”

Ignoring the sudden uncertainty that twists in my belly, I tilt my head and allow a bitter smile to play about my lips. “That is most odd, because I distinctly remember you telling Sister Thomine it was precisely because I was so biddable and obedient that I would excel as seeress.”

Her eyes widen at the recognition of just how often I must have listened at her door, and the blood drains from her face. She turns to look at the papers on her desk to hide it, but it is too late. I have seen it and know that she is afraid of what I may have overheard.

“Perhaps it is not what you have, but what you lack,” she says at last.

Her words are like a slap. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you have no gifts, no special skills, *nothing* that would be of any use to Mortain in the execution of His wishes. Augury can be taught. The sorts of gifts the other novitiates possess cannot. However”—she leans back in her chair again and lifts a folded message from her desk—“this latest turn of events should please you greatly. In spite of your lack of true gifts, I will have to send you out on assignment after all. It will give you a chance to prove yourself. To convince me I was wrong to waste you as seeress.”

And there it is: everything I have ever wanted, everything I have trained and fought for, only now I do not trust it. “You will have to forgive me if I seem less than grateful, for I find it hard to have confidence in such an order—now, at this time.”

“You have asked me for an explanation, and I have given you one. I use the tools Mortain gives me in the manner best suited to their gifts. Matelaine, for all her youth, had inherent gifts that made her more valuable in her service to Mortain than you. But she is gone now and all the others are too young, as you have so movingly pointed out, so there is no one left but you.” She tilts her head.

“I thought you were willing to do anything to prove your ability to serve Him in just such a manner?”

Her faintly mocking tone sets my teeth on edge. “It is too late to catch me with that trap. Besides, the duchess has requested I assist her in caring for Isabeau, and I cannot turn my back on a command from my sovereign.”

Her face tightens in annoyance. “That was a request, not a command, and likely made just as a favor to Ismae to give you something to do. And as Sybella is back, she can assist Isabeau in your stead.” Then she arches her brows at me in such a way that causes all the muscles along my neck and shoulders to clench in apprehension. “Besides, the man to be killed is not only a proven traitor to the crown but also the man responsible for Matelaine’s death.”

And just like that, I am hooked like a fish. And she knows it. Even so, I try to feign indifference. “And who is this proven traitor to the crown?”

“Chancellor Crunard. Or, I should say, the former chancellor Crunard.”

I glance at the empty perch behind her desk. “Has Sister Vereda Seen this?”

“Yes.” Our gazes meet, and I think of all the times I thought she was telling the truth only to learn later that she had lied. There is no way I can take her word on this.

“Why? According to Ismae, he has been sitting in a prison for months. What possible threat could he pose now?”

“Someone is communicating our movements, positions, and strategies to the French. We know that Crunard has close ties with them and can only assume he is using some bribed guard in Guérande to get word to them of our activities.”

“Yes, but how is he getting word of the duchess’s plans? He is no longer in her confidence.”

“Perhaps there is yet another traitor. I do not know, I know only that we are to make every effort to halt the French. Are you willing to do this?”

“What if I do not see a marque? What then?”

“I told you. Sister Vereda has Seen it. Kill him anyway.”

Back in our chambers, Ismae looks at me with worried eyes. “I think it is a bad idea.”

I glance away and begin folding some of the clothes I will take. “Not if I am aware that the abbess is up to something,” I point out.

Sybella moves away from the window. “You do not fully understand her motives.”

“I understand enough to know she does not have my best interests at heart.”

“But why?” Ismae asks. As if she is unable to keep still, she reaches out and begins helping me fold. “Why would you go, knowing that?”

I look over at Sybella. “Why did you ride out to meet d’Albret?” I ask softly.

She stares at me a long moment, then gives a curt nod. “Well and so. It is something you have to do.”

“Precisely. I must do it for Matelaine’s sake.” And my own, although I do not tell them that. The abbess has all but taunted me with my own deficiencies, and I feel poised for a battle of wills. I am fully prepared for that. I am not prepared to stand down or walk away or turn my back on the only destiny I have ever wanted.

Ismae stops folding my extra gown. “Have you acquired the ability to see marques since I left? For if not, how will you know if he is intended to die?”

I shrug and avoid answering her question by asking one of my own. “Did you search Crunard thoroughly? Mayhap he bore one that was hidden beneath his clothing.”

“It is too bad we do not have the Tears of Mortain here with us,” Sybella says. “For surely that would solve our problem.”

I open my mouth to tell her that we *do* have the Tears, but something keeps me from uttering the words. I don’t want them to know that I am small enough to have stolen something so precious from the convent. “Do you think the duchess will mind my absence? I tried to tell the abbess that those duties would prevent me from going, but she dismissed it.”

Ismae shakes her head. “The duchess and Isabeau will be fine. It is you I am worried about.” She sets the folded gown down in my bag, then crosses her arms across her chest, clearly uneasy. “Crunard is as wily as an old fox and cares nothing for his honor or any cause. Everything he has done has been for love of his sole remaining son.”

“Do we know if this son is still alive?” Sybella asks. “Crunard failed in the task the French regent set for him and has been imprisoned. Have we any reason to think the French regent has not killed him as she said she would?”

Ismae opens her mouth, then closes it again. “I do not know,” she finally admits, “but I would like to think she would not kill an innocent man.”

Sybella rolls her eyes. “There is a reason you are Mortain’s mercy and I am not.”

“It is one thing to hold him for ransom,” Ismae says. “Quite another to execute him outright.” Then she grimaces. “Let us hope she has been too busy plotting her other moves against Brittany.”

Chapter Thirty-One

ON MY WAY OUT OF the city, I see small groups of Arduinnites patrolling the surrounding countryside. One of the women waves, but she is too far away for me to tell if it is Tola or Floris. I know it is not Aeva, for she would never condescend to be so friendly to me. I pretend I do not see the woman waving, for I do not wish to stop and talk with her, not with my duties to Mortain sitting so uneasily upon my shoulders. Especially if Aeva is with them.

It is twenty-six leagues to Guérande, a two days' hard ride, and I see no reason not to push. Even though I do not trust the abbess, a small part of me is thrilled to finally be doing what I was trained for. This will be no simple fight such as with the French soldiers in Vannes, for I will be acting as Mortain's true handmaiden.

There are few villages or towns on the road between Rennes and Guérande, and it is sparsely traveled, especially with the threat of French invasion hanging over the country. Fortuna is well rested from her time in the stables and we do not need to stop often. The distance flies by. Luckily, the days have grown longer, if not warmer. I pull my cloak more tightly around me and glance overhead at the threatening storm clouds, hoping the rain will hold off one more day.

I do not know what to expect in Guérande. It is likely that the abbess is setting some trap—but if so, is it for me or Crunard?

If it is for me, then at least I am not going into it unaware. Not only do I have more training than Matelaine, but thanks to the events of recent weeks, I have far more experience as well. Experience in the falseness of the human heart and the many ways it can lie.

The burning question is, why would the abbess now give me that which she has withheld so long? There is a possibility, although a remote one, that it is precisely as she claims: there is no one else, I am at hand, and Sister Vereda has Seen it.

Or, more likely, is it because I now have something to hold over her and she thinks I will quietly forget about Matelaine's death if she gives me what I have always wished for.

If so, she will be sorely disappointed.

It is my fervent hope that I am being sent now simply because I have passed whatever test Mortain set before me. Mortain—not the convent. I have stood

nose to nose with the hellequin and held my own; I have fought beside those who serve Arduinna and done our convent proud, in spite of the history and animosity that lays between our two orders; and, perhaps most importantly, I have a much broader view of Mortain's gifts and how they affect us all.

Surely my actions have proven beyond all doubt how fully committed I am to Him. Not to the current abbess, who was so kind to me years ago, and not to the Dragonette, who offered me a warped bargain in exchange for a home, safety, a sense of *belonging*. But to Him.

Tired of these weighty thoughts, I turn my mind to all the weapons I carry and entertain myself by reviewing the many ways I know how to kill. I wonder which one I shall use on Crunard.

I have a supply of poison that I can use in small doses to disable any guards. I wear a braided silver cuff that doubles as a garrote and carry five knives, which are concealed within my skirts and sleeves, as well as my beloved bow. I feel certain that if this is a kill sanctioned by Mortain, then I will feel none of the uncertainty or hesitation I have felt in the past, for I will be engaged in my own god's work.

If Crunard is truly the one to have killed Matelaine, avenging her death seems justifiable, at least to me, but I realize I do not know how Mortain Himself feels about vengeance. It never came up in our lessons.

Certainly if Matelaine had realized her life was in danger, she would have been well within her rights to defend herself, but this cold, calculated desire for revenge I hold in my heart feels much more human than divine. The whole issue is made even more complex by all that I have learned from Ismae and Sybella; so many guilty have not been marked, and so many innocent have been. Surely that suggests that Mortain's will is not easily discernible, or even recognizable.

Who should pay for Matelaine's death, Crunard or the abbess?

And then I remember I will not be going into this blind. I have the Tears of Mortain with me. I smile, realizing I will be able to discern Mortain's will after all. It is all I can do not to stop right there and administer the Tears in the middle of the road, but I force myself to keep going. There will be time enough when I stop for the night.

When the sun begins to dip below the horizon, I realize I must either come upon a village soon or pitch camp. I travel another half a league, hoping for a lone inn or farmhouse where I can pass the night, but there is nothing. I glance up at the sky once more, relieved to see that the gray clouds have blown to the north. As I turn my gaze back to the road, a flock of crows launches from one of the nearby

trees, a hundred black wings rising into the sky, flapping their wings in unison like the folds of a single cloak.

At the sight of them, I am suddenly reminded of Balthazaar, and a wave of remorse washes over me. I was so eager to ride out that I completely forgot my promise to meet him again on the ramparts.

On the heels of my remorse comes a surge of ire. I did not invite him to follow me to Rennes, and surely I do not owe him an accounting of my whereabouts. It was his choice to come, and it is not my responsibility to look to his comfort. Besides, I had thought we were done with each other, that I would never see him again.

And yet, I cannot argue away the small thrill of joy I felt when I did see him again. And while it saddens me to think that my thoughtlessness might add to the despair that already haunts him, it is not my concern, no matter how often I see his face when I close my eyes at night or how much I miss his silent, brooding presence skulking nearby. Mortain's work and the abbess's plotting are what I must focus on now.

A short while later, I spy a small copse of trees near a scattering of large, moss-covered boulders. The trees are thickly canopied and would afford some shelter if the clouds return, while the boulders will help shield me from view of the road. There is even a small streamlet on the far side of the copse. Thus decided, I dismount and lead Fortuna to the water and let her drink. I am pleased to see there are some fresh green shoots of grass nearby that she can graze upon.

Once I have removed her saddle and tack, I rub her down thoroughly and settle her near the grazing area. Then I must look to my own needs before the light fails altogether. By the time I have a small fire built, darkness has settled. My stomach rumbles with hunger, but when I pull my saddlebags closer, it is not the food that my fingers search for. They dig deep, down into the very bottom, where the small vial of Tears is cushioned by the calfskin-bound journal.

I pull out the heavy bottle, unwrap the cloth around it, and find myself staring into the dark black crystal, the reflected flames of the fire leaping and dancing in its faceted depths.

I think of all the handmaidens who have gone before me, who have had their senses opened to Mortain's will so they could see the world more as He saw it. Surely, few of them could have needed to see His will as desperately as I do now, with not only Crunard's life hanging in the balance, but my own future with the convent as well.

I carefully lift the stopper, revealing a long, thin wand of crystal. I dip it into the Tears, then slowly pull it all the way out. I set the vial down on one of the

rocks surrounding the fire and bring the crystal wand up to my eye. I pause to say a small prayer. *Please, Mortain, let Your will be clear to me so that I may better serve You.* I hold my eyelid open with my free hand, then tap the dropper once.

The Tear falls in, heavy and cold. Even as I fumble to dip the wand in the vial again, a burning begins. Forcing my right eye open, I repeat the procedure, shuddering at the cold heavy feel of it.

The burning is stronger now, growing instead of receding. It burns so brightly that it turns the inside of my eyelids red, as if I am staring at the sun through closed eyes. I bite my lip and wait for it to pass.

But it does not. I feel the first trickle of panic as the sensation moves from my eyes to my forehead, then creeps along my skull and works its way down my neck so that even my throat throbs.

I lift my hands to rub the pain away, then stop, not knowing if that will make it better or worse. Instead, I clench my hands into fists and pray that the feeling will cease.

I do not know how long it takes—when one is in pain, every second feels like an hour—but eventually the sensation begins to lessen and I risk opening my eyes.

I blink, and blink again. I lift my hand and bring it close to my face, then hold my breath and blink a third time.

I cannot see a thing.

No. That cannot *be*. I lift my hands and press them gently against my closed lids, as if I can rub the blackness away. But when I open my eyes, I still see nothing but more blackness. My heart begins to race, thudding loudly in my chest. Perhaps it is only temporary, a strong reaction to the sacred Tears. For all I know, every novice who has been administered the Tears has felt this.

Except . . . if that were true, surely there would have been some rumor of it. Besides, Ismae was administered the Tears only a short while before she left with Chancellor Crunard on her second assignment. If it affected her sight thusly, it cannot have been for long.

Before I can take any comfort from that, a new thought occurs to me, one so galling that my limbs begin to tremble.

What if this is the wrong bottle?

It is entirely possible, for there is no label on it, and Sister Vereda's room was a mad jumble of odds and ends. It looked like the bottle I had heard so much about, but there was nothing except my own willful defiance to lead me to that conclusion.

Or could it be yet another test? I wonder. Please, Mortain, no. I have passed enough tests to choke an ox; surely there is no need for further proof of my dedication.

Or perhaps . . . My thoughts stumble and stutter, rearranging themselves in an entirely new formation. Could the abbess have gotten hold of the Tears and altered them in some way? I have rarely been in my chambers, and she has free access at the palace. Likely no one would even note her coming or going as she pretended to meet with her handmaidens in their room.

She is plainly dead set against my serving Mortain as an assassin, but would she have resorted to such brutal tactics?

I snort, answering my own question. Of course she would. We have crossed a new line in our relationship.

Afraid I will be sick, I plant my hands on my knees and bend over, fighting to take in great big gulps of air. I wish, desperately, to move, to stand up, to pace, to *do something*, but I am afraid of losing my bearings. I close my eyes and the panic ebbs somewhat, as if my body is comfortable with being sightless as long as my eyes are closed.

What now? What does this mean for my journey to Guérande?

Indeed, what does it mean for my very life? Now I will have no choice but to sit behind the stone walls of the convent in that dark tomblike chamber for all the rest of my days.

No.

The word swims up from inside me like some ancient fish from the bottom of the deepest part of the sea. No. I will not sit here like a bump in the road, waiting for the abbess to come fetch me and escort me back to the convent, an obedient brood mare for her precious, endless visions.

I have tasted freedom and can never relinquish control of my life to others again.

But how can I go forward if I cannot see?

One step at a time. The words seep into my awareness like rain into parched ground, calming me somewhat.

Instead of allowing myself to despair, I will simply have to pray that my sight returns in the morning.

I grope along the boulder on my right until my hand comes into contact with my saddlebag. I walk my fingers along its bulk until they touch the thin leather straps and the cold metal of the buckles that hold my bedroll in place. It is easy enough to remove it from rest of the pack. I close my eyes again so I may concentrate on remembering my surroundings. I had secured Fortuna just beyond the northernmost tree. The other trees spread out in a half circle from

there. Clutching the bedroll in front of me like a softly padded shield so I do not break my nose if I miscalculate, I begin counting out the steps to the next tree, pleased when I feel the rough bark under my palms only two steps farther than I thought.

My sense of smell is stronger, whether from the Tears themselves or simply because I cannot see, I do not know, but I find that helps me as well, the sharp pungent scent of the sap guiding me to the next tree, a mere four steps ahead. Good. I am far enough away from Fortuna that she will not accidentally stomp on my head as I sleep.

Keeping the tree at my back, and the heat of the fire in front of me, I lower myself to the ground. With all the grace and precision of a performing bear, I clear away rocks and branches before unrolling the woolen blanket. When that is done, I sit back on my heels. Although the night is cold, perspiration trickles along my body from my efforts.

I am back from the road and hidden enough from view, and there is no moon tonight. Even so, I pray to Mortain, asking Him to let the darkness conceal me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I AWAKEN WITH THE GROUND beneath me rumbling like thunder in the far distance. I glance up at the sky to see if storm clouds have formed, cursing when only black nothingness greets me.

Slowly, I stand up. Fortuna snorts and stomps her foot. Another noise follows the first, the screech of an owl perhaps, or the cry of some small creature whose life has just been cut short.

The thundering grows louder and I hear Fortuna tossing her head and whinnying. That is not thunder, but horses. My heart slams against my ribs—the hunt.

I cock my ear, straining to hear better. No. Just one horse. A lone traveler, then. Although why anyone would be galloping so hard in the dead of night, I do not know. But if he is in such a hurry, he will likely pass by without seeing my camp. Especially now that the fire is dying.

I wait, poised in the darkness, listening carefully, surprised when the rider does not pass but instead turns off the road and heads in my direction. Quickly, I grope with my right hand until it closes around an arrow, then I snag my bow with my left. Slowly, I rise to my feet, keeping all my senses pinned on the approaching rider.

The hooves grow even louder as they draw near and I cannot help but wonder if it is my fear that makes them seem so loud or simply my hearing compensating for my lack of sight. Either way, I nock an arrow to my bow and wait.

When the horse explodes into the copse, it is all I can do not to release the arrow, but I will have only one shot—I'd best wait until I am certain I can make it count.

With a great blowing of breath and heaving of lungs, the horse barrels to a stop just outside the ring of boulders that surrounds my campsite. I hear the creak of a saddle and the swish of leather as someone dismounts. I consider calling out for him to identify himself, then realize I do not wish to give away my position or the element of surprise.

There is a crunch of heavy boots on the forest floor, and my skin draws tight across my bones as I wait.

His scent reaches me first: the rich clean scent of earth and spring leaves accompanied by the faint whiff of leather and horse. “*Balthazaar?*” His name

comes out part whisper and part prayer.

He does not answer me with so much as a grunt. I have never felt so vulnerable, so wary of where I am to place my feet. It is as if the world itself is now some huge trap I must carefully navigate. Because that so infuriates me, I lift my loaded bow and point it in his direction. His footsteps stop.

“What?” he asks. “What is wrong?”

The sound and timbre of his voice wraps itself around me and I give in to the sweet relief that flows through my limbs.

Do I tell him? No, not until I know why he is here. “I am just surprised to see you. That is all. Why are you here?”

“You said you would return. That you would meet me on the battlements. And instead, you ran away. Again.”

Though his voice thrums with his anger, it does not quite hide the faint note of pain that resides there as well. “And so you *hunted me down*?”

“No.” He sounds vaguely outraged. “I had business nearby.”

I cannot decide if my heart quickens with joy or apprehension. “You followed me.”

“I do *not* follow; I hunt.”

The sound of his voice is closer, but as I listen for the rustle of his boots upon the forest floor or the crunch of a twig under his boot heel, there is nothing. The man moves as quietly as a wraith, with no clank of weapon or creak of armor to help me pinpoint his location.

It is hard to pretend to keep my eyes focused on him when he moves so quietly, but I do not wish him to know that I am blind. I feel foolish and silly and would rather keep this secret from him. “I do not understand you. Sometimes I cannot tell if you hate me or wish to devour me.”

“Both,” he whispers, and I can feel the heat of him draw closer.

I open my mouth to tell him he is standing too close, but instead I find myself saying, “I am glad you are here.”

He grasps my arms with his hands—hard—and pulls me even closer so that our bodies touch and I can feel the swish of my skirts as they tangle around his legs.

“What spell have you cast over me that I have no choice but to gallop after you across the countryside like some lovesick hound?”

My heart tumbles excitedly at his words. “I thought you said you were not hunting me?”

“Hunting. Following.” Disgust at himself is thick in his voice. “Either way, I will have none of it.” He gives me a little shake with each word, as if he can

throw off the hold he claims that I have over him. And then, without any warning at all, he presses his lips against mine.

As his mouth covers my own, I find myself reeling, as if I have been tipped backward and am falling, falling, so that even the stars in the sky are spinning. His lips are warm and soft, the unrelenting pull of his desire for me as strong as the pull of the waves against the sand.

It is not like practicing with Ismae, or even Sybella. It is not like any of the first kisses I have imagined over the years. It is far, far better and more wondrous, and yet terrifying as well, like one of the raging storms that pound against the convent walls in the winter, threatening to breach its defenses. So too does this kiss threaten something deep within me that I cannot even name.

Then, just as suddenly, he sets me away from him, leaving the entire front of my body cold and bereft and wanting *more*. There is a faint rustle of his cloak as he steps back from me. I long to put my fingers to my lips. To see if they feel as different on the outside as I do on the inside. Then I remember who—and what—he is. “Will you pay for that?” I ask, recalling the hellequin and their talk of the price of temptation.

“You would charge me for a kiss?”

I long to reach out and smack him—but I would have to be able to see him first. Instead, I turn toward the faint heat of the dying fire and hold my hands out over it. “No, you dolt. I was worried that giving in to temptation would extend your penance.”

There is a moment of silence before he finally speaks. “I follow you for twelve leagues, accost you in the dead of night, and you are worried about my penance?”

I sniff. “You did not accost me; I *let* you kiss me, make no mistake.”

For some reason, I feel certain that he smiles, although I cannot hear such a thing. I wonder briefly if it is quick and sharp or slow and easy. “Thank you for that clarification, my lady.”

His eyes linger on me—I can feel it just as surely as I could his touch mere moments ago—and I wish to hide myself from them. But any move I make would give away my situation.

“What is wrong with you?” he asks softly.

“Nothing.” I turn my back to him then, not caring how childish it might seem.

“But there is. Come here.” He reaches out and snags my chin with his fingers, and he gently pulls my face back around. I look up at where I desperately hope his eyes are.

“You are blind.”

It is all I can do to keep from reaching up and feeling my face. “How can you tell? Are my eyes scarred?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“No, they are fine.” The warmth and softness in his voice sends a shiver down my spine.

He leans in and I expect a kiss, but instead, he sniffs. Then sniffs again. Just when I think he will sniff a third time, he leans down and captures my lips again in an all too brief kiss. “Tell me.”

And so I do. Leaving out the part about the Tears being stolen.

As I tell my tale, I realize he listens to me in a way that few others do. I can *feel* him listening, and I fear he hears things I do not even know I am saying.

When I am done, he does not speak for a long while. The night is so quiet I imagine I can hear the stars passing across the sky. “Were you so very hungry to experience the world as Mortain does?” he finally asks.

And even though I fear it will hurt him, I cannot lie. “Yes.”

There is the whisper of thick wool as he shifts, and I feel his hand take mine, the cool leather of his glove smooth against my palm. “Most in your situation would simply give up, turn back.” He tugs gently on my hand, and there is a faint rustle of leaves as he sits down on the forest floor.

Since he will not release my hand, I lower myself to the ground. “I have always been willful and stubborn. It is one of my greatest sins.”

“But is it a sin? If it allows you to survive? Endure? Prevail?”

I am absurdly warmed by his words. So he will not see this, I snort derisively. “I do not know that this”—I gesture to my blind self sitting in my camp in the middle of nowhere—“qualifies as *prevailing*.”

He kisses my brow, and for some reason it makes me want to weep.

“For now, tonight, it is prevailing. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, but that is always the case, is it not?” He puts his arm around me and draws me against his chest.

I hold very still. “Are you going to seduce me?” I ask, although in truth, it would not be much of a seduction, as I need little convincing.

He leans in and rubs his cheek against my hair. “Would you like me to?”

Yes, I think, but do not—quite—manage to say.

He plants a kiss behind my ear, then sighs. “Alas, no.” I hear the smile in his voice. “Not when you must spend the entire day tomorrow on horseback. I am not that selfish. Not quite.”

When the full meaning of his words sink in, I blush so furiously I give off more heat than the fire, and Balthazaar laughs. Because it is only the second time I have ever heard him do so, I do not even mind—much—that it was at my expense.

“Sleep,” he whispers softly. “I will watch over you till morning, and then we can decide what to do.”

We. Not you, but we. I know I should resent that he presumes so much, but instead, I hold it close, like a promise.

“Be safe, my love,” a voice murmurs. Then I feel the press of cool lips upon my eyelids.

At the shock of his touch, I wrench my eyes open. The sun is just beginning to shine through the trees, and I swear that I can still feel the hellequin’s body against my own, the bite of the chain mail he wears sharp against my back. But when I turn to look at him, he is gone.

That is when I realize I can see. Relief surges through me, so overpowering that I am nearly dizzy with it.

In the distance, I hear the sound of galloping hooves. When I look up, I see that he has left. Confusion and hurt swell up inside, tightening my throat.

No. I will not feel any of those things for him. I will not let myself get waylaid by emotions. Not for him or for the abbess. My god’s will is my sole purpose right now. And I’m embarrassed that Balthazaar could make me forget that. I have an assignment. An assignment my very future hangs on, and I will not let Balthazaar cloud my mind.

It occurs to me that he too could have been a test, sent by Mortain. I reach down and begin collecting my bedroll. If he was, then I am getting heartily sick of these tests. If Mortain does not understand my dedication by now, then surely there is nothing more I can do that will prove it to Him.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ALONE, I APPROACH THE GATE to Guérande, the looming height of the two towers on either side of it making me feel small and insignificant. The guard manning the gate eyes me as I pass, and I take a coin from my purse and toss it to him. “Which is the best inn for the night?” I ask.

“The Hammer and Cross, if they’re not full up.”

I glance around to the nearly empty streets. “Would they be?”

He shakes his head. “Few enough travelers right now. There should be rooms available.”

“Thank you.”

Guérande is a smaller town than Rennes, with fewer people and less bustle—at least, at this time of night. A lone woman hurries down the street with her market basket. Two merchants walk side by side with their heads bent close in conversation.

The inn is a sturdy stone building set back slightly from the street. A wooden sign painted with a picture of a blacksmith’s hammer and Saint Cissonius’s cross hangs above it. As I steer Fortuna into the courtyard, a stable boy no older than Florette hurries forward to take the reins. “Take especially good care of her,” I tell him as I dismount. “She has ridden hard these last two days.”

When I enter the inn, I am engulfed by the scents of roasting meat, smoke, wine, and the fresh rushes on the floor. The innkeeper, a thick man built like a bear and nearly as furry, looks up at my arrival. His head and face are covered in coarse brown hair, and his cheeks are reddened from his work. His eyes are wary, but not unkind. He wipes his hands on his leather apron and comes to greet me. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for a place to pass the night. Possibly two. Have you room?”

“Aye. If you’ve coin.”

“I do.” I pull two from the purse at my waist and hold them out to him.

The wariness leaves his eyes as he plucks the coins from my fingers. “Would you like some supper as well?”

“I would, thank you.”

After a satisfying meal in the common room, I retire to my chamber, fully expecting to drop into sleep like a stone into a river. But instead, I toss and turn restlessly.

It is not, I tell myself, because I miss the hellequin.

The next morning I am up early, grab some bread and cheese from the common room, then venture out into the streets of Guérande. They are much busier now, with people scurrying everywhere about their business. It is easy enough to blend in with the crowd. I pause and admire a ribbon seller's wares, pretend to consider purchasing one of the scrawny chickens at the market, but all the while I am forming a map of the city in my mind. The cathedral acts as my true north as I get a feel for the streets of the city and the gates that they lead to. When all of that is firmly fixed in my mind, I make my way to the palace and spend the rest of the day committing the entrances, the exits, and the comings and goings of the sentries to memory. I will return tonight, under the cloak of darkness, and do what must be done.

Back at the inn, I have an early supper, then retire to my room and wait. When it is three hours after nightfall, I carefully arm myself with every weapon I possess, slip the vials of poison into the pouch at my waist, and sling my quiver over my shoulder. I carry it lower than is comfortable, but this way it will be hidden by my cloak.

As I make my way down the narrow staircase, I realize that the common room is quiet—unnaturally quiet. I lighten my footsteps on the stairs to make as little noise as possible and draw one of the knives from its sheath. When I reach the landing, I slowly ease into the main room.

The innkeeper is holding a blacksmith's hammer and scowling at the front door. Following his gaze, I see a tall, darkly cloaked figure glaring back, the reek of the Underworld rolling off him like a mist from the sea and filling the entire room with darkness and foreboding.

I blink, wondering briefly if hellequin can be summoned merely by allowing oneself to think of them.

"Let me through." Balthazaar's voice is deep and low and altogether threatening.

"You're not coming into my establishment." The innkeeper makes the sign of the cross with his right hand. He holds the handle of the hammer in a loose grip with his other hand and hefts it over his shoulder.

Muttering an oath, I shove my knife back in its sheath and hurry forward, my mind scrambling for some way I can pour oil on these troubled waters. "My lord?" I make my voice young and light and breathless. "I told you I would come to you." I am hardly even aware of what I am babbling, I know only that I must create some distraction that will keep these two from coming to blows.

Slowly taking his gaze from the bristling innkeeper, Balthazaar looks at me, an entire thunderstorm of emotion roiling in his eyes. I glance nervously around us, then lower my voice, as if ashamed. “I . . . I did not wish to meet you here. In front of others, my lord,” I whisper. As I drop my gaze and pick at my skirt, I see a look of understanding—and disgust—flare in the innkeeper’s face, but the tension across his shoulders lessens somewhat and he lowers the hammer a fraction of an inch.

“You know this man?”

“Oh, yes!” I step forward to subtly insert myself between the two men. Giddy—I would be giddy if I were meeting a lover. I stare up at Balthazaar with open admiration. If I did not think that the blacksmith’s life hung in the balance, I’m fairly certain I would sicken myself. “I am ready to leave, my lord.”

He stares down and blinks, his dark eyes unreadable. He nods once, grabs my arm, then hauls me toward the door.

I link my arm through his and snuggle up against him so that it will look more like he is escorting me and less like he is hauling me off to be ravished or dragged to the Underworld. “I will be back shortly,” I call to the innkeeper.

“We lock the doors at the third bell and do not open them again till morning. If you’re not back by then, do not bother.”

“Thank you! I will be back before the third bell rings.” And then we are at the door. Balthazaar flings it open, shoves me out into the night, and shuts it behind us. Before I can berate him for creating such a scene, he presses me up against the wall, lowers his head, and captures my lips with his.

The force of it fair steals my breath and for a moment, I can do nothing but stand there and reel. Taking advantage of my inaction, he wraps his arm around me, pulling me closer, as if even the small space between us is too much. Luckily, the movement brings me back to my senses, and I—less forcefully than I should—shove him away. “What are you doing here?”

He stares down at me, and I must force myself to look away for fear I will lose myself in that gaze once again. “Were you not acting my lover just then?”

I glance around to see if anyone has witnessed our display. Luckily, we are alone in the courtyard, most likely because his enormous black stallion is tossing his head and pawing at the ground like the creature from the Underworld he is. “Yes, you lummoX, but only so you and the innkeeper would not come to blows. Now, get off me. I have work to do.” I want to ask him why he left me and where he went, but refuse to let those questions pass my lips. Lips that still feel the press of his upon them.

“I finished my work in Nantes,” he says.

My head snaps up and I half fear he has read my mind.

“That is what I am doing here.”

I push away from the wall. “What business did you have in Nantes?”

“A new hellequin has been sworn to our service.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

Because lies fall as easily from his lips as ripe fruit from a tree, I press further. “What sins is he seeking redemption from?”

“He was overcome with lust for his own sister, and yet died trying to protect her. In his moment of death, he begged for a chance to redeem himself, and so it has been granted.”

“So that is why you left with not so much as a by-your-leave.”

His voice softens. “I said goodbye.”

So. That was no dream, then. I study him suspiciously. “You left not even knowing if my sight had returned.”

“But it had.”

And how could he know that? “*Be safe, my love,*” a voice murmurs. *Then I feel the press of cool lips upon my eyelids.* I scoff at my suspicions. Hellequin have no such powers. It was but a coincidence. My body finally adjusted to the power of the Tears, that is all. “Well, I am fine now, as you can see. And I have work to do.”

“I will accompany you.”

Merde, that is all I need, him looking over my shoulder. “You will not! My work is meant to be done in private.”

“As is mine, and yet you witnessed it for nearly three weeks.”

“At *your* invitation.”

“Besides, what if you go blind again? Or lose your hearing? Or power of speech? Then you will need my help.” There is a faint note of smug satisfaction in his voice.

I nearly shove him again in frustration, but then I see how the spark of humor lights up his eyes, lifting the despair and making them nearly human. And just like that, my anger dissipates. “Very well. But you must do as I tell you.”

He places a hand on his chest. “Always.”

I roll my eyes.

Crunard is being held in the northeast gate tower. As we head through the nearly deserted streets of Guérande, I keep a careful eye out for the city watch. Beside me, the hellequin moves as quietly as a wraith. Indeed, the shadows of the night seem to pool around him, as if his very presence attracts them. It is most

unsettling and it takes every ounce of training I have to push it out of my mind and concentrate on the task at hand.

I am ready for this. I have spent my entire life preparing for this moment, this chance to serve Mortain. Instead of sitting walled up in some suffocating tomb using nothing of who I am to serve Him, now every skill I possess, every bit of intellect, every moment of training, will be brought to bear on this task, and in doing this, I will dedicate my life to His service.

If He will have me.

I do not know what I will do if the life I want is denied me, but the thought is less bleak now than it once was. I tell myself that has nothing to do with the hellequin at my side. Or if it does, it is only because I have learned through him just how far Mortain's grace and mercy can extend.

I ignore his dark brooding presence at my elbow and review everything I have learned about marques—about how and where they appear and the different ways in which Mortain's daughters see them. I know that Ismae has seen marques since she was young and that they appear to her in ways that suggest the method of death. Sybella only sees them on the victim's forehead, and she did not see that until after she was administered the Tears.

There are initiates who never see marques at all, although those are rare. That is why we rely so heavily on the seeress, and it is no small part of why I am so terrified of having that rest on my shoulders—I cannot believe that I am to be His voice in this world.

When we reach the gate tower, I put my hand out to stop the hellequin. Just as I do, two guards emerge from the door. Before I can react, the hellequin grabs me by the shoulders and spins me around so that my back is against the wall. Leaning over me, he presses our bodies together, his cloak swirling forward with the movement and wrapping itself around my legs. Then he brings his hooded head down toward mine, so close I think he plans to kiss me again, and while I am annoyed with his actions, my traitorous heart gives a small, eager leap. Just as I prepare to wrench away from him, he whispers in my ear, "Hold still."

I curse my own loss of focus. He is right. It is one of the first lessons we learn at the convent, how to meld with the shadows. And I would have remembered it if I hadn't been so distracted by the idea of him kissing me again. There is a good chance the sentries will not see us, and if they do, they will likely think it is merely some soldier's dalliance.

I feel Balthazaar's heart beating against my own as the two soldiers pass by. They are close enough that the hellequin could reach out and touch them if he wished, but they do not so much as look in our direction. When they have passed and their footsteps no longer echo on the cobblestones, Balthazaar steps away.

“I told you you would have need of me.”

I avoid his eyes as I adjust my skirts. “I could have escaped their notice equally well on my own. I have been sneaking and skulking since I was a child, and am very good at it. Now, are you ready to play your part?” It was the price I demanded if he insisted on coming with me.

“I still say you would make a better distraction than I.”

I give him a grin that is all teeth and little humor. “Yes, but I have the sleeping draft and you do not.” I give him a push, which is like pushing a stone wall. He makes certain I know this by resisting a long moment before finally choosing to step back.

I squelch the urge to reach out and kick him.

As he slips away, I keep myself from asking him what he plans to do to distract the guards. Instead, I slide along the gate-tower wall, ease myself toward the guard room, then slip inside. Torches flicker lazily in their iron sconces, causing long shadows to dance in the dim light. I move quickly to the table where the men had been sitting, their dice still lying upon its surface. Quickly, I remove the small paper of fine white powder from the cuff of my sleeve, tap a sprinkle into each cup, then pour the rest into the jug. Before I can do more than that, I hear the footsteps of the returning men.

I step back into the shadows near the corner of the room, grateful for the sputtering torch light that is barely enough to see the dice by.

And then I wait.

The men take their seats. One of them says something, laughs, then lifts his cup and takes a swig of wine. As he lifts the jug to pour himself more, his companion drains his cup and holds it out to be filled as well. Some of the tension in my shoulders relaxes and I lean back against the wall, waiting for the draft to do its work.

I do not know if it takes longer than it should or if it is just very hard to wait while crouching in the shadows. At last, their heads nod, and first one, then the other, slumps over the table, the movement causing the dice to fall to the floor.

Victory wells up within me. Now I may face Crunard.

Slowly, I turn and walk from the antechamber to the short narrow hallway beyond, then pause. There are no doors here, only grilles of ironwork, much like the portcullis. A lone man sits behind one of them. For all that he is in need of a haircut and his beard a trim, I recognize him immediately from his visits to the convent.

Feeling my eyes upon him, he looks up. Slowly, he leans back against the wall, one side of his mouth lifting in a bitter smile. “I wondered when she would

send someone after me. It is not like her to waste an opportunity when one of her opponents has been weakened.”

“I am not sent by the duchess,” I tell him as I search his face for any hint of the dark smudge that I am so desperately praying for.

“I know. You are sent by the abbess of Saint Mortain.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

AT HIS WORDS, everything inside me grows still. “You know why I am here?”

“Perhaps even better than you do.”

His words prick at something uncomfortable in me. “What do you mean?” That I must ask this question rankles me, but my need to know what hidden web is being woven is greater than my pride.

He shrugs, a surprisingly elegant gesture. “It means that I understand better than you why you have been sent. You think you are on Mortain’s business, but you are not. You are here on hers.”

I force out a laugh and hope it does not sound as false to his ears as it does to mine. “You are facing death, my lord. It is not surprising that you would say anything you can think of to stay my hand.”

He shifts then, rises to his feet. Good! If he comes closer to the light, mayhap I will see a cursed marque. I silently raise my bow.

He ignores the arrow pointed straight at his chest and stands just on the other side of the iron bars. “Did she tell you why I must die?”

“You betrayed the duchess, did everything in your power to hand our kingdom over to the French regent. I do not think there is much to explain.”

“Your fellow handmaiden chose not to kill me once. Perhaps she knew something you did not?”

My heart twists painfully. “Matelaine?”

He frowns slightly. “No, Ismae. When she first discovered I was the one behind the plots here at court, she chose not to exact justice. Have you asked yourself why?”

Even though there is hardly any room, I take a step closer. “No. I was too busy trying to puzzle out why you had killed the second handmaiden sent after you. Surely you recognize that now, in addition to your crimes against the kingdom, you have committed crimes against Mortain.”

His frowns deepens and he appears genuinely puzzled. “A second handmaiden?”

I laugh again. “Playing dumb will not help you, not when I stand here with an arrow pointed at your black heart.”

He spreads his hands wide, as if giving me a clear shot at his chest. “If you think I am eager to cling to this life when all I have ever cared for is gone—my

family, my lands, my honor—then you are sadly mistaken.” Crunard grips the bars with his hands. “I welcome death,” he whispers.

“Then you shall have it,” I whisper back. But even though every fiber of my being wishes to see this man dead for what he did to Matelaine—and to the duchess—I find I cannot release the arrow.

He leans forward. “Do you see one of your precious marques on me?”

Shock travels along my bones that he would know of such things. “It is probably hidden by your clothing.” I motion with the bow. “Strip.” While I am eager to see if he bears a marque, I am equally eager to wipe the smug certainty from his face.

There is a whisper of movement to my left as I feel Balthazaar unfold himself from the shadows, and I wonder how long he has been there. He leans close enough to whisper in my ear. “Let me have him.”

Scowling, I turn my arrow on him. “He is mine.”

Balthazaar holds his hands up in a placating gesture and slips back into the shadows. I return my attention to Crunard and watch as he pulls off his doublet, then unlaces his linen shirt and pulls it over his head. His chest is still broad with muscle, even though the hair upon it has gone white. But there is no marque.

Before I can respond to that stark fact, the hellequin grabs my arm and pulls me aside, out of Crunard’s hearing. “Do you see a marque on him?”

“No,” I admit, making no effort to hide my disgust. Hopefully, his accursedly sharp hearing will not pick up on the despair I feel—that even with the Tears, I do not possess this most basic of skills.

“Have you seen all you need to see?” Crunard’s dry voice cuts through my thoughts. “For it is cold and damp and I would rather not catch a fever and die that way. Better for you to simply kill me with your arrow now. It would be a far more merciful death.”

“You assume that you deserve mercy,” I snap, “when I am sure of no such thing. And yes, you may put your clothes back on.”

While he dresses, I ponder my options.

I cannot say with utter certainty that Crunard is meant to die. If Mortain Himself or the duchess’s justice demands it, that would be one thing, but I do not trust the abbess’s word that he must die. Especially with the unsubtle insinuations Crunard is throwing around.

I huff out a sigh. “Very well.” At Balthazaar’s eager look, I give him a shove, releasing some of that frustration on him. “No, you will *not* hunt him,” I say. “But I will take him back to Rennes to face the duchess’s justice, and she can decide his fate. Unless Mortain marques him on the way. Then I will kill him.”

The hellequin studies me a moment and then gives a single nod. "So be it," he says.

My mind spins furiously, devising a plan. It will be easy enough to get Crunard free of his prison. Harder to get him out of the city. I turn to Crunard, who is watching us both with hungry eyes. "As you heard, you will be coming with us. But if you make one noise when you should not, make any attempt to escape, I will cheerfully kill you, then drag your body back to the abbess and the duchess. Is that clear?"

He nods. "Most clear, demoiselle."

In the end, I decide that moving quickly is better than sitting around devising the perfect plan. I slip back out to the antechamber and the two drugged guards, remove the key from the jailor's belt, then return to Crunard's cell. As I fit the key into the lock, I pause, for some reason reminded of the old tale of the girl whose curiosity drove her to open a box that let loose all sorts of evils upon the world. I too feel as if I am on the brink of answers, answers that have the power to move through my life like a storm surge. I cannot help but wonder what will be left when I am on the other side.

"Come along," I tell him, slipping one of my knives into my hand where he can see it. "And quietly."

He nods, then steps out of his prison slowly, as if unable to believe I will not slam the door in his face. I turn to Balthazaar. "Tie his hands behind his back."

After a moment's hesitation, Crunard reluctantly turns around. As the hellequin tends to that, I close the door, lock it, then toss the keys inside. At his raised eyebrow, I shrug. "It will give them something to puzzle over." Then I grab Crunard's arm and shove him in front of me. Balthazaar falls into step behind us like a sinister shadow.

Crunard spares one glance at the two guards slumped over the table, their dice on the floor. "Did you kill them?" he asks.

"Yes," I lie, hoping he will think me ruthless and therefore be less inclined to attempt escape. "Now, hush and act the contrite prisoner, or I will kill you as well."

My plan, such as it is, is to pretend we have been charged with transferring the prisoner to Rennes, where he is to stand trial for his crimes. All the lessons on subterfuge and lying that have served me so well at the convent will serve me equally well here. Or so I hope.

As we reach the landing, I pause, listening for the sentries. Still only two, I think. Very well. I glance over at the hellequin. "You are my escort, provided to me by the duchess herself."

He raises one darkly arched brow, then nods. I draw a deep breath, straighten my shoulders, lift my chin, then step outside.

At once, the two sentries spring to attention, raising their weapons in spite of their surprise. "Halt!" the taller one cries, his eyes widening when he recognizes Crunard.

I scowl at them, letting the men know just how much they annoy me. "Delay us at your own risk," I warn.

They glance at each other.

"We are sent to bring the prisoner to Rennes to stand trial for his crimes. If you detain us, you are delaying the duchess's own business."

Finally, unable to help himself, the taller one asks, "How did you get in there?"

I meet his gaze, unflinching. "We walked right past you, and you can be certain your lack of attention to your duties will not go unmentioned."

The shorter one glances down at my hand—the one that does not hold the knife. "Do you have orders of some kind?" It may be my imagination, but I think I detect a new note of respect in his voice.

I shove Crunard a short distance from me so they can see my attire. "Do you dare to question one of Mortain's own?"

The taller guard crosses himself, the superstitious gesture grating on me, but the shorter guard gives a small bow.

"Besides, the guards below had no problem letting us through. Perhaps you should consult with them."

They pause a long moment, then finally relent. "Very well, demoiselle," the taller one says. "You may be on your way. I have no wish to keep this traitor from his rightful punishment."

I nod regally. "In the name of Mortain, I thank you."

As we step out of earshot of the guards, I feel the hellequin lean in close. "You take great pleasure in throwing that name around, don't you?"

I swat at him, disappointed when I miss hitting his long nose. "You may go now. I have no more need of your services."

"Not a chance," he says, and I fear I can hear amusement in his voice. "Besides, you will need assistance getting him back to Rennes. In truth, you will need assistance getting him out of the city, no?"

And though I wish to argue and tell him he is wrong, I am not willing to jeopardize my prisoner for my pride. "I could manage on my own, but if you insist on hanging about, then you'd best make yourself useful. Return to the inn and collect my saddlebag from my room and then get our horses. If you could find a third horse, that would be most beneficial."

“And you? What will you do?”

“I am going to get him out of the city gates. We will meet on the outside, near the copse of trees just in sight of the bridge.”

Balthazaar does not even hesitate, simply nods his agreement, and I am reluctantly impressed. Getting two horses, much less three, through the city gates at this hour will be no small feat. I have the far easier task with Crunard.

Once the hellequin has disappeared down the street, I turn to Crunard. “What is the easiest way to get out of the city when the main gate is closed?”

“There is a sally port near the north tower. It is usually only guarded by one man and will be our best chance.”

I stare into his face, trying to determine if he is telling the truth or sending me into a trap.

“It is no lie I tell you, demoiselle. You are my only hope for freedom, and I will not jeopardize it.”

In the end, I have no choice but to trust him, and I am rewarded by the truth of his words. There is but one lone guard on duty. Even better, he is dozing. I glance at Crunard. “Truly, this city’s security is lacking.”

He shrugs. “The duchess is not here. There is no one worth guarding. And they have never particularly cared who got out. It was always preventing someone from getting in that they focused on.”

“Are they not worried that the French will attempt to take the town?”

“I do not know,” he says, his eyes glittering with something sharp. “They no longer include me in their counsel.”

We are fortunate that there is enough moonlight from the crescent moon for us to make our way to the copse of trees without stumbling or breaking an ankle. As we walk, I try to assess Crunard’s movement and determine how old he is and how much his imprisonment has sapped his strength. He does not appear to be ill treated or half starved, which is a relief, as he will not hinder our travel that way.

When we reach the agreed-upon meeting place, I am unsurprised to find Balthazaar already there astride his demon spawn of a horse, holding Fortuna’s reins as well as those of another horse I have never seen. It even sports a fine saddle. I almost ask how he acquired it, then think better of it. “I do not expect to be pursued—at least, not until the guards learn that I was not officially sent, but we should be well behind the gates of Rennes by then, so I am not overly concerned. Even so, I think it best if we put a few hours’ ride between us and the city immediately.” I glance over at Crunard. He is old, but he has also had weeks of rest in his prison and surely he is as eager as I to put some distance between

himself and the city. He gives a nod of assent, then turns and motions with his arms that I should untie him.

“Surely a seasoned soldier such as yourself is able to ride a horse with your hands tied.”

He glances at me over his shoulder. “Ride, yes. Mount one, no.”

Unfortunately, he is right. I glance at Balthazaar. “Draw your sword.”

He gives a mock bow in his saddle. “With pleasure, my lady.” The ring of steel being unsheathed sounds loud in the quiet darkness. “What would you have me do with it?”

“Be certain he does not try to escape once I untie him.”

“You do not mean to give him free rein?”

“Only long enough to get on his horse.” Drawing my knife, I step forward and use the tip of it to loosen the knots of the rope that binds Crunard’s wrists, careful to avoid nicking his flesh. When I am done, I keep the knife pointed at him. “Get up. Then once you are settled, bring your wrists in front of you and lean down so that I may reach them.”

He stares at me a long moment. “What if I gave you my word that I will not attempt to escape? I am just as eager to be gone from this city as you are.”

“Gone from this city, yes, but I am not at all convinced you wish to face the duchess’s justice. Besides, why would I trust the word of a confirmed traitor?”

After another moment of hesitation, he does what I ask. I hope he will not argue every step of the way, else it will be a most tedious journey. Perhaps I shall have to gag him.

Once he is settled and retied, I mount Fortuna, glad to have her solid, friendly bulk beneath me once more. I hold out my hand to the hellequin so that I may take my own reins and Crunard’s as well. He hands me mine but does not release Crunard’s. “Let me lead him,” he says, sounding surprisingly like Aveline when she is eager for some task that she knows will be denied her.

I bark out a laugh. “I think not.”

“I would not toy with him. Much,” the hellequin grumbles.

“No.” I hold my hand out, and with great reluctance, he gives the reins to me.

I secure Crunard’s reins to my saddle, then nudge Fortuna to the open road.

“So how do you know of the marques?” I finally ask when we have been traveling a while. “That is a well-guarded secret of Mortain’s.”

“As the liaison between the convent and the Breton court, I have worked closely with the abbess for many years. Of a necessity, we have had to share information with each other so that we could ensure no mistakes were made.”

“And yet, not only were mistakes made, but you betrayed the duchess and every measure of trust the abbess has put in you.” I make no effort to hide the

censure in my voice, and I wonder again at how the abbess came to judge this man so wrongly. “So, now that I have decided to spare your miserable life, tell me of how Matelaine died.”

“Who?”

I study his face for the signs of lying we have been taught to look for, but there are none. Or else he is an exceptionally accomplished liar. “The first assassin sent to kill you.”

“Other than Ismae, you are the first.”

“You are wrong,” I say firmly, hoping it is not I who am wrong, steered down a false path by the scheming abbess.

“What did she look like?” he asks softly.

“She was young. All of fifteen. Skin as pale as milk and bright red hair.”

“Ah,” he says, and I pounce.

“Tell me.”

There is a long moment of silence before he speaks. “Since you are hungry for information, as I am, I propose an exchange. A trade, if you will. I will answer one of your questions, and you will answer one of mine.”

Before I can respond, Balthazaar butts in. “Or we could play the game my way: If you do not simply answer her question, I will run you through with my sword.”

Crunard does not so much spare him a glance. “Have we a deal?”

“Be careful,” Balthazaar warns me. “He is toying with you, lulling you into a false sense of security.”

“Not that I do not agree, but what makes you think so?”

The hellequin glances over at Crunard, his face growing dark. “Let us just say that one hunter is easily able to recognize the tactics of another.”

I follow the direction of his scowl. “You’re jealous!” I am so surprised I scarce remember to keep my voice low.

He flinches at the word, then looks sorely affronted. “Jealous? Of that old man? Nay, it is just that if anyone is to hunt you, it should be me.”

A flutter of something both terrifying and thrilling moves low in my belly. I know him well enough now to recognize that when he appears to be disgusted with me, it is actually himself he is unhappy with. Before I can say anything, he puts his heels to his horse and, with a flapping of his dark cloak, draws to the front of our group.

I turn my thoughts back to Crunard’s proposal. I have no secrets to hide, and he appears to know nearly as much as I do as to how the convent operates. “Very well. We will trade. What do you know of Matelaine?”

“The truth is, I never met her,” Crunard says. When I open my mouth to protest, he raises his bound hands in an appeasing gesture. “However, one of the kitchen maids used to carry on a flirtation with one of my guards. She fits your description of this Matelaine.”

Matelaine. Flirting with a guard. Most likely so she could get close to Crunard.

“But I have not seen her in weeks,” Crunard adds.

“Because you recognized she was from the convent and killed her.”

“I have already said that I have not. I have nothing to gain from lying at this point.”

“Nevertheless, she is dead.” I stare at him, willing myself to see past the flesh and bone to his soul and discern whether or not he is telling the truth.

“How did she die?” he asks.

I look away. “I do not know. There were no marks on her body, no bruises, cuts, or injuries.”

“Surely the convent has ways of determining the cause of death.”

“True, but we cannot discern it from a glimpse of the body in a bone cart on the side of the road.”

Crunard’s eyes are narrowed in thought. “And she had nothing on her?”

“Only her gown.” She was wearing a plain gown, maid attire, now that I think about it. “And she was holding a white chess piece in her left hand.”

The skin around his eyes tightens imperceptibly, as does his mouth. “I do know how she died, then, and I fear it was naught but an accident,” he says gently. “She was merely caught in a trap set for someone else.”

“An accident,” I repeat hollowly. It was terrible enough that Matelaine had died on a mission she was not qualified to undertake. But to have her death be an accident makes it not only tragic but a waste.

Sensing my hesitation, Crunard continues. “If it is the truth you are after, perhaps you should ask yourself why I had access to Arduinna’s snare, the convent’s own poison. If it is the truth you are after, perhaps you should ask yourself why the abbess has sent you here now. Is there to be a trial? Does the duchess know? Duval? Do you truly know whose orders you are carrying out as you stand there and hand out death like God on Judgment Day?”

“You are guilty.”

“No,” he says dryly. “The man I sought to poison is very much alive.” He frowns, as if still unable to understand how that happened, and I think of Ismae and her gift and her love for Duval.

“Perhaps you do not know quite as many convent secrets as you think you do,” I tell him. “Now, what is your question? I would be done with you, at least

for now, but I will not go back on my promise.”

“What has the abbess told you of me?”

I am puzzled by the question, but even more so by his manner, which is almost tentative and seems out of character for him. “Nothing,” I say truthfully. “I know only that you were her liaison at court, but she never spoke of you. Not until she explained you were responsible for Matelaine’s death.”

He is quiet for a long moment before he speaks again. “Have you another question, demoiselle?” While Crunard’s words are most polite, there is an underlying tightness in his tone that perplexes me.

“No more for now,” I tell him. “Only a warning. If you annoy me too much, I *will* kill you, the abbess and Mortain’s justice be damned.”

At the sound of the god’s name, the hellequin quirks one eyebrow and holds up three fingers. It is the third time I have mentioned the god tonight. I glare at him, until he too falls silent.

Two leagues later, I call a halt for the night. Our horses need rest, even if we do not. It is a tedious camp, with Crunard making exaggerated, stilted movements, as if his bindings are cutting off his very life force, and the hellequin’s moroseness filling the small clearing like smoke from the stuttering fire. I do my best to ignore them both, get Fortuna settled, and locate a soft spot on which to pass the rest of the night.

In an attempt to give Balthazaar something to do beside glare at Crunard, I hand him a length of rope. “Here. Tie Crunard up so that he cannot escape during the night.”

Balthazaar visibly cheers at this, snapping the rope against his hands and carefully considering Crunard as he stalks toward him.

“I will not try to escape,” Crunard says. “There is no need to tie me up.”

“There is every need, as I do not trust you any more than I would a fox who has caught scent of a hen house. Your freedom calls to you so loudly that *I* can hear it singing in my ears. So, yes, we will tie you up.”

With a sigh, Crunard settles on the ground where the hellequin has pointed. “I have no bedroll,” Crunard observes.

I give a short laugh of disbelief. “I am not some maid to do your bidding and see to your comfort. You are a prisoner being escorted to a trial, a trial where you will very likely be sentenced to death. I care not how comfortable you are.” I glance around us. “It is warm enough that you won’t freeze, and there are no rain clouds nearby. Besides, surely a seasoned soldier such as yourself is well accustomed to a little hardship.”

Crunard's mouth draws into a tight, firm line. My words have displeased him, and I can see the wheels of his mind turning as he tries to determine how to make me pay for this slight.

I turn to Balthazaar. "Shall I take first watch, or shall you?"

He pauses in his tying. "Hark! What sound is that? Does the fair maid ask for my help?"

I fold my arms. "If I did not plan on using you, I would not have allowed you to accompany us. Now, shall I take first watch, or shall you?"

"I will, as my need for sleep is less than yours."

"Do I have your promise that you will not somehow manage to kill the prisoner while I sleep?"

He glances at me, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. "Do you trust me so little, then?"

"Let us just say that it is easy to recognize the tactics of one who is as eager to do Mortain's work as I am. Your word."

After a pause, he nods. "You have it."

Crunard protests. "I cannot believe you will take his word but not mine."

I shake out my bedroll with a loud snap. "He has had occasion to prove his worth to me—more than once. You have not. Now, hold your tongue, else I will have him gag you."

After that, there is blessed silence. But even once I have made myself as comfortable as the forest floor will allow, I cannot settle my mind. It is as restless as a horse who has scented a pack of wolves, and I would do well to heed its warning.

Chapter Thirty-Five

TWO DAYS LATER, WE REACH Rennes in the early afternoon. I do not wish to announce to all and sundry that I have brought a traitor into the city—at least, not until I better understand the nature of the orders I have been given. I glance over at Crunard. “Pull your hood as far forward as you can.”

He shoots me a questioning look, as if challenging me. “Don’t tell me your courage has failed you, demoiselle?”

I lean over so he can hear me more clearly. “Lest the townsfolk recognize you, pull you from your horse, and decide to administer the duchess’s justice on their own.”

He does as instructed.

We are not stopped at the gate, although one of the sentries gives Balthazaar a long hard look, but then he sees me and recognizes that I serve Mortain.

Our journey through the streets of the city is similarly unimpeded and people almost seem to make way before us—whether because of the faint sense of darkness that clings to Balthazaar as firmly as his cloak, his pawing, prancing stallion, or the fact that Crunard’s hands are tied, I cannot tell. Whatever the reason, by the time we reach the palace courtyard, a small crowd has gathered and follows us at a distance.

I angle my horse to block the sight of Crunard somewhat, then dismount. A groom hurries forward to take the reins, looking nervously at Balthazaar’s horse. The hellequin ignores him and speaks directly to me. “I do not think you will be needing my help anymore.”

“No. I do not think that I will.” I long to ask when—if—I will see him again. On the ramparts—perhaps even later tonight? But I do not.

He bows in his saddle, then turns his mount and canters out of the courtyard, causing grooms and the overly curious bystanders to scatter like ashes before the wind.

When I look away from Balthazaar’s departing figure, I find Crunard watching me. Before I can tell him to keep his bedamned eyes to himself, there is a small flurry of movement at the entrance to the palace, and a slim, black silhouette emerges from the door. It is the abbess, her hands clutched tightly in front of her, her gaze searching the courtyard. Seeing me, she relaxes somewhat and a welcoming smile touches her lips. As if she believes I have done precisely what she asked and now everything will be as it once was between us.

I smile back, but there is no warmth in it. Then I step out of the way to show her who I brought with me. When she sees Monsieur Crunard, a mask of anger slams into place.

But not before I see the glimmer of fear. She is not simply angry that Crunard is here—she is terrified.

Ismae comes running out of the palace just then and spots me immediately. If she is relieved that I have returned, she does not show it as plainly as the abbess. Or mayhap she simply had more faith in my abilities.

At the sight of Monsieur Crunard, her eyes widen in surprise. She lifts her skirts and hurries down the steps to join me in the courtyard. As she draws closer, her gaze goes again to Crunard, narrowing this time, and the heat of her glare reminds me of all that this man has done to betray his country and our convent. Unable to help myself, I search out the abbess once more, only to find she is no longer waiting upon the steps, but has returned inside.

I take Ismae's arm and pull her a short way from Crunard so he cannot hear us. "Is he marked?"

She glances at him again, her eyes raking over him in open disdain. "No. And why that is the case, I do not know. What will you do with him now that he is here?"

"Ismae, he knows things about the convent and the abbess. Things that may help us determine what game she is playing. He seems to think I was sent to kill him because the abbess wished to be rid of him rather than because of his actual crimes. And while it is not surprising that he would claim such a thing, if you see no mark on him, then that bears him out somewhat."

She nods reluctantly. "It at least warrants careful consideration."

"Can we put him in the dungeons here? It should not make any difference as to where he is imprisoned, should it?"

She pats my arm reassuringly. "If it does, we will find a way to turn it to our advantage. Let me escort you and help get him settled."

I look at her in surprise, and she laughs. "Oh, I do not mean to see to his comfort, only to be certain the guards know he is a prisoner and that he is to be well guarded."

I gratefully accept Ismae's offer, for I do not know where the dungeons are, nor do I know if the men would take an order from me. But mostly, I do not wish to appear a bumbling green fool under Crunard's sharp gaze that misses nothing. Every time I hesitate or fumble, I fear I have unwittingly given him some new weapon to use against me.

Once Crunard is safely locked behind a wood and iron door, Ismae and I make our way back to the palace proper, my mind churning like a water wheel.

“What are you thinking on so furiously?” Ismae asks.

“How to get the abbess to tell me the truth.”

Ismae laughs. “You may as well ask how to keep an ass from braying or a bird from flying. I am beginning to think she has lost the ability to tell a plain truth.”

“I fear you have the right of it. Perhaps I will simply claim that Crunard has told me everything and demand to know if it is true. As if I am giving her a chance to clear her name before I condemn her in my own mind.”

Ismae smiles. “You are frighteningly good at playing these games with her.”

“Only because I have done so my entire life,” I mutter. Just then, a page comes racing toward us, breathless as he skids to a stop.

“My lady,” he huffs out to Ismae. “You are to report to the duchess’s chambers immediately.”

Ismae grabs the boy’s shoulders. “Is it Princess Isabeau?” she asks, her fear for the young girl plain in her voice.

The page replies, “Oh no, my lady! It is Marshal Rieux. He is here and requesting an audience with the duchess.”

“Go,” I tell her. “I can find my own way to the abbess’s chambers.”

In answer, Ismae reaches out and grabs my hand. “No, come with me. Best you hear what is said as well. Besides, the abbess will no doubt already have been summoned.”

The duchess’s privy chamber is nearly full by the time we arrive. All of her councilors—Duval, Captain Dunois, Chancellor Montauban, Jean de Chalon, the bishop, and even Father Efram—are there. Ismae and I slip in unnoticed by most except for Duval, who appears to be attuned to Ismae’s presence like a bee to a flower, and the abbess, who notes my arrival with a look of dour disapproval.

Once the duchess is seated, the rest of her councilors take their seats. Ismae, Sybella, and I remain standing. Duval has us positioned just behind the duchess’s chair and motions us to expose our weapons. As I step into place beside Sybella, she reaches out and gives my arm a squeeze of greeting.

Then Marshal Rieux is announced and brought into the chamber. He is a tall man with an imposing manner and is dressed in an elegant doublet and cloak. “Your Grace,” he says with a deep bow. For all that he has come to worm his way back into the duchess’s good graces, it looks as if it pains him to bend his knee to her.

“Marshal Rieux.” The duchess tilts her head in greeting, her voice cool and distant.

“I am pleased to see you are well, Your Grace.” His words are awkwardly delivered but seem sincere nonetheless.

“With no thanks to you.” Duval throws the words down like a gauntlet.

Marshal Rieux shakes his head. “I had nothing to do with the trap d’Albret sprang before Nantes. We argued fiercely over it, and it is one of the many reasons he and I have parted ways.”

Duval glances at Sybella, who gives a tiny nod of confirmation. Rieux’s gaze follows the movement, his eyes growing wide when he sees who Duval is communicating with. “What is she doing here?”

“You have no authority to question those who serve me.” The duchess’s reprimand is swift and sharp and I wish to hug her for her staunch support of Sybella.

With some difficulty, Rieux swallows whatever further arguments he had been planning on making. “That is true, Your Grace, but she can also vouch for me. She was there and saw me arguing with d’Albret. We nearly came to blows over it. Tell them,” he demands.

All of us turn to look at Sybella, who studies him much as a cat deciding whether a skinny mouse is worth the effort. “It is true that you argued with him over that trap. But it is also true that you were at his side when he took Nantes, that you stood idly by while his men slaughtered innocent palace retainers and city folk.”

The room is as quiet as a tomb, and Rieux himself has gone pale as Sybella throws his crimes at his feet. “Yes, but what you cannot know—since you did not ride out on those sorties yourself—is that neither I nor my men participated. We had no idea his methods would be so brutal, else I would never have supported him in the first place.”

“You mean, else you never would have betrayed the duchess in the first place.” Duval’s voice is harder than stone.

Rieux turns to the duchess and speaks directly to her. “Your Grace, your father assigned me to guard over you, as both your tutor and your advisor.”

“A sacred duty that you not only abandoned, but betrayed.”

He takes a step forward, and as one, Sybella, Ismae, and I place our hands on our weapons. He stops. “Your Grace, it was but a play to force you to do what I thought best for you and the country. In my own way, I was being loyal to the duty your father had entrusted to me.”

“But you were not loyal to *me*.”

“I have never stopped being on your side,” he insists. “Which is why I left d’Albret once I understood the full scope of his plans. My troops and I have chased the French from three towns.”

“But how do we know you speak the truth?” Lord Duval asks. “How do we know you are not here simply because d’Albret is dead and you wish to throw your lot in with the stronger side now that the tide has turned?”

Marshal Rieux’s head snaps back to Duval. “D’Albret is dead?”

“As good as.”

The marshal looks over at Sybella, who gives a brief nod, confirming Duval’s words. He looks stunned for a moment, then shakes his head. “Though it pains me to say it of any man, that is probably a good thing, I fear.”

At his words, Lord Duval and Captain Dunois exchange a look. “So why are you here?” the captain asks.

Marshal Rieux looks up again, as if surprised they need ask. “Why, to offer my fealty to the duchess and serve her as marshal once more. This is no time for internal differences to divide us.”

“It was no time to be divided four months ago either.”

“And I have seen the error of my ways. I am asking for a second chance and offering you the not insignificant resources I have at my disposal.”

“How could we trust you again?” the duchess asks, and this time, her voice sounds young to my ears, as if there is as much heartbreak beneath her question as political calculation.

“I know that I will have to earn that trust back slowly, piece by agonizing piece, but I am asking for a chance to do so.”

It is the right answer, and Duval and Dunois exchange glances once more. “You cannot expect Her Grace to decide this immediately. She will need to think on it.”

“Of course. I await your pleasure, Your Grace. But do not wait too long, for of a certainty, the French regent will not.”

“Wait!” It is Sybella who speaks, drawing all eyes toward her. “Does that mean you know what plot d’Albret was hatching with the French regent?”

Rieux stares at her, surprise etched clearly on his face, as if he realizes he has just been granted an opportunity to make himself valuable. “And you do not?”

Sybella gives a sharp shake of her head, and Rieux turns back to the duchess. “D’Albret always claimed that if he could not have the duchy as his own, he would hand it over to the French regent. When he received word that Your Grace had been married by proxy to the Holy Roman emperor, he began negotiations with the French. He plans to hand over the city of Nantes to them.”

A collective gasp goes up around the room, and the duchess's small hands grow white as she grips the arms of her chair.

"That is the reason I am here, Your Grace. If we do not join forces, we shall surely fall."

The shocked silence that fills the room is louder than a hundred murmuring voices. Then, almost as one, all turn to look at Sybella, myself included.

Although she holds her head high and proud, I sense the tangle of feelings in her: anger, embarrassment, defiance, and shame. Instead of acknowledging any of those, she meets Duval's questioning gaze. "Well, now we know," she says.

"Are you certain—very certain, my lady—that you did not know this earlier?" It is Chalon who asks the question.

Before she can answer him, Beast turns on Chalon, who visibly blanches at the anger and heat he sees there. "I know you are not questioning the lady's loyalty, my lord, for she has done more than any of us here to ensure the duchess's and our kingdom's safety." Beast's voice is soft, polite even, but there is no mistaking the threat that underlies his every word.

The entire room watches silently as Chalon splutters out an apology. When he has finished, Sybella answers the question he posed.

"I did not," she says. "But I cannot say it surprises me, for it became clear that he was like an enraged child who would break a toy completely before allowing another to play with it."

I cannot help but think it is a frighteningly apt description of what Count d'Albret has done to our country.

Chapter Thirty-Six

CONTEMPLATING THE FULL WEIGHT OF what Rieux has told us, Duval begins stroking his chin. “We will need to know if the city is resisting, or if its citizens have accepted French rule as easily as they did d’Albret’s.”

Marshal Rieux shifts on his feet. “There are rumored to be small pockets of resistance, my lord, for while few understood that d’Albret was not acting with the full blessing of the duchess, most everyone knows that the French assuredly have no such blessing.”

“Do we know what they plan to do? Simply hold the town? Use it to launch their offensive?”

“No,” Rieux says. “D’Albret did not trust me with the full details of his plan.”

“Do we know if he made the deal with the French regent or the king himself?”

“Does it matter?” Chalon asks.

“It could, possibly. The regent, the king’s sister, has been in charge since their father’s death, and even though the king reached his majority two years ago, she still appears to be holding the reins. If they are not in agreement, or if the king is champing at the bit to take control on his own, perhaps we can use that to create some sort of wedge between them.”

“To what purpose?” the bishop asks.

Duval shrugs, then glances pointedly at Marshal Rieux. “To weaken them, as our wedges have weakened us. And perhaps to buy us enough time for an opportunity to present itself.”

“Buy us a miracle, you mean.”

Duval nods. “That is precisely what I mean. Opportunity, miracle—I welcome them all.”

“How do you propose to determine who is in charge?” Captain Dunois asks.

Beast’s voice rumbles through the room. “Do not even think of sending the Lady Sybella.”

Duval glances over at his friend. “It never crossed my mind,” he assures him.

Chancellor Montauban speaks for the first time. “But the information could prove most beneficial, as you have stated.”

“I will go.” Ismae’s quiet words cause the room to fall silent.

Duval looks at her as if she is mad. “No, you will not. We have others we can send. Besides, what of your duties to the duchess?”

Ismae nods at me. “Annith is here now, and she is more than capable of

serving the duchess in my stead. Indeed, she is far better suited for it than I.”

The two of them stare at each other a long moment before Ismae speaks. “This is what I am trained for,” she reminds him softly. “You cannot turn a wolf into a lap dog.”

Duval opens his mouth, then closes it, then opens it again. “We will speak of this later,” he finally says.

Ismae smiles. “We will, my lord.” And I have no doubt that she will be going to Nantes.

The meeting winds down quickly after that, in no small part because it is clear from the dark glances Duval keeps sending Ismae that he wishes to dissuade her from going. As for me, my thoughts are taken up with the abbess and what I will say to her once we are alone.

The duchess formally dismisses us with thanks for our counsel. As she stands, her eyes seek out mine and she smiles. “I look forward to having you as one of my ladies,” she says.

I drop a curtsy. “The honor is all mine, Your Grace.”

She smiles again and shifts her attention to her brother, releasing me from her presence. I turn to find the abbess has already quit the room so that I must hurry to catch up with her. There are enough other courtiers in the hallway that I do not wish to gallop after her, so instead I call out softly, “Reverend Mother! If it please you, I would have a word.” She halts her progress but does not turn to greet me.

When I reach her, I dip another curtsy. “I would speak with you of my trip to Guérande and what I learned there. I think you will find it as enlightening as I did.”

“I know everything I need to know about your trip.” The barely controlled fury in her voice fair blisters my skin. “You have failed in the duties Mortain set before you.”

I open my mouth to explain that Crunard was not marquée, but she does not let me so much as speak. “Clearly,” she continues, her voice low and heated, “I was correct in not sending you out on assignment earlier. Now leave me. I do not have time to discuss your mistakes in depth.” She glances over my shoulder, then gives me a sour smile. “Besides, I believe the duchess has need of you.”

Then she continues walking down the hall, her head held high, and I am left standing in her wake, all my questions and accusations rolling around like stones in a barrel with nowhere to go.

“Lady Annith?”

The duchess’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts, and I whirl around and sink into a deep curtsy. “Your Grace.”

“I would request you attend upon me and Isabeau, as Ismae wishes to argue with my brother over whether or not she will be going to Nantes.”

“But of course, Your Grace. It would be my honor.” I hope for Ismae’s sake that her arguments will prove more fruitful than mine have.

As I walk with the duchess back to her solar, she gives me an apologetic glance. “I am sorry if you have other pressing duties you wish to attend to.” I detect a faint note of curiosity in her voice and realize she is intrigued by my role at the convent. If only she knew how little I’ve truly done.

“Not at all, Your Grace. The reverend mother and I were just making arrangements to meet later.”

“Good.” She smiles, showing a charming dimple. “Isabeau has been begging for stories, and I have none. Perhaps you will have one or two.”

“But of course, Your Grace. I know a number of stories. How is her health, by the way?” I feel a sharp pang of guilt for having done nothing to help the young princess.

The dimple disappears. “She is holding steady and has grown no worse. Neither does she grow any better, however.”

We have arrived at the solar, and I follow the duchess into the room. Isabeau is snuggled deep in her bed, her skin nearly as pale as the snowy linen sheets, her eyes too large in her small, pointed face. She may not be any worse, but one does not need to serve Mortain to know that this child will never get any better. Her days are truly numbered.

The duchess motions me toward Isabeau, then goes to speak with the girl’s attendants. I sit myself down on a nearby stool and pull it close to the bed. We have not spent much time together, Isabeau and I, but I am immediately drawn to her fragility coupled with her valiant spirit. “I hear you are wishing for more stories. What story is your favorite?”

“My favorite is the one about how Amourna went to the Underworld to become its queen.”

Ah, how very clever of Ismae to tell her that story. What story should I tell? The younger girls at the convent love the story of the time Salonus, the god of mistakes, tricked Death, but I do not wish to give Isabeau false hope. Instead, I tell her the story of how Saint Brigantia outsmarted Camulos, the god of war and battle.

When I am done, she asks, “Did you know my sister is dedicated to Saint Brigantia?”

“No, but I am not surprised, for she is very smart.”

“Maybe she can outfox France, just as Saint Brigantia did.”

“If anyone can find a way,” I assure her, “it will be she.” Then I think of the tale I have not told her yet, one I’m sure she would dearly love to hear. “Have you heard the story of Saint Arduinna? Of how she came to a young ruler’s aid?”

Isabeau grows absolutely still, her eyes huge. “No,” she whispers.

“Well, once upon a time, a young woman ruled over our fair land. She was wise and kind and much loved by her people, but she was beset by enemies on all sides. Enemies in the north, enemies in the south, and especially enemies just across her eastern border.

“The young ruler had many resources at her disposal—a valiant army, a skilled navy, and many, many wise counselors to advise her.

“She also had something that no other ruler had ever had before, and that was a young sister who loved her with a love that was stronger than all those armies put together.” She ducks her head, but not before I see a small, pleased smile.

“The poor ruler’s enemies were great, and her problems many, so one night her young sister decided to take matters into her own hands. She snuck out of bed when no one was looking and crept down flights of stairs and long dark hallways to the small chapel.”

“Was she frightened?”

“She was terrified, but she was determined to do this for her sister. It was the only way she could think of to help. Finally, she arrived at the chapel. Once there, she placed an offering on the niche of Saint Arduinna and said the sacred prayer to invoke her protection.

“Then she crept back to bed, exhausted and made ill because of her nighttime journey.”

Isabeau coughs just then and looks faintly guilty.

“The stories do not say what sort of protection the sister wished for the young ruler. What do you imagine she prayed for?” I ask.

“Well.” Isabeau makes a great show of thinking upon the question, her face scrunched up and one small finger placed under her chin. “She had armies and knights to help with the fighting, so that probably was not it.”

Good, I think. They have been able to protect this child from knowing how dire our situation is.

“My guess would be that the girl was worried about her sister’s heart.”

“Her heart?”

“Yes. For the young ruler had no one to love, save for the little sister, and the sister wished for the young ruler to have someone to love in case . . . in case anything ever happened to her.”

I stare into Isabeau’s eyes and see that she knows full well that she is not long for this world. That she worries about her sister at a time like this is a testament

to her remarkable character.

“Well.” Unable to help myself, I reach out and smooth the silky strands of hair away from her face. “The ways of Arduinna are mysterious, but the goddess of love heard the young girl and accepted her offering. Shortly thereafter, she sent a handful of her best warriors to see what they could do to assist the young ruler.”

Isabeau settles back against the pillow, a small, satisfied smile upon her lips. “I know,” she says, surprising me, for I have made up the entire story on the spot as a way to tell her that the Arduinnites have come.

“How do you know?” I ask, in mock outrage. “How can you know the end to my story?”

She giggles, a truly delightful sound. “Because Father Efram told me.”

“He did?”

“Yes.” She looks around the room to see where her sister is. When she is certain we cannot be overheard, she leans forward slightly. “And he told me that you are who they sent.”

When the child has fallen asleep, I leave her side and cross the room to attend the duchess. At my approach, she looks up from her embroidery. “You are good with children, demoiselle.”

“I was raised in a convent full of motherless girls, many of them younger than me. I am used to their ways and their needs.”

“Did you know that is one of the options the French regent has offered me? To have me sealed away in a convent for the rest of my life?”

I raise my brows. “I had not heard that, Your Grace.”

“Oh, it is not their official position, of course. Officially, they have located several suitable husbands for me, nearly all of them over sixty and in possession of no more than half their original wits. It is either wed one of them or be sent to their convent, and I assure you, the convent the regent has in mind is not nearly as interesting as the one you serve.” She looks up at me suddenly. “Have you been satisfied with your life? Spending your days in prayer and devotion and service to your saint?”

Ah, and what do I tell her? That I thought I was until I learned that the abbess is corrupt and no longer trust anything she says? But, I remind myself, that is not the whole of it. “I have always wished to serve the Divine, Your Grace.”

“When did you first realize that was your life’s wish?”

That is harder to answer. Especially now when I must work to separate my own desires from those the convent has planted in me. But—no. Actually, it is not hard, for I remember the moment so clearly: it was when Mortain came to me, sat beside me, His gentle presence an inspiration, a comfort, and a source of

strength, and I realized that I wanted to be worthy of that presence, to be in that presence as much as possible. “Ever since I was old enough to have desires, that is what I wished to do. Serve Him with all my heart.” And now the abbess has torn everything asunder with her conniving, calculating plots and lies.

“I too have only ever wanted one thing since I was young—to serve my people as their leader. I too have loved my Church, and surely it is my faith that has seen me through these hard years. But more than my love of the Church, my love of Brittany has shaped my life, molded me. I have loved my people, been buoyed by their cheering, found strength in their faith in me, and been comforted by their warm regard. It is what I have been trained for, raised for, to be their leader and to see to their interests. But now—now I fear that their trust has been misplaced. I fear that I will not be worthy of the honor they have done me. Here I sit with war at our doorstep and the conviction that no matter what I do, I will have failed them.”

The despair in her voice pierces my heart, and I kneel beside her. “Your Grace, you have been left with very few choices, and none of them good. I am sure your people understand you are doing the best you can.”

“But will it be good enough?” she whispers.

And as I stare at her, this young girl whose father left her with an unstable kingdom, an empty treasury, and a surfeit of suitors, none of whom cared one fig for her beyond the riches she could bring to their coffers, I become angry. Just as I am angry on Matelaine’s behalf, I am suddenly furious for this girl—for that is all she is, a thirteen-year-old girl—whose guardians have abandoned her in pursuit of their own ambitions. “Your Grace, it is not you who have failed, but your father.” The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret them, for surely I am taking an egregious liberty.

But then she looks up at me with a faint glimmer of . . . hope? Relief? I do not know her well enough to understand what she is feeling. She stops stitching and closes her eyes for a moment. At first, I think she is struggling not to cry. But when she opens them again, I see that she is angry, furious, in fact, and struggling to rein it in. When she speaks, her voice is so soft I must lean in close to catch the words. “There are times when I am alone in my bed at night and cannot sleep for the fear and worry trying to claw their way out of my belly. On those nights I am so angry with my father.” She whispers, as if even now that he is dead, he might somehow hear her.

And suddenly, she is no longer my duchess or sovereign, but a young wounded thing, like those who arrive at the convent every year, and it is that girl that I try to speak to. “As you should be, Your Grace. We are given no choices in life—we must rely on our fathers or guardians to make them for us. And when

they choose poorly or make weak decisions, they risk destroying our entire lives with their folly. How can we not be angry?” By the time I finish talking, I am no longer certain whom I am talking about: the duchess or myself.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ONCE I HAVE BEEN DISMISSED, I return to my chambers. My conversation with the duchess has stirred up all my simmering anger and frustration, like muck at the bottom of a pond. Alone in the room, my breath comes fast, my fists clenching at my sides. Between Crunard's insinuations and my own confrontations with the abbess, I am drawing close—so close—to finally understanding what is at the heart of the abbess's plots and intrigues. Crunard knows more than he is telling. I do not know if this is some strange game being played between him and the abbess or if he knows even more about the convent than she does.

Of course, the simplest answer is the most painful one, that she is lying—has been lying—to me since the beginning.

Frustration bubbles up from deep inside, so hot and urgent I fear I will scream. Instead, I stride over to the clothes chest, lift the lid, and root through my meager belongings there. When my hand closes around the satin-smooth finish of lacquered wood, I pull the black box from the depths of the chest and carry it over to the window. Even in the bright light of the afternoon sun, I can find no seam, no joint, nothing to indicate how it can be opened. Other than by breaking it.

I take the box over to fireplace, place it on the hard stone hearth, and grab an iron poker from where it leans against the wall. I raise it up over my shoulder, then bring it down against the smooth unmarred surface.

It sinks in with a splintering crack. I place my foot on the box to hold it steady, then pull the poker back up and strike again. And again and again, until I am certain the noise will bring someone running. I toss the poker to the floor, then pick up the box and begin yanking the splintered wood away from the hole that I have made.

When there is an opening big enough, I shove my hand inside, ignoring the sting of splinters biting into my flesh. My fingers search, but I feel no parchment or vellum, only a slim rod of some sort. Slowly, I maneuver the thing around until I can extract it from the hole I have made.

It is long and thin, with a piece of chipped stone at one end. An arrow shaft, I realize, with some ancient arrowhead still attached. Not answers, then, but some musty relic. With a growl of frustration, I hurl the arrow onto the bed, then slam the box onto the floor, relishing the cracking sound it makes. It is all I can do to

resist grinding the wretched thing under my heel until it is naught but sawdust and ash.

Instead, I take a deep breath and force myself to a state of calm. The abbess refused to see me this afternoon, but she cannot put me off forever. I do not care with whom she is sequestered or what duties she is performing, I will force a meeting with her and find out what rotten core is at the heart of the twisted web she weaves. I am so close to *knowing*. It is as if I can put my hand out and feel the shape and contours of the lies, but I am unable to discern the whole of it.

I will meet with the abbess tomorrow, and this time, I will not be put off.

I am not able to get in to see her until the afternoon. It is late, and most people have retired to make ready for dinner, but not the abbess. She is still at work in her office. I rap once on the door. “Come in,” she calls out. Her invitation to enter surprises me—I had expected some resistance—but I step into her office, then shut the door firmly behind me.

At the loud click, she looks up, scowling when she sees it is me. “I did not send for you.”

“You also told me to kill Crunard, and I did not, so clearly my desire to follow your every order has waned somewhat.”

“You are making a grave mistake. Do you think I favor you so much that I will not punish you?”

“Do you honestly think that I care any longer? My need for answers—for the truth—has grown far greater than my need to please you. Now tell me,” I demand, “what lies between Crunard and yourself. Tell me why you have not sent me out until now. Tell me why you ordered him killed when he bears no marque at all.”

“You can see marques?” She studies me closely and I consider demanding to know what she put in the Tears that caused me to go blind. Except I am not certain enough that she is behind it to risk sharing that information with her. It would be too easy for her to use it against me.

“No. I cannot. But Ismae can, and once Crunard was here in Rennes, I had her look for me. What happened to Matelaine? Why was she gone so long if she was only to kill Crunard?”

Her mouth pinches in annoyance, but she answers me all the same. “It was a complex assignment. Everyone in Guérande was on edge, and the man was in prison. It took her a while to get into position to make her move.”

“You never saw a vision for her to kill Crunard, did you? She hesitated because she couldn’t see a marque on him either, and yet you ordered her to remain there.”

The abbess's nostrils flare. At first I think it is in irritation, but then I see how wide her pupils are, how rapidly the pulse in her neck is beating, and I realize it is fear. I take a step toward her. "Why are you so afraid of him?"

She turns and carefully folds the letter she's been reading. "I am not afraid of him; he has just become a liability to the convent. He has betrayed his country and shamed us by association. I truly believed him to be *marqued*."

"Believed? You told me Sister Vereda had Seen it, but if so, Ismae would have seen a *marque*."

She whips her gaze up from the letter and narrows her eyes. "And I told you that Vereda was too old, too enfeebled, to be relied on for such things any longer. Do not throw her vision in my face when you are the one who has defied my order to replace her."

"How can you take His will into your own hands like that? What gives you the right to break the rules that lies at the heart of our service to Him?"

She does not answer, and as she sits there, saying nothing, my frustration continues to simmer until it boils over. "Tell me precisely what is going on and why I should not report it to the others. Then, once you have told me that, you will explain why you sent Matelaine out instead of me."

"You have been chosen to be the next seer—"

"No! *You* have chosen me to be the next seeress—not Mortain, not Vereda, *you*. And for no reason that anyone could determine. There are plenty of other virgin novitiates or nuns beyond childbearing years who could easily, perhaps even happily, step into that role. Sister Claude would welcome an opportunity to come in from the rookery."

The abbess gives a snort of derision. "You would put such weighty decisions in the hands of a tired old woman who reeks of bird droppings?"

"No," I say quietly. "I would put them in the hands of Mortain, where they belong." But it is too late. I understand now why she so desperately wants me to fill this role. "You want me to be seeress because you think you can control me. You think you will only have to make a suggestion here or nudge me a bit there to have me 'Seeing' precisely what you want me to." After all, not only have I had exceptional training in the assassin's arts, but in blind obedience and biddability as well. The thought of how much of my own will I have handed over to her and the Dragonette throughout the years causes a hot, painful wave of mortification to course through me.

"How can you threaten me?" The abbess rises to her feet, fists clenched. "I, who have spent my entire life at the convent protecting you, shielding you, saving you from that wretched woman?"

“The Dragonette?” I snort. “You did not shield me, or even save me—you were simply there once in a while to offer me comfort.”

She stands as still as any statue as my words echo in the silence between us. Then she turns, as if she cannot bear to look upon me a second longer, but not before I see the pain that twists her mouth. “You do not wish to know the answers to your questions, not really.”

“Oh, but I do. That is why I have left the convent and ridden one hundred and twenty leagues across the country. I have come in search of answers as well as my destiny.”

“Your destiny? You think to find your destiny here? You will find nothing, nothing but heartache and things you do not want to know.” She turns around then, her hands clasped before her and anguish in her eyes. “Annith, I beg you, leave off these questions. Return to the convent and assume the duties of seeress, and you will have a destiny to be proud of, one that few can claim as their own.”

“What you do not seem able to grasp is that I will not return to the convent—not if I am forced to be seeress.”

She draws herself up, and, to my surprise, her lips curl in a half smile. “You will change your mind when you hear the truth, for any sin that falls upon my head will also fall upon yours.”

“Why? I was never a party to your scheming. I had no knowledge of your plans.”

“That will not matter, for our close ties will speak far louder than any words you can say.” She takes a step toward me, then another, until we are close enough that I can see the faint lines that have begun to appear at the corners of her eyes. Abruptly, she turns away. “Would you like to hear the story of your birth? I know it has plagued you for years, not knowing how you came into this world.”

I blink in surprise and everything inside me grows still. “What do you mean?” My voice does not sound like my own. “No one knows anything about my birth.” I am not at all certain I wish to hear, for I am suddenly terrified of this story I have hungered for my entire life.

Unaware of my inner turmoil, the abbess begins to speak, her voice soft, as if she is peering down the corridor of time. “It was raining that night. They had traveled far, and the lady had only an old castoff maid from her father’s household, for he declared her dead to him once he learned of her plight. She was exhausted, and well beyond the point where she should have been traveling, but it was as if her shame and her heartache were some location on a map and she had to get as far away from them as she could.

“And then the pains began, leagues from a city of any size, and the lady and her maid both panicked. They stopped at the next house they passed and asked for the nearest midwife. There was none. The closest thing was the herbwife who lived at the edge of the mill road. It would have to do.

“It took them forever to reach it, with the rain and the mud, and the lady having to stop every few minutes and wait for the pain to pass. It was like someone had wrapped iron bands around her stomach and was squeezing. She dropped to her knees in the mud twice due to the pain.

“But she refused to have her baby—even a bastard babe—in the mud, so she pressed on, using her poor, near hysterical maid as a crutch.

“The herbwife—” Here the abbess pauses, a faint smile playing on her lips. “She seemed to be expecting them and opened her door as they drew near. The fire had already been built up, and clean sheets put on the single narrow bed in the one-room cottage. Drying herbs hung from the ceiling, so low the lady had to duck in places.

“The pains were coming much more quickly then, so quick she could scarce catch her breath. Before she could even lie down, there was a great gushing and water ran down her leg. She thought she would die from embarrassment, but that feeling quickly dissolved in the next squeeze that gripped her belly.

“The herbwife and the maid helped the lady onto the bed, and the next hours narrowed into an endless blur of pain and sweat. She could not help but scream, as she feared the pains would rend her in two—punishment, no doubt, for the sins she had committed.

“You arrived in the world after one last anguished push.” She smiles again and glances up at me with such fondness, such tenderness, that I am struck dumb. “As the herbwife wrapped you tightly in swaddling, the lady’s maid cleaned up her mistress as best she could, and then you were placed in her arms. You were perfect even then.”

“How can you know all this?” I whisper.

She lifts her gaze to meet mine. “Have you not yet guessed, Annith? You are my own flesh and blood, born of my body. Every sin I have committed, every rule I have broken, every girl you feel I have betrayed in some way—it has all been done out of my love for you, for you are my own daughter.”

The sheer audacity of her claim presses down on my chest, making it hard to draw breath. My mind scrambles to fit this new revelation into all that I know of the world. If I am sired by Mortain, can the abbess also be sired by Him? Surely He would not lie with His own daughter? “So you lied to the convent? You are not sired by Mortain?” The enormity of this is such that I can scarce wrap my mind around it.

The abbess stares at me, her eyes more human than I have ever seen them, and there is genuine sympathy there. It is all I can do not to place my hands over my ears, and something cold and slippery slithers in my belly.

“No, Annith. I am not.” She takes a step closer, and although I long to back away from her, the wall is already behind me and I have nowhere to go. “And neither are you.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

MY WORLD SHATTERS into a thousand pieces, each one of them as sharp as glass. Each one of them slicing me from the mooring that has anchored me my entire life.

I am not one of Mortain's own, not His daughter, not His handmaiden. I am nothing to Him. Nothing. My chest grows tighter and tighter, as if the god Himself is wringing the very air from my lungs until I can scarcely breathe. "You are lying," I say, but my voice is weak, my words a feeble attempt to fend off an opponent's mortal blow. "You are simply saying that to taint me with your sins, in the hope that I will fear whatever punishment heaped on you will also fall upon me. You, not me, have deceived everyone into believing you were sired by Mortain." A hot bitterness fills my belly and I fear I will be sick.

She ignores my outburst and continues with her story. "All my anger and outrage at my circumstances disappeared in that moment, for whatever else I had endured, it had brought me you. My feeling of euphoria lasted but an hour before worries of what we would do, how we would survive in this world on our own with no family to support us and no friends willing to take us in. I even asked if I could apprentice to the herbwife in exchange for my keep—and yours—but she laughed and said she could scarce scratch out a living on her own.

"So all that long night, as I held you and you dozed and suckled at my breast, I tried to think of a way we could be together and have some life that did not involve begging or selling ourselves to the highest bidder. Since you were a bastard—a mistake—I could have taken you to one of Saint Salonius's orphanages, but they would not have allowed me to stay, so I would never have seen you again. Or I could have found work at a brothel or tavern, but who would hire a woman with a babe for such work?

"And then I remembered my youngest sister, who had been sent away to a convent when she was thirteen, a convent that took in young girls and trained them for service. So in the morning, when some sleep had returned my wits, the herbwife asked me who the father was, and I told her Mortain, and began to lay the foundation for my great lie."

"And she believed you?"

"She did, for as she explained, Mortain brought many daughters into this world, and I must be especially favored if I was allowed to live to raise mine.

"But while that meant the convent would take you in, it would not gain me

entrance, except mayhap as a wet nurse for the first few months of your life. So I plotted some more, and by the end of the week, I had a plan firmly in place. It was not without its costs, and they were high, but it was the best I could salvage from the wreckage of my life, and so I committed to it with every fiber of my being and vowed to make it work.

“I told the herbwife I would accompany her to the hedge priest who would see that you were delivered to the convent, which I did. That was the hardest part, being separated from you for the first few months, but it was so we could be together for the rest of our lives.

“As I stood in the shadow of the church and watched the night rower row you out to the convent, I cried so much I thought I would die from it. The pain of that was far worse than any of the birthing pains.”

“Then what did you do?”

“And then I went to Brest, found work in a respectable tavern for three months, and came up with a convincing story that I could present at the convent when I arrived, a story that I had been sired by Mortain and come late to His service.” She spreads her hands wide in supplication, desperation shining clearly on her face. “Surely now you understand why you cannot speak of this to anyone. While my sins might be the greater, you will suffer as well.”

I cannot think. I cannot even feel. I am empty as a barrel. “What is the punishment for such deceit?” I ask.

The abbess shrugs. “I do not know. I have never heard of anyone who has done it, but perhaps that simply means it was dealt with in silence.”

“And my father? Who is he really?”

“He was charming, and well-titled. His family’s holding bordered ours, so I had known him since I was a young child. I loved him. Or thought I loved him, and I was sure that he loved me too. He came to visit often, either to hunt with my father and his men or to pay court to the ladies of our house.

“I knew that at first he came for my older sister, Marie, but it soon grew obvious—at least to me—that in her fickleness, her attentions turned to another. But he did not see it, or would not accept it. Even now I do not know which it was. But my fair sister had higher ambitions than the neighbor baron. And even still, he thought he had a chance—thought that she was being forced by our parents into a different match.

“He and I talked frequently, either in person or by note. I thought this meant he had turned his attention—and his affection—to me, but he was merely gathering information on the one he truly desired.”

“So he played you false.” I harden my heart against her and what must have seemed a shocking betrayal to her. “What is his name? My family’s name?”

She turns away from me then. “Is it not enough to know that he is not Mortain? What lies between us is old history that I do not wish to resurrect.”

“Tell me.”

She sighs, the sound coming from some great well of despair deep within her. “Crunard,” she says at last. “Your real father is Crunard.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

AS I LEAVE THE ABBESS'S chambers, I feel as if I have been shrouded in a thick mist that prevents my thoughts from taking shape. It is as if someone has reached inside my chest and yanked my very self from my body. Or as if, with her words, the abbess created one loose thread, which she then used to unravel my entire soul.

I was not fathered by Mortain.

I bear not a single drop of His blood.

I was not born to serve Him, have received none of His gifts. Have, in fact, been an impostor on such a massive scale it is hard, even now, to grasp the fullness of it.

My mother never lay with Death, never welcomed Him into her life, except when she needed a refuge, a safe place to hide from the world. And she has pulled me, unwitting and unwilling, into the duplicity with her.

Even worse, she tried to have me commit patricide. For of all the crimes she has committed, surely that one is the most vile. I could have killed my own father and never even known it.

Of course, that was the abbess's intent. It is easy enough to see that now, with the benefit of hindsight. One quick strike, and the only person from her past who could expose her secrets would be silenced forever.

Without thinking about it, I find my feet leading me toward the back of the palace, then outside and down two long, winding flights of stairs until I find myself at the door behind which my true father sits, awaiting his judgment.

The lone guard considers asking me what my business is, but when he takes one look at my face, his mouth snaps shut. He, at least, does not yet know I was not sired by Mortain.

There is a single torch outside Crunard's cell, the light cast by its oily flames feeble against the thick darkness of the dungeon. I move as silently as a shadow to him, then lean back against the wall to watch him unobserved. Although I make no sound, he lifts his head and sees me. Slowly, he straightens, his eyes meeting mine.

"You knew, didn't you?" I ask.

He tilts his head. "I suspected, which is very different from knowing."

"Did you suspect from the very beginning, when I first showed up in Guérande?"

“No. Then I knew only that you had been sent to silence me. It wasn’t until we were on the road the next day and I saw you in broad daylight that I noticed the similarities between you and the abbess.”

I hold his gaze, unflinching. “And did you also know then that you were my sire?” I cannot call this stranger father.

His entire body stills. Indeed, it does not look as if he is even breathing. And then something in his face shifts and he smiles, surprising me. “You are my daughter. Well, I had wondered. Your abbess was a virgin when she and I knew each other, and your age seemed about right.”

He stares at me with such a painful mixture of warmth and hope that I cross my arms, as if by that gesture I can ward off his affection. “You will forgive me if I do not greet the news quite as warmly. All my life I have been laboring under the assumption that I was sired by a god. To learn instead that I was sired by one of the kingdom’s greatest traitors brings me little joy.”

He shrugs. “And you will forgive me if I seem overzealous, but I have sat in the dungeons of Guérande for over three months now under the assumption that the very last of my children had been killed. To find that I have another is an unexpected mercy I never dared dream of. Even if she did try to kill me.”

And then it hits me. Not only do I now have a human father—but I once had an entire family. The thought brings a surprising twist of pain with it—that I learned this only after they were all dead is yet one more thing the abbess has stolen from me. “Why did she want you dead?”

The sly look is back on his face before I have finished my question. Clearly, any affection he may feel for his daughter will not be at the expense of his own hide. “To cover up her crimes, of course.”

“And what crimes would those be?”

“The crimes of not being a daughter of Mortain. Of having deceived not only the convent, but the crown. It is fraud. Surely you realize that. One can only imagine the punishment for such crimes.”

And though his words do nothing more than echo my own thoughts, I know in my heart there is more to it than that. I do not ask the question that hovers on my lips: *How come you abandoned her and your unborn child to fend for themselves?* Instead, I ask, “How did you come to reconnect with her after all that time had passed?”

His faint chuckle surprised me. “That was purely by accident. As much a shock to me as to her, I assure you. In my position as chancellor to the late duke, I was also his unofficial spymaster and liaison with the convent. Imagine my surprise when I paid them a visit and found my ex-lover posing as abbess.”

His mockery of her—when he had so callously abandoned her—rankles. “She was not posing as abbess. She came by that position through her own efforts and skill.”

“Ah, I admire loyalty in my children. That speaks well of you, Annith.”

I do not care for the sound of my name coming from his lips, nor do I care for the tenderness with which he infuses it. “It is too bad that you were not as loyal to those whose lives you so carelessly used and then discarded,” I say quietly.

“Any loyalty I have learned has not come from you.”

My heart heavier than it has ever been, I turn and leave the dungeon.

I have a father. And brothers, though they are all most likely dead. Family.

The realization worms into me as I move through the palace corridors, trying to find my way back to my chamber, a place where I can be alone with my thoughts as the full weight of the abbess’s treachery begins to settle over me.

She stole so much from me. With the choices she made, she took one life and gave me instead . . . an imprisonment. Memories of my early years in the convent fly through my head like a flock of disturbed crows, each one dark and unsettling. All those special sessions with the Dragonette. All those harsh punishments when I failed her tests. And the abbess—Sister Etienne—stood idly by.

No. Honesty forces me to admit that is not precisely true. She often *did* intervene, when she could. Slipped me bread or cheese when I had been denied supper. Snuck a candle to me so I could light the darkness of my punishment. She was often the one to unlock the door when it was over so she could fuss over me a bit and be certain I was all right.

Oh, how surprised she must have been when her imagined refuge turned into such a series of labors and trials! Her well-laid plans for the two of us collapsing under the weight of the Dragonette’s spiritual ambition.

That thought causes my steps to falter as I realize—fully realize—how very hard that must have been for her. To have the haven she’d sought turn into such a grim reality. One she was just as powerless to alter as she would have been had she remained outside the convent. Her sanctuary where the two of us need never be parted turned into a nightmare.

Is that why she wished me to be seeress? So we would still never need to be parted? How did she envision that future? Did she honestly think she could nudge and shape my visions to suit herself?

Or . . . another motive occurs to me. Perhaps it was her fear for my safety that controlled her actions. Her fear that, since I was not sired by Mortain, I would be vulnerable as I enacted His will in the world. Or mayhap she was concerned for my immortal soul.

But it matters not, for what she did was wrong. Doubly so when she sacrificed others such as Sybella and Matelaine to keep me safe. *She* is not the injured one here, no matter how she might try to present herself thus.

The closer I get to my chambers, the more I realize that I am unable to face Ismae and Sybella in my current state, and my feet change course, taking the next passageway out of the main corridor. Because I am tempted to hang my head in shame at the lie I have been a part of, I force myself to hold it high and squarely meet the glances of any of the passing nobles or courtiers who look at me. They do not know. Not yet.

But they will soon enough.

I cannot fathom how I am to exist in this world without my role as Death's handmaiden to give shape and purpose to my life. I feel as useless and unformed as wine without a cup.

And when it is learned who my father is? I may well be tossed into the dungeon beside him.

No. Ismae would not let that happen. She would tell them that I had no knowledge of any of this. But will they believe her?

The pain of it all twists inside me so that I must stop and grip the wall for support. And yet, even through the mists of the pain, I have to look down to be certain my legs are still attached to my body, for I can scarcely feel them any longer.

I force myself to resume walking—faster—as if I can escape the awareness the abbess has handed me. Before long, I find myself standing at the foot of the stairs that lead to the battlements, drawn there, just as those metal shavings found themselves drawn to the lodestone.

Yes, the pain inside me howls. Go to Balthazaar. He has lived with a similar pain for hundreds of years. Surely he will know what to do with it.

With no one to see, I lift my skirts and take the stairs two at a time, welcoming the strain it causes in my legs. When I reach the top, I am breathless and trembling, but that has nothing to do with my climb. I step outside into the cold, not surprised to see that night has fallen. Indeed, it feels as if entire lifetimes have passed in the space of the last hour.

Every single thing I have ever believed about my life is naught but a lie. That thought writhes through my mind—through my entire body—like a serpent. Nothing, not one thing is true. The girls I have called sisters all my life are not of my blood. Not even Ismae and Sybella. I am not the first and most skilled among a special cadre of His chosen handmaidens, but some blatant impostor slipped into His nest while He was not looking.

Every prayer I have ever uttered to Him rears up in my mind, filling me with mortification. Shying away from the pain of that, I search the shadows that pool along the stone walls. Anger begins to simmer through me when I do not see him, and I focus on that rather than my despair. The one time I wish him to be here, he is not. I want to put my head back and roar out a demand that he appear, but even in my current state, I cannot bring myself to be that bold. Instead, I begin walking along the length of the battlement in the opposite direction of the sentries. “Balthazaar?” I whisper into the darkness.

When there is no answer, I continue down to the farthest corner, where the catwalk disappears into a guard tower. I turn and look out over the battlements to the city below. I long to pray, but I no longer even know to whom I should direct my prayers. Salonus, the god of mistakes, perhaps?

There is a faint whisper of sound behind me. My heart lifts in hope as I whirl around, and there he is. “You came.”

“I have always been here,” he says. “Waiting.”

My spirits rise at the faint goading in his voice. I fold my arms and take three steps toward him. “Well, you need wait no longer. Here I am.” Then I reach out, put my hands against his chest, and shove. Caught off-guard, he stumbles. I push again, and again, until he is up against the wall. He looks down at me, his face a mask of confusion.

“You’ve wanted me since the night when you first happened upon me. Well, now I am giving myself to you.” I have denied myself so much in the belief that I owed my life to others, but that belief is gone now. If I am nothing other than the most ordinary of mortals, then I may as well roll in the full slop of life.

I want Balthazaar’s arms around me, his lips upon mine. I want to feel something other than this howling nothingness that screams through my soul.

I reach up and wrap my arms around Balthazaar’s neck, rise up on my toes, then plant my lips on his. Or try to.

“Wait.” He pulls away, staring down at me as if I have sprouted antlers. “What is it you want?”

I stare at him steadily. “You. Me. Entwined.” I want him to make me forget. Make me remember. Make me feel extraordinary in this new, mortal way that is all that is left to me.

When he continues to hesitate, I grow incensed. How dare he change his mind now, when I have decided this is what I want? “But if you are not man enough, there are thousands of soldiers wandering the city. I’m sure one of them will oblige.” I turn to leave, holding my breath to see if he will let me go, exalting when he reaches out and grabs my arm. He spins me around so that my back is

against the wall. He is angry now. I respond by leaning into it, by letting his fury ignite my own and using it to warm the chill at the very heart of my being.

“Something’s changed you.”

“Yes.” Something has changed me, but it has also freed me. I feel a frantic bubble of laughter rising in my throat. I have always felt torn in two by my opposing desires—to live my own life, or to serve Mortain as He wills it. Well, I have only my own life to live now. And what I want—in this moment—is to *feel*. I want to feel something new and forbidden. I want to feel powerful in some way—as I do when Balthazaar looks at me with heat in his eyes. I want to feel the full force of that heat on my lips, my hands, my entire body. I reach for him again and this time he does not stop me. Slowly, I bring my lips up to his.

“I do not want to take you against the wall.” His lips brush against mine with each word, his gaze boring into me as if plumbing my depths to see what is hidden there.

“But I *want* to be taken against the wall.” I nibble at his lips in the same way I would a sweetmeat. I welcome the bite and chafe of the rough stone against my back.

“You’re angry . . .”

“It’s nothing to do with you.”

“But what if you regret this?”

I pull far enough away that I can glare at him. “For a spawn of the Underworld, you have far too much honor.”

He does not look away but instead waits patiently for my answer.

I sigh. “Trust me, on the long list of regrets I might have, this would be near the bottom.” To convince him, I begin unlacing my gown.

He grabs my hands to still them, but this time he pulls me away from the wall. With my hands still wrapped in his, he leads me down the battlement.

As we draw out of the shadows, I am tempted to keep my head down in case one of the sentries should see us. Except my action shames no one but me, and I am not ashamed of what I am doing. It is perhaps the only thing I am not ashamed of right now. It feels as if it is one of the most honest things I have ever done.

It is comforting, this new knowing where my boundaries lie. Before, it was as if I were still forming, waiting for the edges of my self to fill in. But now I know that this is it. The sum and total of who I am and who I will ever be is already contained within me.

Balthazaar pauses outside a narrow door, listens, then opens it. It is a storage room of sorts, full of extra weapons and unused armor. It is, I think, the perfect place.

He swiftly shuts the door, then pulls me closer. He lifts his hands to my face and cups it, his eyes searching mine. “Are you certain?”

In answer, I put my arms around his neck again and press my entire body along the length of his. “Yes.” The word rings as clear and sharp as a bell, for I am certain of nothing but this. My waiting is over; it is now time to claim the life that I want, even if I must drag it kicking and screaming to a garrison closet.

Then—finally!—he leans down to place his lips on mine.

It is everything I remember. At first, they are surprisingly cool, but within seconds it is as if the heat of my own desire flows into him as he takes what I offer, moving his own mouth so that it completely captures my own. I fall into the kiss, like a stone into a deep pond, sinking deeper and deeper until I am not sure I will ever leave. I let go of everything, everything but the sensations that engulf me.

He has beautiful lips, I realize, running my tongue along the fullness of them. They are shapely and full enough to invite kissing. Best of all, they chase away the taste of bitterness and despair that have threatened to drown me.

The faint rasp of his whiskers. The silky spot of skin my fingers find, just below his ear. His hands, sure and strong, caressing my waist, moving up along my rib cage and then down again to my hip, as if he would memorize the shape of me.

The feel of his heart echoing mine as they both beat too fast.

I step back—just a bit—to give myself room to finish unlacing my gown. I meet his eyes and am thrilled to see no sign of bleakness or despair or grim duty there. They are warm and glowing like sun-warmed stones, and the heat in them causes my heart to race faster and my fingers to falter.

“Here,” he whispers. “Let me.”

And I do.

Afterward, as I lie in his arms, savoring the feel of them around me, savoring the feel of his heart hammering under my hand where it lies upon his chest, I realize that I cannot even pretend our time together was enough. I am more drawn to him than ever, drawn to this meeting of not just our bodies and hearts, but our souls. It is an intimacy that I have hungered for my entire life yet have never been able to name. If I think this is all I will ever have of him, I fear I will weep.

I saw hope in his eyes, and an easing of his bleakness, just as I felt hope in my own heart and no longer felt alone. I promise myself that this is just the beginning. Now that I have no obligation to the convent or the abbess, I can begin to shape the future I want for myself.

Chapter Forty

AS I MAKE MY WAY to my chamber, I send out a silent plea to let it be empty. Please let Sybella be visiting her sisters and Ismae be attending to the duchess. Or locked in some private chamber with Duval. With all that has happened in the past few hours, I am feeling far too confused and raw to explain anything to anyone, even my dearest friends.

But my prayers are not answered. When I open the door, both Ismae and Sybella are there. Sybella's gaze sharpens as her eyes rake over me, her nostrils flaring. If anyone could detect such activity as I have just been engaged in, it would be she. But to my immense relief, she says nothing about her suspicions. "Here." She shoves a garment at Ismae. "Go put that on." As Ismae disappears behind the screen, Sybella pours me a cup of wine and hands it to me. I am surprised at the thoughtfulness—just one more way in which she has changed. "Thank you."

"Are you all right?" she asks under her breath, dispelling any notion I might have had that I fooled her.

I stare at my goblet as if it is the most fascinating thing in the world. "I am fine," I assure her, then take a gulp of wine. The room is quiet except for the sound of Ismae slipping into her gown.

When she is done changing, Ismae steps out from behind the screen and hurries toward me, a look of concern on her face. I wonder how on earth I am to tell her—tell them both—that we are not sisters. That we do not share a father and that, indeed, I have no right to the title I have claimed all my life.

When she reaches me, she grabs my arms and squeezes. "How did it go?" she asks. "How furious was the abbess?"

I laugh. "*Furious* does not even begin to do her reaction justice."

Sybella frowns. "Is she going to punish you?"

That, at least, I can answer honestly. "I do not know; she has not yet said."

Ismae goes over to Sybella and motions for her to lace up her gown. "What will she do with Crunard?"

At her question, one of Crunard's assertions comes back to me. "He said that before, when you were in Guérande, you had a chance to kill him and you did not. May I ask why? Was he not *marqued* then either?"

She glances down at her hands, then back up at me. "He was *marqued*. However, I had just come from a battlefield where scores were *marqued* for

death, deaths I had no hand in, so my uncertainty of how the convent was interpreting these marques had already begun to form. And now he is no longer *marqued*.”

Despair fills me as the knowledge that I will never see *marques* settles over me. “What do you think should be done with him?” I ask *Ismae*. “You are more familiar with his crimes than either the abbess or I am.”

Sybella smirks. “Notice she does not ask *me*.”

Ismae is silent for a long moment while she puts on her shoes. “I think it should be left to the duchess’s justice. Put him on trial. Have him answer for his crimes. Then, if he is to die, have it be for those crimes he has been convicted of, not some shadow that falls across his forehead that I do not trust the convent to correctly interpret.”

Her honesty has created a safe, almost holy space around us. It is the perfect opportunity to tell her of what I have learned. I take a deep breath, meaning to do precisely that, but find I cannot bend my tongue to my will. Besides, I do not yet know what I will do with my new knowledge.

Leave the convent? Report the abbess—but to whom? The sheer enormity of this revelation and its reverberations forces me to tread cautiously.

More importantly, as I stare into their dear faces, I realize that as strong as I have been, as much as I have endured, I am not strong enough to sever this bond. If I lose that, I fear I will unravel into a pile of tattered threads. “She still has not told me all.” While it is not the whole truth, it does not feel like too great a lie. That is when I notice they are both dressed most strangely. “Why are you wearing servant gowns?”

“Do you like it?” *Sybella* lifts her skirt and twirls prettily, as if it is some magnificent dress that she wears and not merely sewn-together rags. “I am sneaking out with *Beast* tonight when he and his men patrol the city. All the various troops and mercenary factions are teeming with pent-up energy and frustration, and they have nothing to fight. Except each other.”

Ismae arches an eyebrow. “I can’t believe he agreed to let you come with him.”

Sybella flashes a cheerful smile. “Oh, he did not. He does not even know that is what I intend. But I shall go mad if I must sit here one more day, twiddling my thumbs with embroidery.”

“And you, *Ismae*?” I ask. “Are you going out to rein in the mercenaries as well?”

Sybella’s face sobers. “No, she is leaving for *Nantes* in a few hours.”

“You convinced *Duval*, then?”

Ismae snorts. “Let us just say that all his arguments were to no avail.”

“Which means,” Sybella says, plucking the wine goblet from my hands, “that you are to attend upon the duchess while we are busy. But not until we get you freshened up.”

“Isn’t that where you’ve been, with the duchess?” Ismae asks.

“No. I . . . needed some time to think, to cool my temper after my meeting with the abbess.”

Sybella begins combing my hair, her fingers gentle and light. I close my eyes and let the sheer comfort of the touch lull me into calmness. Now, I think. Now I will tell them. As I open my mouth to do that, there is a knock on the door. We all stiffen. “If it is the abbess, I’ve not returned,” I warn them.

But when Ismae opens the door, it is Duval’s deep voice that we hear. “I’m not going to argue any more about this,” she tells him.

“Good. I am not here to argue, but would like to see you before you leave.”

“Of course.” Before following him out into the hall, she comes and gives Sybella and me a hug. “Be safe, you two.”

“And you,” Sybella says. “And remember, the abbess at Brigantia will grant you sanctuary if it comes to that.”

“It won’t.” Then it is my turn to hug her before she is gone.

Chapter Forty-One

FOUR DAYS LATER, THE FRENCH ambassador arrives. With the mud of his journey still clinging to his boots, he comes striding into the hall where the duchess is holding court. As he steps through the door, Duval's head snaps up, and he grows still, like a wolf who has just sensed another predator.

Sybella and I stand just behind the duchess's chair. We exchange a glance, and, almost as if we have rehearsed it, our hands go to our weapons. Not that we will kill him on sight, but we will simply remind him to step carefully.

The ambassador is tall and leanly muscled, with a great beak of a nose and piercing green eyes. As he draws toward the dais, Duval motions subtly with his hands for the soldiers to begin clearing the others out.

As the people make their way to the door, the duchess looks up from the stolid burgher whose claim she has been adjudicating and sees what is happening. Although she keeps her face serene and composed, I can see the faint trembling in her fingers before she tightens her grip on the arms of her chair.

"Gisors." Duval's voice is pleasant, for all that his body is fairly humming with tension. "I did not expect to see you again. Ever."

Gisors ignores him and executes a flawless bow, his attention never wavering from the duchess. "My lady." There are small gasps from around the room, as he pointedly does not use the respectful form of address her title demands. Sybella's hand closes around the hilt of her knife, her eyes narrowing in anticipation. The ambassador catches her movement and becomes slightly more circumspect. "I pray my visit finds you in good health."

"It does, Lord Gisors. And I hope you have had a pleasant journey." The duchess clings to the protocol and courtesies required by her position.

"I apologize for appearing before you in such an unworthy state, but the message I bring cannot be delayed."

"By all means, then, let us hear it," Duval says. Gisors continues to ignore him and waits for the duchess to nod her agreement.

"I have been sent by His Majesty to accept your unconditional surrender of Brittany, her offices and estates and lands and armies. Once you have surrendered these, I am authorized to offer you safe passage to the court of your new . . . *husband*." He manages to imbue the word with utter contempt.

The entire room is as quiet as a crypt, with not even the sound of breathing to disturb the utter silence his words have effected.

Duval leans forward. “And this message comes from His Majesty the king or from the French regent?”

“It matters not, for they speak as one. My lady? May I report to His Majesty that you agree to the terms?”

By the tense line in the duchess’s jaw, I can tell she wishes to tell him that no, he may not, but even now, under such circumstances, her grace and bearing hold. “I fear I cannot make such an enormous decision without careful consideration, my lord. I would give you and *your king*”—she manages to infuse *your king* with as much acid as Gisors did the word *husband* only moments ago —“in a few days’ time.”

“Time is the one thing we do not have much of, my lady.”

“Nevertheless, I must insist. I have my people to consider and their interests must come first.”

Gisors opens his mouth to argue, but Duval motions for sentries to step forward and escort him away. Unless the man wishes to be dragged from the room, he has no choice but to comply. “I will expect an answer by tomorrow, my lady.”

“You may expect all you want, but you will not get it,” she mutters under her breath.

When he is gone, she turns shakily to Duval. “I think I will return to my chambers now,” the duchess says.

“But of course.” Duval leaps up and helps her to her feet. He glances at Sybella. “Find Beast for me, would you?” She nods and hurries off. Together, Duval and I escort the duchess to her chambers.

Once she and I are alone in her room, I slip the heavy headdress off her head and place it on the bureau.

“Have you ever been in love?”

Her question surprises me so much that I nearly drop the brush I hold in my hand.

Without waiting for an answer, she says softly, almost to herself, “I have. Once.” I begin brushing her hair. “I was very young.” She closes her eyes. “Do you think you can fall in love with someone when you’re that young?”

An image of Mortain sitting beside me in the wine cellar fills my mind. “Yes, Your Grace. I do.”

Her eyes flash open and she turns to look at me, surprised. She smiles. “You are the first to agree with me,” she confides. “I knew we would get along.” She turns back around so I may finish her hair. “His name was Louis, Louis d’Orléans, and he came to my father’s court when I was but five years old. He was so charming and gallant, but mostly kind, kind and gentle with the child I

was then. And of course, I had heard plenty of stories of how bravely he fought beside my father as they tried to restrain France's encroachment on her surrounding duchies."

My mind scrambles to the tapestry back at the convent, but Louis d'Orléans was a French noble, not a Breton one, so I knew little about him other than that he is a cousin of Charles VIII, and that he fought in the Mad War beside the duchess's father.

"Why did your father not betroth you to him? Surely it would have been a good match."

The duchess sighs in sorrow. "Louis was forced to marry Joan, the daughter of the late king, when he was only fourteen years old. It was especially hard because his wife's physical infirmities left her sterile, so he would have no hope of producing an heir."

"And thus there would be no threat to the French crown," I murmur.

"Precisely. There was talk, during that visit, of having his marriage annulled so that we could marry, but the plan was vehemently blocked by France, which held much sway with the pope.

"And then he was captured last year and has been kept as a prisoner ever since." There are tears in her eyes. Whether because he is imprisoned or due to her lost dreams, I cannot tell.

Chapter Forty-Two

IT IS LATE, FAR TOO close to dawn. I should grab a few hours' sleep before morning, but I am filled with a need to see Balthazaar, even as an unwelcome sense of shyness and uncertainty settles over me at the memory of the things we did together four nights ago. I wonder if that is all he will think of now when he sees me.

I wonder if he will want to do it again.

And how soon.

When I reach the ramparts, I step quietly onto the catwalk. The sentries are so familiar with my habit of haunting their domain that they barely acknowledge my presence except to stand a little more alertly and shake themselves awake. I turn and walk in the opposite direction. Usually by the time I reach the far corner, Balthazaar is there waiting for me. But tonight as I peer into the shadows and whisper his name, I can see that they are empty.

My heart twists uncomfortably in my chest, then I scold myself for being foolish. He does have other things to do—hellequin duties he must attend to. It is unreasonable to expect him always to be here when I need him. And yet, he is, and I do.

I whisper his name again, then wait a few moments. I lean on the battlements so that if the sentries should look my way, they will think me pensive or in prayer.

The minutes drag into a quarter of an hour and still he does not come. A most disturbing thought fills me. Does he feel he has gotten what he wanted and so sees no reason to return? He is a hunter, after all, and I his prey. Now that I have been duly lured into his trap, has his interest faded? My hands grip the stone wall in front of me. No. Our connection is more than simple lust, although that is part of it, no question. But it wasn't only my body he was after.

I glance at the sky. Nearly an hour has passed and I have run out of arguments and justifications as to why he is not here. I put my hand on my chest, over the tender place there, and tell myself it is not pain I am feeling. As I turn to leave, I detect movement in the shadows. "Balthazaar?"

After a moment's hesitation, he steps forward.

"How long have you been there?" I ask.

"Not long. It is late. Surely you should be sleeping."

"I will, but I wished to see you."

“Why?”

I frown. “Because I am daft, clearly.”

He sighs, then steps over to the battlements, puts his hands on the wall, and leans out, staring at the city below, careful to keep a goodly distance between us. “Do they not miss you when you come up here?” His voice is gruff, guarded, and he does not look at me.

“I am careful not to come that often.” I do not slip away nearly as often as I would like.

“You should not come here anymore.”

I hold very still, trying to study his face, but he keeps it turned toward the city. “What are you saying?” I keep my voice very low. “Are you *rejecting* me?” Outrage mingles with mortification.

“No.” The word is harsh. He turns to face me, and I recoil at the intensity of the emotions in his eyes. He takes a step closer, looming over me. “I am not *rejecting* you—I am trying to save you. To save you from being pulled any further into my bleak existence.”

“It is not *I* who need saving, but *you*.”

He blinks in surprise, his mouth parting slightly, but no words emerge and I realize I have hit the mark far more accurately than I dreamed.

He turns to look back over the city. “Do not be ridiculous.” His voice is ripe with scorn and mockery. “It is others, including you, who must find safety from me.”

“Truly?” I take a step closer to him and he cringes. It is a mere tightening of muscle and skin, but I see it and suddenly I know he is not cringing in revulsion or rejection but because he is fighting a fierce battle with his own desires and his own heart. “What must I fear from you?” My voice is as soft and gentle as the caress I long to give him. “That you will touch me?”

I reach out and put my hand on his neck, feel his flesh twitch and flutter beneath my fingers. I draw even nearer, pressing myself close against his unyielding side. “That you would do this?” I put my fingers in his hair and force him to look at me. The anguish and conflict in his eyes nearly break my heart anew. If ever anyone needed saving, it is this tortured man. “Or this?” I rise up on my toes and softly place my lips against his. He resists at first, and then it is as if a floodgate opens and all his need pours out.

He turns from the battlements and pulls me into his arms as if he could pull me into his very chest so I might reside against his heart. His manner shifts, changing from resistant to possessive, and he cups my head in his hands and devours my mouth as if he would pull all that I am into him. Breathless, he stops and rests his forehead against mine, our hearts beating in a joint frantic rhythm.

“How can you expect me to walk away from this?” I whisper.

“But there is no freedom for me, only death.”

“Even now? After all that you have done and all the years you have ridden with the hunt?”

He shrugs, a sharp frustrated jerk of the shoulders. “It is the nature of my existence. And what I wish to save you from—giving your heart to someone who cannot be with you in the way you deserve. Who cannot be the man you deserve.”

But his warning comes far too late. My heart is already his.

I do not sleep much that night, not with thoughts of Balthazaar rolling around in my head like an uneven cart wheel. When I am not thinking about him, I worry about the duchess and the corner the French have backed her into. And when my thoughts finally turn from that, then it is young Isabeau who comes to mind, and I wonder just how much longer she will live and how the duchess will bear it when she dies.

But when morning comes, I am determined to do something, anything. And that is when I remember Crunard, languishing in the dungeon, a traitor who once had the ear of the French crown and who may well still be in contact with the regent.

I find Crunard in his cell, stretched out on the small pallet there. When he hears my footsteps, he sits up. Seeing it is me, he quickly runs a hand over his hair and straightens his shirt. I cannot decide if I find his gesture humorous or touching. He nods in greeting. I say nothing but simply stare at him, giving the whirlwind of emotions I feel every time I look at him a chance to subside.

“What do you know of Marshal Rieux and his alliance with d’Albret?”

“It was too much to hope for a pleasant father-and-daughter chat, wasn’t it?”

“It was. What do you know of their alliance?”

He leans back against the stone wall and shrugs. “That Rieux believed allying with d’Albret would be our best chance to gain enough force to repel France’s aggression.”

“Did he not know of the rumors surrounding d’Albret’s earlier marriages, or did he simply not care?” For that, far more than the political betrayal, is what rankles me.

“We had all heard rumors, but Rieux believed them to be just that, rumors that followed a brutish leader who was not loved by his people. I think he also believed that the duchess’s position would keep her safe, for it is one thing to have so many accidents befall one’s wives, when they are far from their homes

and the people who would avenge them, but a far different thing to openly attack the beloved ruler of a nation.”

“And you?”

He meets my gaze steadily. “I feared them more than simply rumors. Whatever other treachery I may have committed, I was not willing to consign the duchess to d’Albret’s tender care.”

“Duly noted.” I fold my arms across my chest and begin to pace in front of his door. “The question is, can the duchess trust Rieux’s offer to become her loyal subject once more?”

“I do not see that she has any choice. Rieux is a brilliant military tactician, and he brings many troops with him, troops the duchess will no doubt need.”

“But how can she be certain he will not betray her again?”

“She cannot. But she can be certain he will not betray her with d’Albret again, and can take precautions in case his loyalty shifts with the winds of opportunity.” He rises to his feet and comes to stand nearer the door. “You have to understand, for years the French crown has bribed many in the Breton court to report all the duchy’s activity and options and counsel. A person was of little importance if the French did not try to recruit him. Most took the money. Some gave them useful information in exchange. Others gave them meaningless crumbs.

“Madame Hivern, François, Madame Dinan, Marshal Rieux, fully half the nobles of Brittany took bribes or payments of some kind.”

“And you.”

He glances sharply at me. “No. I never took the bribes. Not until the duke lay dead and the promised payment was my last remaining son.”

I shake my head. “No wonder the poor duke could never win a damned war,” I mutter.

“Precisely. Oddly, some of his most loyal men were actually French—Captain Dunois, Louis d’Orléans.”

That is the second time I have heard that name mentioned. “How many sons did you have, all told?” I ask softly, for we are speaking of my brothers.

“Four.”

“What were their names?”

“Phillipe was the eldest, then Rogier, followed by Ives, then Anton.”

“And Anton was the one the French held captive?”

“Yes. He and Duval were great friends. They grew up together, trained together.”

“And how would he feel about your betrayal of Brittany?”

That arrow strikes home. Crunard's nostrils flare in irritation and he looks away, but not before I see a brief twinge of shame. "He would not understand because he is young and full of noble ideals and has no idea what it is like to watch your children crumple before you like so many trampled weeds."

I do not know what to say to that, for part of me agrees. How can any of us know the heartache such a loss would create? How can any of us know how we would live—or try to live—with such pain?

But I am unwilling to stay here and sympathize with him. I lift my skirts and turn to leave, but one last thought occurs to me. "Would any of the duchess's suitors have helped her stave off the French invasion?"

"Does it matter? She is now married to the Holy Roman emperor."

"Who has helped her very little. I want to know if she would have stood a chance with any of the others."

He thinks for a long moment, then shakes his head. "No."

"So all this has been for naught? The outcome was fixed from the start?"

"Yes." He laughs, a painful, defeated sound. "Her only hope of avoiding the war would have been a betrothal to the heir to the French throne himself."

"Why wasn't she?"

"Because at the time, the dauphin was betrothed to another, and the old king held too much animosity for the duke to award him such a prize as making his daughter queen. Once he died, the French regent was just as rigid in her thinking as her father."

"One last question. Does the French regent intend to allow the duchess to join the Holy Roman emperor in Austria? Or will some mysterious harm befall her along the way?"

He meets my eyes and shakes his head. "That, I do not know. We can always hope that she will be true to her word."

And while he might be willing to pin the duchess's future on such thin hopes, I am not.

Chapter Forty-Three

TWO DAYS LATER, THERE IS yet another Privy Council meeting. As they debate Marshal Rieux's true intentions and his trustworthiness to lead troops who will actually fight for the duchess and not turn against her when he snaps his fingers, I feel someone's gaze on me. It is the abbess, looking at me like a hungry vulture watching a dying fox and wondering if the fox is worth the effort or if the vulture herself will be taken down in the struggle. I consider smiling coolly at her, but it takes more energy than I wish to expend on her behalf. Instead, I simply ignore her. Which has the added benefit of inflaming her further.

I still do not know what I wish to do with the knowledge of her treachery. Whom I will tell. As I pointedly turn away from her, I glance at Father Efram, his lively blue eyes intent upon my face. When our gazes meet, he does not even have the grace to look away. Not knowing what to do, I bow my head in his direction, acknowledging him. He smiles broadly, so much so that it catches the abbess's attention, who in turn scowls at the both of us. I nearly laugh, that she thinks she can silence us like two restless children in church when we are respected peers in this elevated company.

I study the wooden cross that hangs around Father Efram's neck and the hempen prayer cord with the nine beads. He is old. Older than anyone I have ever seen, and he clearly follows and respects the old ways. And from what I gathered from our conversation in the chapel, he seems wise and knowledgable. I glance once more at the abbess, who has returned her frigid gaze to the conversation going on. If anyone would know what sort of court or church council oversees the convent, it is he.

"Very well, we will trust him." Duval's voice breaks into my thoughts. "But with caution, and we will appoint his second in command and make certain that person is someone loyal to us."

Everyone at the table agrees, except for Captain Dunois, who cannot find it in his heart to forgive the man.

Chancellor Montauban clears his throat. "The French ambassador visits my chamber nearly every hour, demanding an audience with the duchess—and her answer." The older man looks at the duchess with fondness and deep sympathy.

"Is there no word from François?" she asks worriedly.

"No, Your Grace. Which we must assume means there will be no more help from the Holy Roman emperor."

“I told you there wouldn’t be,” Chalon points out. “He is already spread too thin.”

Duval turns his steely gaze upon Chalon, who tries not to flinch under it. “Oh, that is not why he cannot come.”

“No?” Chalon sounds surprised.

“No. He cannot come because the French regent has brokered a truce with him.”

“My own husband betrayed me?” The duchess tries to sound strong, but it is hard not to hear the distress in her voice.

“He did not betray you, Your Grace.” Chalon comes to his liege’s defense. “He has been fighting this war for years, and it has cost him untold resources in material and lives. He needed that truce for his own people and the security of his kingdom.”

“At the expense of ours,” she murmurs.

Duval nods. “Yes, for it has the undeniable effect of essentially tying his hands where Brittany is concerned, because if he makes a move to aid us, he finds himself embroiled in war with France once again.” In spite of Duval’s ire, there is also a note of begrudging admiration at how neatly the French regent has boxed us in and cut us off from our own allies.

“What of the English forces? Have any more of their troops arrived in Rennes?”

Captain Dunois shakes his head, looking almost ill. “No, Your Grace. The rest of the English troops will not be joining us here in the city.”

Her brow creases in puzzlement. “Why not?”

Dunois takes a deep breath. “They will be staying in Morlaix.” He and Montauban exchange a glance. “They are holding it as surety against payment for their aid,” he says softly.

“And so the net tightens,” mutters Duval in disgust.

When the council meeting is over, the abbess rises and heads my way. I pretend I do not see her and mutter into Sybella’s ear, “Distract her for a moment, would you?”

She smiles wickedly. “But of course.” I do not linger to see how she does it, although part of me would like to, because I am certain it will be entertaining. Instead, I slip away to the old chapel. I do not know if I will find Father Efram there, but other than the council meetings, the chapel is the only place I have ever seen him.

I walk slowly, hoping he will see where I am headed and that his curiosity will compel him to follow.

Even if he does not, I could certainly do with some quiet contemplation and prayer right now. I have no earthly idea what to do. With the duchess and her council—nay, the very country—so beset by enemies and turmoil, I can hardly bear to add to it by telling them of the newest in a long line of betrayals. And yet

...

And yet surely those who have been wronged by the abbess's choices and actions deserve justice, if not vengeance.

The chapel is empty but for the nine flickering candles in front of the nine niches. As I stare at the Nine, an emptiness opens up inside me. Even the comfort of prayer has been taken from me, for I am no longer certain whom to pray to. I ball my hands into fists and force myself to take a deep breath.

"Lady Annith? Is that you scowling at my altar?"

I whirl around. "Father Efram! No, I wasn't scowling. Well, not at your altar, at least. Only at all the weighty problems that bedevil us."

He cocks his head to the side. "And by *us*, you mean the duchess and Brittany? Or is there some other *us*?"

The man may be older than time itself, but he is nobody's fool. "Father, I would have you hear my confession."

He blinks in surprise, but he is not half as surprised as I am. "I did not know that followers of Mortain must needs confess their sins."

"That is part of what I must confess to you."

His curiosity is as pungent as the incense burning in the chapel's censers. He motions for me to follow him to a small corner. "I cannot imagine you have anything to confess, my child. Surely you move within your god's grace—"

"But that is what I must tell you." Tell someone. The secret presses against me, so heavy and full that I fear it will burst from me like an overripe plum from its skin.

But once we are seated and his kind, curious eyes are on me, all the words that were crowding to get out flee before the immenseness of my confession.

"What is it, my child? What troubles you?"

"How great a sin is it to spend your entire life pretending you are one thing, only to find out that you were not that thing at all?"

"I assume you are talking of yourself?"

"Yes."

"What thing did you pretend to be?"

"A daughter of Mortain, sired by Him to be His handmaiden."

"And you are not His daughter?"

"No. I have learned that I am not."

“Ah.” He leans back in his seat. “And now you feel as if you’ve tricked everyone?” When I nod, he tilts his head and studies me. “How old were you when you came to the convent?”

“A babe.”

“Well, then.” He spread his hands wide. “It cannot be your fault at all. If the convent made that assumption and had no methods for confirming such claims . . .”

“But they were tricked. Someone knew. My mother, the abbess, for one.”

His eyes widen in surprise, and I proceed to tell him the whole sordid story. It rushes out of me in one enormous surge of relief.

When I have finished, he looks at me with a gentle expression. “Surely you must know that you are innocent in all this?”

While I wish to believe this, I cannot. I look down at my hands, which are tangled in my lap. “Not so innocent, Father, for I have killed men.”

He takes my hands in his own, forcing me to look up at him. “I believe He will understand, for even Mortain has been known to make mistakes.”

I recoil in surprise. “Surely He has not!”

“Ah, have you not heard the tale of how He took Amourna by mistake when it was really her sister He was after?”

“Well, yes, but that is just a story those who follow Salonus tell. It is not what actually happened.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No! We at the convent know what truly happened.”

“So say the followers of each of the Nine.”

I sigh in exasperation, and he holds up his hand. “I did not say your version was wrong. But think on it: Why would they tell a story about a god as feared and revered as Mortain making a mistake?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.” In truth, I am in no mood for theological puzzles.

He leans forward. “To show that even someone such as Mortain is capable of making a mistake.”

“But He is a god!”

“He is *a* god, but not *God*.” He points heavenward.

I do not know what to say that. Instead, I change the subject. “One more thing, Father, and then I will leave you to your duties. Whom do those who worship the Nine answer to?”

“Their gods, of course.”

“Yes, but in matters of more earthly jurisdiction. I know there is a council of bishops who oversee the new church’s matters, but surely they do not hold authority over the Nine, do they?”

“Authority? In what way?”

“If someone must be brought to account, much like a Catholic priest might be stripped of his office, who would address such matters?”

“Are you speaking of your mother?”

“Yes.”

He leans back, sighing. “That sort of thing has not come up in a very, very long time, but when it has happened in the past, a convocation of the Nine was called to preside over and judge such things.”

“And that is?”

“A council, a convocation, attended by the heads of each of the Nine, where the matter is brought before them and they decide what punishment, if any, is to be meted out.”

“And how does one call a convocation of the Nine?”

“A message is sent to the high priest or priestess or abbess of each of the Nine, and they in turn each send a representative to attend. But again, it has not been done in years. Certainly not in my lifetime.”

“What—what would the punishment be for such crimes?” For all that I want her to be held to account, I do not think I wish for her to be put to death.

His eyes soften with understanding. “No one is beyond God’s forgiveness.” The certainty in his voice astounds me.

“How can you know that?”

He shrugs, somewhat sheepishly. “When one has made as many mistakes as I have, one becomes very familiar with the fullness of God’s grace and mercy.”

Chapter Forty-Four

AS I MAKE MY WAY from the chapel to my chambers, I am accosted by a somewhat frantic page. “Lady Annith! Lady Annith!”

His alarm is nearly infectious and I find I must hold on to my composure. “What?”

“The duchess says you’re to come at once. It’s the princess Isabeau. I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” he says accusingly.

“I was praying,” I explain, then lift up my skirts and hurry after him.

When I reach the duchess’s chambers, I am shown in immediately. The duchess sits beside Isabeau. Sybella and one of the Brigantian sisters are on the other side. The girl’s skin is nearly translucent, and her breath comes in great rasping heaves. “What happened?” I ask softly.

The Brigantian nun rises and hurries to my side. “She just took a turn for the worse while everyone was in the council meeting.” Her face softens in sympathy. “It is not unexpected. It is amazing she has held on this long.”

My eyes are fixed on Isabeau as she struggles for breath. “Is there anything that can be done to ease her breathing?”

“I have used all the knowledge our convent possesses. The duchess thought—hoped—you might know of some remedy that we did not.” If the nun resents this in any way, she gives no sign. My thoughts go back to nursing Sister Vereda and what we did then. “We have more experience with poisons and wounds than with illness,” I murmur. “But I do know of one poultice that might help.”

I give her the short list of ingredients, but before she can leave the room, Sybella rises and hurries forward. “I will help her,” she says. At my questioning glance, she leans in close. “I cannot watch this,” she murmurs, her face stark white. I am taken aback for a moment until I remember her younger sister Louise suffers from a similar ailment. Once they have left, I approach the bedside.

“I am so sorry, Your Grace. I was in the chapel, praying.”

“There is no need to apologize. I am just glad they found you.” She looks up. When she sees that the Brigantian nun has left the room, she turns to me. “Ismae discovered that one of her”—she lowers her voice—“poisons eased Isabeau’s symptoms, and she often gave her a drop or two when her breathing grew painful like this. Do you know what she used? Might you have any? It does seem to ease her suffering.”

My mind scrambles for a moment, carefully going over all the poisons we use at the convent, until it lands on Mortain's caress—a poison that is made from the milk of the poppy. "I do! I will be right back." I hurry from the room, and once in the hallway, I break into a run. When I reach my chamber, I rifle through my saddlebag until I find the carefully wrapped brightly colored bottles. I snag Mortain's caress, return the rest to the saddlebag, then race back to the sickroom.

I am cautious with the amount of poison I give Isabeau, perhaps more cautious than I need to be, but I do not have Ismae's skill with it—or her ability to correct fatal mistakes.

However, even the small amount does seem to work. Isabeau's breathing grows less painful, although the fluid that fills her lungs does not diminish.

She is dying. For all that I am not a daughter of Mortain, I can still feel His presence heavy in the room. I want to shout at Him to hurry up and ease her suffering, except that I know it will cause the duchess great pain.

The next four days are consumed with tending to Isabeau, doing everything we can to restore a fragile balance to her body. We try poultices and tisanes, simples and salves, and none of them manage to turn the inexorable tide of her death. The only relief any of us can find is in the few precious drops of Mortain's caress.

When the French ambassador sends word that he is still waiting, the duchess nearly grabs Duval's sword from his hip and goes after him, so desperate is she for something—or someone—to strike out at.

Duval and the duchess and I consider trying to get word to Ismae, but in the end, there is little she could do, and trying to contact her would risk exposing her to even more danger. So, instead, we wait. We take turns by Isabeau's side, sitting with her so she will not be alone should she wake. Or should she die.

On the fourth day, the bishop comes to administer the last rites. The young princess rouses enough to say that she wants Father Efram to be the one to perform that duty for her. After a moment of stunned silence, Father Efram is quickly sent for. The duchess stays by Isabeau's side, holding her hand the entire time, tears flowing down her face.

And still, Death does not come.

That night, when the duchess has fallen asleep on the floor beside Isabeau's bed, and I am sitting with the young princess, bathing her fevered brow with lavender water, her eyes flutter open. I am so startled, I nearly drop the linen cloth I am holding.

"Where is Anne?" she asks.

"Right here. Asleep. Shall I wake her?"

Isabeau shakes her head. “No, she has been at my side for days; she needs the rest.” She falls silent for a while and simply tries to take air into her lungs.

“What is it like?” she finally whispers to me.

“What is what like?”

“Death. What is death like?”

Although she meets my eyes bravely, there is a faint tremble to her lips that tells me how hard she is trying to be brave.

I do not let myself think of graves or crypts or cold plots of earth but instead fill my mind with thoughts of Mortain Himself when He came to me that first time when I was a prisoner in the wine cellar. “He is quiet and still, and oh, so peaceful,” I tell her. “Fear will no longer hold any sway over you, nor will worry or sadness.” I pause for a moment, trying to think how to best help her young mind grasp such things. “Can you think of a time when you were especially tired? Perhaps after a long day of travel?”

She does not bother to try and speak, but simply nods.

“Do you remember how lovely it was to climb into your feather bed that night? How grateful your tired limbs were? How welcoming it felt? How delicious to close your eyes and finally rest?”

“Yes,” she whispers, her eyes aglow.

“It is just like that,” I tell her.

“Oh,” she breathes, and the faint crease between her eyebrows smoothes away. “I just wish I did not have to go alone,” she whispers. “I do not like being alone.”

At her words, I am filled with the memory of the terror I felt all those times I was shut alone in the cellar, that dark prison I feared I would never be released from. That is when it occurs to me that Isabeau need not make this journey alone.

Balthazaar could take her. He could escort her to the Underworld. There is little comfort I can offer her, but this would surely help.

As soon as Isabeau drifts off to sleep, I excuse myself from her bedside to search out the hellequin. When I am in the corridor, I lift my skirts and run, ignoring those who pause to watch me in surprise.

When I reach the battlements, dusk has only just begun to fall, and I worry it might be too early for him. Even so, I must try. *Please, Mortain, even though I am not Your daughter, please let him be here.* I hurry to the shadows where he always waits for me. At first, I think it is empty, and disappointment nearly chokes me. Then the shadows move and he steps forward.

I throw myself into his arms. For one brief moment I shut out all the complications and tragedies that surround us and allow myself to draw on the

comfort he offers me. Then, reluctantly, I pull away. “I must ask a favor of you.”
“Anything,” he says.

Such a simple word, but it takes me utterly aback. “There is a young girl in the palace, the duchess’s sister, and she even now hovers at Death’s door.”

He glances to the palace behind us as if he could peer through the walls. “I know.”

“She is so young and so afraid of being alone on that dark journey into death. And then it occurred to me, she doesn’t have to be alone. You could take her.”

Balthazaar raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Would my presence not simply frighten her even more?”

I study his noble, fierce face. “Mayhap if you tried smiling,” I suggest, “it would help. Besides, she is used to soldiers and men-at-arms—and you are not so very much more terrifying than they.”

“It is not my role to play, you know that. She is not a wicked soul or a lost one.”

“No, but she is a terrified young girl, trying to be brave. Surely Mortain’s grace extends to her as well.”

His dark brows draw together as he stares down at me. “You place much faith in Mortain’s grace.”

“I do, for I have known it firsthand.”

He looks away then, out over the city, his face heavy with a sense of resignation and regret that I do not understand. His eyes soften and his hand reaches up to caress my cheek, a cool slide of sensation that touches something deep inside me. “Is that what you wish for, Annith? If Death could grant you a wish, you would use it for someone else? Trade your happiness for someone else’s?”

I frown, confused. “Why must I trade my happiness? I do not understand.”

He reaches up with his other hand so that he cups my face. I allow myself to lean into it, savoring the comfort and promise that he offers. Then he bends down and places a gentle kiss upon my lips, a kiss that is tender and achingly sad.

“What? What are you not telling me?”

Instead of answering me, he smiles. The smile is so full of sorrow and loneliness that it pierces my heart. “I am sorry,” he whispers. He pulls his cloak tightly around him, steps out of the shadows, and heads for the door into the palace. Still puzzled, but relieved that he will do this, I follow.

Needing no direction, he makes his way unerringly to Isabeau’s room. I briefly wonder if he has been there before, perhaps when waiting for me. He walks slowly toward the princess’s bed, past the Brigantian nuns and the

princess's attendants, but no one in the room appears to notice him. Indeed, it is as if they cannot see him at all.

He kneels beside the bed, his manner so gentle it makes me want to weep. As his hood slips away from his face, the light from the candles in the room casts his profile in harsh relief, plucking at a buried string of memory.

Isabeau looks up at him with enormous eyes, and he reaches for her small, thin hand. "Be not afraid," he says, and she nods her head, her eyes never leaving his.

"It is not so very scary a place, where we are going. And you will not be alone. I will take you there myself."

I stare at that noble brow, at the hood puddled around his neck, and recognition begins to seep into me.

Young Isabeau turns to Anne and gives her a brave little smile. "Do not be sad, Anne. I will not be alone. Besides," she adds shyly, "you have always gone first. This time, it will be my turn to go first, and *I will wait for you.*" The duchess grabs Isabeau's hand, silent tears streaming down her face. She still does not look at the stranger kneeling beside her.

And then—even though Isabeau is not yet dead—my lover leans forward, gathers Isabeau up in his arms, and cradles her against his chest.

Except it is not *her*, but her soul, for her body still lies on the bed, as empty as a husk.

No, I think. It is not possible. A hellequin cannot call a soul from its body.

Isabeau peeks over his broad shoulder and gives me a tiny wave. Then, together, the two of them step through the door, and none but the living remain.

That is when I realize that I have not fallen in love with a mere hellequin, but with Death Himself.

Chapter Forty-Five

I SINK TO MY KNEES beside the duchess and she remains by the bed, gripping Isabeau's hand.

Balthazaar is Death.

How could I not have known? Not have recognized it? For of course, looking back, I see all the signs are there. That deep sense of recognition. Him leading the hunt. Possessing my arrow. How could I have been so blind?

But my heart—my heart was not, for it knew Him even if my eyes were too clouded to see it.

My face flames anew when I remember the manner in which I threw His name around, and I nearly writhe in embarrassment.

And what does this mean? For me? For us? Surely there can be no future with Death?

It is too much, too huge a thing to wrap my mind around. Instead, I turn my attention to the duchess. She will need my help to begin to deal with her grief.

In the morning, before the duchess can even stir from her tears, we learn that the French army has arrived and is just outside the city.

"Where is Gisors? Bring him to me at once!" Duval is so agitated he cannot sit still and is pacing the privy chamber.

Chancellor Montauban's brow is furrowed. "What of our scouts? Surely they should have warned us of the approaching army."

Duval whirls upon him, jaw clenched tight, but Captain Dunois hurries to answer. "It can only mean the French erected checkpoints along the road and intercepted our scouts so they could not bring us the news."

I look at Duval, the reason for his distress suddenly clear. What of Ismae? Will they have intercepted her?

The messenger returns just then, his face white. "Ambassador Gisors is no longer in the palace, my lord. He and his retinue left last night."

Duval clenches his fist, clearly wishing to smash it into something. However, he politely dismisses the messenger before swearing a black oath. "It was a trap. A setup. They knew we would not surrender, but they thought to divert us with such talk."

"And it worked," Chalon points out.

Duval's head whips up. "Only because they stopped our scouts and left us blind." But it is clear that he blames himself.

The duchess tries to remain brave in the face of this setback. "What must we do to combat the siege?" Her voice is small, and she sounds painfully like the child she is.

All eyes turn to her, and Duval's voice is gentle. "There is not much to be done but play out our hand. We knew this was coming, Your Grace."

"Although we had hoped we'd have more time," Captain Dunois says.

"But we do not." Marshal Rieux's voice is curt and abrupt.

"So what do we do now?" asks the bishop, trying not to wring his hands.

"Fight," Dunois says grimly. "Or surrender."

"Surely that is not an option," Chalon says. "Not after we have turned down every chance they have given us to make peace. They will grant us no quarter, nor will we be able to negotiate favorable terms of surrender."

"We can withstand a siege for months," Chancellor Montauban points out.

"Yes, but to what end? There is no more aid coming. Whatever victory we will wrest from this thing must be done with what we have on hand. All our aid and supplies will be cut off. Before long, they will starve us out. And again, to what end? Simply to surrender later rather than sooner?"

"Enough!" Duval cuts off Chalon.

Marshal Rieux shifts in his seat. "It will take days before the supply trains arrive, let alone their siege engines. We have a little time. Best to have the men ride out immediately and secure all the food supplies and livestock that can be found. No point in leaving it for our enemies, and we will have need of it soon enough."

Duval nods. "Agreed. We must also find out their numbers, their plans. What siege engines they will bring." He glances up at Captain Dunois. "Whom shall we send?"

Sybella steps away from her place behind the duchess. "I will go," she says, and I am immediately filled with shame that I did not think to make such an offer.

"What?" she asks, seeing the councilors' horrified looks. "Do you think if you ride out on your chargers with shield and banner flying, they will simply confess to you their strategy?" She snorts. "Do not be absurd. But they will never expect a woman, for who is more invisible than a camp follower or laundress? No one notices a woman's comings and goings."

Beast looks as if he wishes to put his head down on the table and weep. Or perhaps lock Sybella up in her chamber for the next few weeks.

Duval sends an apologetic glance Beast's way. "Very well. But be careful, and if there is any sign of trouble, get back here immediately. Find out how many troops they have, what engines of war they bring, how many cannon, if any. We need to know precisely what we are up against."

Sybella curtsies, then quits the room, grateful, I think, to have some action to perform. Unlike the rest of us, who must wait and wonder.

"Should I go as well?" I offer belatedly.

"No." Duval gives a decisive shake of his head. "I want one of you to stay with the duchess."

"You think France will make an attempt on her life?" Captain Dunois asks.

"No, but I am not willing to stake her safety on that." Duval turns to the window and rubs a hand over his face. Between Isabeau's death and this, he appears to have aged ten years in a single night. "There has been no word from Ismae?"

It is not clear whom he is asking, so I glance at the abbess. She gives a curt shake of her head, then realizes he cannot see it. "No, my lord. There has been no word. But as it was not a convent-sanctioned escapade, I do not expect she would be in contact with me."

He sends her a searing glare that would shrivel a lesser woman, then turns to me, his face more gentle. "Have you heard anything?"

"No, my lord."

"Very well. But if you do, send word to me immediately. I have promised my sister I will help with the funeral arrangements." At the words, a fresh wave of grief passes across his face. He is such a good tactician, so great a strategist, that it is easy to forget he is also an older brother who has just lost a sibling.

There are a hundred small details to be seen to in order make certain that Isabeau is laid to rest with all the honor and respect due her as a princess of Brittany. She was beloved not only by Anne and her family but by the people as well.

The duchess is so pale as she works with her ladies to prepare Isabeau's body that I fear she will fall ill too. The young princess is dressed in her favorite gown of crimson velvet, and Anne herself braids the pearls into her long brown hair. On the day of Isabeau's funeral, the cortege carries her to the great cathedral in Rennes, where she is buried beneath the choir.

I have not talked to Balthazaar. It is too hard to think of him as Death since the night He—no, he—carried Isabeau away. It is nearly impossible to reconcile my roguish, moody hellequin with Death. I climb the stairs, moving slowly. I am

still uncertain of what to say, how to be with him. I cannot treat him as if he were still simply Balthazaar. And yet, the idea of treating him as formally as I would Mortain feels equally wrong, for we have been much more to each other than that.

The thought has me blushing. To have lain with a god and not even known! Truly, I am three kinds of fool. But looking back, I feel as if my heart has always known. How else to explain that sense of recognition, of connection, that I felt at our first meeting? Is that even possible? For our hearts to know things that our minds do not?

Would he ever have told me if I had not asked him to escort Isabeau? That is one of the questions that has been tumbling around in my mind for the past three days. Was he trying to trick me? And why does he carry my arrow with him?

My fear is that I somehow called him to me, much as Arduinna binds hearts with her arrows, and that feels like another sort of trickery all its own. One that I never intended.

And how will we ever be together again? It was bad enough to have fallen in love with a hellequin, but to fall in love with Death? Surely there can be no happy ending to *that* story.

When I reach the battlements, I take a deep breath, then step outside, grasping my skirts firmly so that I will not feel the trembling in my hands. As I make my way to the shadowed corner, all the clever things I have thought of to say, all the burning questions I have wrestled with coalesce into one: Why me?

Unable to help myself, I slow my steps before I reach the corner. As I take another deep breath to fortify myself, Balthazaar's low deep voice rumbles out into the night. "I wondered if you would ever return." While his voice is teasing, I can hear the thread of true worry that underlies it. Then he steps out of the shadows, onto the catwalk.

"My lord." Without conscious thought, I start to drop to my knees.

"Stop." The feel of his hand grasping my arm startles me into silence.

I long to look up, to see his face, to try to discern if he is angry or amused or any of a hundred possibilities. But I am too embarrassed and feel far too foolish.

"Do not treat me differently now. Please." The annoyance and frustration in his voice sound so much like Balthazaar that it is almost possible to forget all that has transpired.

I sigh. "I do not know whether to rail at you in anger or beg your forgiveness."

He lets go of my arm. "Most likely there will be both before we are done, but know this: You have nothing to ask forgiveness for. It is I who tricked you, although I did not intend it to be a trick."

I do look up at him then. "What was your intent?"

His dark, depthless eyes study me a moment, as if he himself is perplexed by the question. Then he goes to lean against the parapet and stares out into the night. He runs his hand through his hair, and in that moment, he is so much a man rather than a god that the tight iron band around my lungs loosens somewhat.

“Once, I was so much a part of both life and death that time had no meaning for me. My existence was as much about beginnings as it was endings. People recognized that death was part of the journey, not some grim punishment meted out for one’s sins. But over time, and with the help of the new church, my existence narrowed so that all I was and would ever be was Death. Oblivion, at best, and at worst, eternal hellfire and damnation. Everything that gave purpose and meaning to my existence was stripped from me.”

I grow very still.

“I had been reduced from a god who brought death with one hand and used it to create life with the other to a demonic specter of the night used to frighten people into complying with the new church’s beliefs. I found myself the ruler of only half a kingdom, and it was the terrifying, feared half.”

“Except for the convent,” I whisper.

He nods. “The convent remembered me as I was, as well as small pockets of people here and there. Enough to sustain me, albeit in a reduced existence. To ease my loneliness, I sought a wife—”

“Amourna.”

“No. Not Amourna. Arduinna.”

I suck in a breath. “So it *was* a mistake.”

“Yes. A horrible, tragic mistake that ended so disastrously, I resolved to simply be with those mortal women who invited me into their beds. But those moments were always fleeting and did little to ease the loneliness that grew inside me. If not for my daughters, who maintained a faint thread of connection with me through their worship, I think I would have gone mad.

“Then, into this grim existence, a new heart opened up to me, as unexpected and surprising as a rose blooming in the dead of winter. This heart was not praying for deliverance or offering herself to me rather than her loutish husband. This heart simply belonged to a small, pure soul, one who brought a glimmer of joy to me once more.

“One day, this soul cried out in terror, and she was so open to me that I heard her. I, who had not been invited into anyone’s life in centuries, had a purpose. And so I went to her, and being with her eased that great loneliness in my soul in a way that lying with all those other women had not. So even as I comforted her, she comforted me. Even as she was nourished by our connection, I was fed as

well. For a short span of time—months? Years? I do not know—I was not lonely.

“And then, it stopped. As if a door had been slammed in my face. And once again, I knew despair.”

“I was that soul,” I whisper.

He turns to face me, his eyes bleak with his painful memories. “Yes. You filled a hole that I had all but forgotten about.”

“But I was only five years old.”

He shrugs. “In the world of spirit, where I most often reside, a soul—and the light it shines—is utterly removed from such things as age. I did not know you were a child until I came upon you in the cellar, and then it was too late. I was caught. You prayed and chatted with me constantly, and I did not have the strength to let go of the gift that you offered. It was like bread to a starving man.

“Then later, when that barrier came up between us, it was as if the sun had fallen from the sky, and my existence became even more miserable than before because you had reminded me of all that I missed.”

“And yet,” I say, remembering those long hard years, “you never abandoned me. Even when you thought I had turned my back on you, you did not turn your back on me.”

He turns away, as if embarrassed. “But then you sent me your arrow, and I could not understand why you would do such a thing. It felt like a taunt, and it enraged me, filling me with equal parts hope and fury, and I could not tell what you truly wished from me.

“I had not decided what I would do about it, but I carried the arrow with me. I carry it still,” he says.

“I know. I saw it. That’s why I ran away from the hunt. I thought the hellequin had been sent to punish me for having left the convent without your permission.”

He looks taken aback—almost affronted—that I would think such a thing.

“I am sorry. It was a threat the nuns used with us when we were young, and I believed them.”

“You never needed my permission. You were always free to come and go as you pleased.”

“But that is not what they teach us,” I murmur.

He frowns, distracted by my words, but continues his tale. “And then one night, while I was leading the hunt, there you were. Standing with your back to a tree, making ready to take on the entire hunt if need be. Looking at you opened old wounds.” He clenches his hands into fists. “I hated that I could be made to want again.” He lifts his face to the stars, as if he is too embarrassed to look at

me. “I wished to understand the nature of you, the *why* of you. And so I decided to take you with me.”

“If I recall, I came willingly.”

He tilts his head. “Somewhat. Although I would have insisted either way. I had lost you for long years and was not about to do so again, not until I was ready to set you aside.”

My stomach drops all the way to my toes at his words. “And are you?” I whisper. “Ready to set me aside?”

His eyes burn into me. “No.” After a long moment in which I must look away under the intensity of that gaze, he whispers, “So, what happened? Why did you shut the door and stop letting me in like that?”

“I told someone I had seen you. And I was punished for it, told I was lying, making things up. And so it became my secret, something that I shared with no one. But I was eventually caught out—and punished.” Brutally, but I do not tell him that, nor do I tell him the nature of the punishment, for it shames me still. “Shortly after that, the abbess who made my life so harsh died, and fear was no longer my constant companion. I did not feel as if I constantly walked the razor’s edge between life and death, and so my need for you lessened.” But also, the cost of opening myself to him had proved too great. “With the new abbess, I had been given a new chance, and I did not wish to risk making the same mistake.”

He reaches out and takes my hand in his own, gripping it firmly, as if he could pull me out of the dark confines of my memory. “And thus at a young age you became acquainted with the limits of Death and His power.” He closes his eyes, but not before I glimpse the anger and regret that fills them.

When he opens them again, he looks to the sky. “Dawn is coming.”

I am not ready to leave. There is still so much we must talk about. “When will I see you again?”

He holds very still, as if hope is some fragile thing he must coax forth bit by bit. “Would you like to?”

“I would. I am not done with trying to understand what is between us.”

He smiles then, and bows, then disappears into the shadows.

Chapter Forty-Six

“THE NEWS IS NOT GOOD.” Captain Dunois’s face is gray—with exhaustion or worry, I cannot tell. Perhaps both.

Duval glances at the duchess. “You do not need to be here, you know. We can handle this for you, at least for a little while longer.”

“No.” She gives a firm shake of her head. “I will not abandon my responsibility and let the hard decisions be made by others.”

Duval motions to Sybella. “Tell us.”

“There are fifteen thousand troops outside Rennes.” A gasp goes up around the room; no one expected that many. “It looks as if the bulk of them will be camped south of the city, with maybe a third of their forces in the north.”

“So we are surrounded,” Duval muses. “Even if someone were to send help, they would have to fight their way through the French to reach us.”

“Exactly so.” Sybella glances at the duchess as if she is loath for her to hear what she has to say next. “They have also brought the engines of war with them. Catapults, scaling towers. Cannon.”

The duchess looks like she might faint. “They would destroy the city itself.”

Captain Dunois tries to offer her some small comfort. “It is possible—probable even—that they are to be used as a threat only, for it would bring the king little joy to take possession of a ruined city.”

Duval turns to Marshal Rieux. “And what do you have to report?”

“Equally unwelcome news, I am afraid. Four more cities have fallen to the French, and they have retaken Vannes. The entire south of Brittany is now in their hands. Parts of the west as well.”

We are all of us stunned into silence at this sobering turn of events.

“Which means we have lost,” the duchess whispers.

No one contradicts her. Dunois says, “The British captain has sent word that if you leave now, before the French cut off all the routes, he can get you to the coast and take you to the Netherlands. From there he can get you safely to your husband, the Holy Roman emperor.”

“And abandon my people? What sort of craven do they take me for?”

Beast clears his throat, and Duval motions for him to speak. “It might be the only way we can keep you safe, Your Grace.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the conditions in the city have deteriorated greatly. With the coffers

empty once more, the mercenaries now loot and raid the city, treating the townspeople's homes and businesses like their own personal larders.

Unfortunately, the foreign troops here in the city greatly outnumber our own Breton troops, and it is all we can do to keep them in check."

"What of the Arduinnites?" At my question, everyone turns and looks at me.

"They offered their help weeks ago, and we have yet to take them up on it. Would they not be put to good use protecting the citizens of Rennes? It is their calling, you know, protecting the innocent."

"Yes." The duchess's voice comes swift and firm, cutting off any possible argument. "Let us accept what generous aid these women offer us. You will arrange it?" she asks me.

"Of course, Your Grace."

I grab my cloak and hurry from the palace. The French troops' circle around the city is drawing tighter, but it has not closed yet. It is easy enough to go into the stables, saddle Fortuna, then slip out the postern gate without being noticed. It is harder to avoid the sentries at the Arduinnites' encampment. Before I have spotted them, I hear a command to halt. I look up into a tree, where an Arduinnite I do not know is straddling the branch, her arrow aimed directly at me. "I have come to see Floris," I say. "Please tell her that Annith requests an audience."

She stares at me a moment, then nods her head. Another woman separates herself from her hiding place in the tree and disappears toward the camp. All I can do now is wait. Although it is hard with the sentry's eyes on me and her arrow at the ready, I ignore her and turn my attention to the sparse woods around me. The night is cool rather than cold, with the breath of late springtime upon us at last. I let my mind flow once more over the words I must say to Floris and think how best to say them, for Arduinna's followers have proven themselves a prickly bunch and I do not wish to risk raising old angers or feuds when I wish to bring the duchess some solutions.

That is my answer. The duchess, for it is she whom the Arduinnites have agreed to help. I will tell them of Isabeau's small offering to them on behalf of her sister. Perhaps that will soften their hearts.

Besides, I must know the truth of what lies between Arduinna and Mortain so that I may better understand the man—the god—who has captured my heart. For it comes to me then that beyond all that is reasonable or sensible or even explicable, I am in love with Balthazaar.

It does not come like a thunderbolt from the sky, nor does it clout me alongside my head like a hammer, but seeps slowly into my consciousness, like

a tendril of mist or a trickle of water from an underground stream.

But why? He is stubborn and close-mouthed and half drowning in despair.

And yet . . . something about him fits so comfortably against my own heart.

And though I wish I could have scraped together enough common sense to avoid falling in love with a bedamned god, apparently it does not matter to my heart one whit whether he is a hellequin or the god the hellequin serve—for other than a faint sense of awe and incredulity, my feelings for him have not changed.

There is a whisper of movement, then the sentry who was sent with my request appears before me. “Floris will see you,” she says, doing a poor job of keeping the surprise out of her voice. “You are to follow me.”

She leads me, still on Fortuna, from the trees toward the scattering of campfires and the small dark mounds that I recognize as tents. Someone at the nearest fire lifts a hand in a cheerful wave, and I recognize Tola. She rises to her feet and lopes toward me, still holding the joint of meat she was having for supper. “What brings Mortain’s own out of her mighty palace?” she asks, but there is no sting to her words, only a friendly teasing.

“I find I miss the smell of wood smoke and grew tired of eating off plates.”

She grins back at me, quick and easy. “By all means, join us.”

I look down at the haunch she is gnawing on and realize how very long it has been since I have eaten. “I am actually here to see Floris. I bring word from the duchess.”

The woman leading me stops suddenly, and I must rein in Fortuna so she does not trample her. “You may tie your horse up here,” she says, indicating a slender tree.

I dismount, then secure the reins to one of the branches. Tola takes one last bite of her dinner, then tosses the bone into the nearest campfire. “I’ll take her,” she says to the other woman, who shrugs, as if it makes no difference to her, then steps away.

I smile. “I have missed you.”

She grins, then leads the way to the largest of the tents, set up toward the back. When we reach it, she holds up her hand to stop me, then slips inside. Two seconds later she is back, holding the flap aside and motioning me in.

Inside the tent, Floris sits near the fire, flanked by two older women whom I vaguely recognize from my time with them.

“Annith,” she says softly, her face calm and serious.

Even though it is not their way, I curtsy before her, wanting to demonstrate the respect I have for her. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice and at such a late hour.

“The duchess has sent me to accept your offer of help. Inside the city, we are much beset by the very mercenaries she needs to defend us against the French. They grow bored and restless with the waiting. Even worse, with the French troops encircling the city, the mercenaries are demanding their pay, but her coffers are empty. They have taken to terrorizing the citizens of Rennes as their pastime, and I told her that protecting the innocent was the nature of your service to the goddess. Will you help?”

“But of course we will help.” Floris looks out toward the twinkling campfires of the French. “They will have the city fully surrounded in another day or two.”

“I know. There has been a steady flood of refugees ever since their banners were first spotted.”

“They’d best hurry, for once the French are in position, no one will be able to get in or out of the city.”

In the silence that follows, I wish to ask her if she will tell me her story of Arduinna and Mortain, to see if it is the same as the one Father Efram and Mortain have told me. But as closely as they hold their secrets, I dare not ask. Especially not in front of so many.

The following day, Duval, Dunois, and Beast spend their time poring over maps, trying to mark the French encampments. The duchess excuses herself and retires to her solar. Or tries to. She is exhausted but too ill at ease to be able to rest. In the end, she takes herself and her ladies off to the cathedral to pray beside Isabeau’s tomb.

I have little enough to do except worry about Ismae and miss Sybella, who awoke late while we were in the council meeting and has now taken herself to the convent of Brigantia to spend time with her sisters. Isabeau’s passing has made them all the more precious to her.

As I pace in front of the fireplace, my eyes fall on the black box, now splintered and broken, and I remember the arrow. I hurry over and dig through the wreckage. The moment my fingers touch the slim, dark wood, a deep knowing runs through my fingers. I pull the arrow out and carry it over to study it in the light from the window.

I think of the story both Father Efram and Mortain told me, how Death’s capturing Amourna was naught but a mistake, a wretched, human mistake, and how it was Arduinna whom he had loved all those centuries.

I think of the Arduinnites, who have refused to share their story with anyone and let us all assume it was because they did not wish to contradict either Dea Matrona or Amourna and prove either of them wrong. But of a certainty, pride goes hand in hand with ferocity. What if they simply could not bear for the

world to know that Arduinna had been rejected for her younger, fairer sister? Floris as much as admitted that Mortain had played her goddess false.

The fragment of the arrow I hold is older than anything I have ever seen except for the standing stones and cromlechs that litter the countryside like discarded playthings of the gods. The wood is so hard as to almost be stone, and the arrowhead is of some metal—bronze, I think—gone black with age.

The implications send me reeling, for they are almost too incredible to believe. And yet . . .

And yet, why else would an ancient arrow be kept in the heart of the convent, concealed in a box with no means of opening it, as if Mortain himself were hoarding some small keepsake of his lost love?

What if I am holding the last of Arduinna's arrows in the palm of my hand, a true relic of the gods?

My mind gallops over everything I have ever heard said of Arduinna and her arrows. That they fly straight and sure, that they never miss, and that they bring the pain of true love to those that they strike.

My pulse starts to race. What if we could take this relic, the ancient weapon, and find a way to use it to the duchess's advantage?

As I turn the arrow over and over in my hand, an idea of how to not only avert war but turn this defeat into a triumph for our duchess begins to form. A triumph of not just politics, but the heart.

Chapter Forty-Seven

“WELL?” I ASK IMPATIENTLY. “Do you think it could work?”

Father Effram studies the arrow, his hands tucked into his sleeves as if he is afraid to touch it. “It is *possible* . . .” He looks up at me, his eyes alight with excitement. “Probable, even, for as you say, why else would the convent of Mortain have held on to such a thing for so long?” He reaches out, his fingers hovering just above the arrow. “How very old it must be,” he muses.

“But what if I am wrong?” I clasp my hands together and begin to pace. “I do not wish to kill the king of France.”

“Don’t you?” He cocks his head, truly curious.

“No.”

He nods. “Well, then, I suppose there is one way to be certain. You will need to ask your abbess—”

“She does not know.”

“Well, someone should have the answers you seek. I admit, it is a most appealing idea.”

“I know the duchess does not wish all those deaths on her conscience,” I tell him. “And I know she is worried sick for all the countrymen who must die if we go to war. It is the only way I can think of to avert bloodshed.”

“Perhaps it is even worth the king’s life,” he suggests.

“No,” I say sharply. “It is not. Besides, the French regent would only seek retaliation, which would be swift and far more brutal than a simple war.”

“If a war can ever be called simple,” he murmurs. We stare at the arrow a moment longer.

“How do I ensure that if the king is struck with it, he will fall in love with the duchess rather than the one who has shot the arrow?”

His answer is swift and sure. “By putting the duchess’s blood on it.”

I look up at him in surprise, and he gives a sheepish shrug. “It is the only option that makes sense.”

I gently pick up the arrow, lay it on the length of velvet, and roll the fabric back up, my movements slow and reluctant. “I suppose it is time for me to have a talk with someone who knows.”

Because of my duties for the duchess, I am unable to slip away to the battlements for three days. The entire city is preparing for both a war and a siege, and the duchess's presence and authority are in much demand, as she is forced to make hard decision after hard decision. How many of the hundreds of people fleeing the threat of war can she allow into the city before our resources and supplies are stretched so thin that we assure only our own deaths by starvation or our quick surrender? Which of the many foreign troops that are garrisoned in the city can be trusted not to abandon their posts? Or worse, switch sides, given that they have been paid only a small portion of their fees and have little hope of receiving anything more than sad little coins made of leather, essentially worthless? It is one long endless heartbreak for her, and I do not envy her the task.

"You returned."

Balthazaar's voice unfurls from the darkness in the corner, and I whirl around to face him. "I did not mean to stay away so long," I say. "The duchess is beset by problems and we are busier than I would have imagined. She also misses Isabeau and hates being alone, and so she keeps me nearly constantly at her side."

"And you, Annith? Have you been eager to see me? Or are you still discomfited by my presence?" He says the words lightly, but something in his voice draws my gaze up to meet his. That is when I see him—Balthazaar is there in the bleakness and sorrow that lurks in Death's eyes, and I realize that whatever skin or body he wears, his heart spoke the truth to me, and my own heart responded. Even more telling, when I was most in pain, most in need of comfort, it was him I went to. Not Ismae, not Sybella, but him.

"I am growing accustomed to it all." I will him to see that I am telling the truth. Something in my face must convince him, because the pain in his expression eases somewhat. He glances down at the parcel I carry.

"What is that?"

"It is something I must ask you about. I . . . I found it at the convent, before I left, and took it not understanding what it was." I place the parcel on the flat surface of the crenellation and carefully unroll the velvet to reveal the arrow. I feel him stiffen beside me.

He stares at the arrow a long time, saying nothing. After a while, he reaches out and—almost tenderly—runs his finger along its surface. "It is mine, yes."

"And is it also Arduinna's?"

He looks at me. "Yes. It is the arrow she used to pierce my heart."

"So that part of the tale is true, then?"

“That she pierced my heart? Yes. But it is also true that it was pierced with love for her, not her sister. Nor do the tales mention that my hellequin—my damned hellequin—went out and captured the wrong sister, believing they were doing me a great service, for they thought her lovelier than Arduinna, and more biddable besides. They did not realize it was her ferocity and defiance that drew me to her. I knew she was one of the few who might be strong enough to survive in my kingdom.”

“Those that follow Salonius always claimed it was a mistake.” Balthazaar snorts. “They should know, as I believe he had a hand in it.” He shakes his head as if still unable to believe it. “How could I reject Amourna and tell her it was not she I desired, but her sister? She was soft and lovely and she was much taken with the idea of being queen of the Underworld.”

“But you loved Arduinna.”

“Yes. And she thought I had played her false.”

“What happened to Amourna? For she seems to have faded from the world even more than the other gods.”

“As I said, she was soft and somewhat flighty. At first, she loved being queen, but soon it no longer entertained her—it wasn’t the pageant and festivity she had been longing for, and the pain of loving the damned became too much for her. Slowly, over the centuries, she simply faded away, as the first flush of easy love often does.”

“And you were left alone, with neither sister.”

He looks at me, and I feel the force of his gaze like a blow as he takes a step closer. “Until you opened your heart to me.” I fear I will drown in that gaze, but I cannot look away. Giving me time to pull back or turn my head or do any number of things to let him know he is no longer wanted, he slowly lowers his lips to mine.

They are cool. Cooler than I remember. But the shape of them is the same, and the taste of him. But even more importantly—the need and longing his lips awaken in me has not changed. Slowly, we draw apart. “If you loved Arduinna, then why have you slept with so many women throughout the centuries?” I did not intend to ask such an artless question, but now it hangs in the air between us.

It is hard to tell in the dark, but I think his lips twitch with a hint of amusement. However, that is quickly chased away by the bleakness that is all too familiar. “It was the only way left for me to partake of life. All the other ways that I, that Death, had been a part of life were absorbed by the new church or forgotten and no longer celebrated.”

“Oh.” I do not know what to say to that, but it goes a long way toward relieving me of any jealousy that I had been harboring.

“Come.” He holds out his hand, and for a moment I panic, thinking he is going to ask me to lie with him again. I can’t. Not now. Or at least, not *yet*, for it is all still too new and strange and . . . overwhelming. “Sit with me,” he says, then lowers himself gracefully onto the ground.

I hesitate only a moment before allowing myself to be coaxed into joining him. We sit, stiffly, side by side. “You are one of her line, you know.”

“Whose?”

“Arduinna’s.”

I pull away from his shoulder and stare at him. “What do you mean?”

“You even bear her mark.” He slowly reaches out and places his finger just below my ear, then runs it along the sensitive skin at my throat to the back of my neck, making me shiver. “Here,” he says. “A small red starburst, Arduinna’s bite, they call it, although I do not know why, for she has never bitten anyone as far as I know.”

“How can that be? They told me that Arduinnites were made, not born.” I reach up to feel it, but my fingers discern nothing. This does, however, awaken the memory of Tola asking about a mark I had there. She *knew*.

He settles back against the wall. “Just because she marks you does not mean she has given you special skills or talents. But those who are conceived under the cloud of jealousy or through deceitful means are hers, for hers is the domain of those who feel love’s sharp bite and the pain of rejection. Whether or not they choose to act upon it is up to them.”

My mind goes immediately to the story the abbess—my mother—told me of her desperate attempt to win Crunard’s heart, although it had already been given to another.

“If you decided to wield that arrow, it would strike with love as permanent as if it flew from Arduinna’s own bow.” He reaches up and places his cool fingers against my cheek, turning my face toward him. “If you doubt me or my constancy, you have only to pierce me with it and you can be certain I will be yours for eternity.”

“But what of Arduinna? She pierced you once and you have not remained faithful to her.”

He drops his hand and turns away, but not before I see the old pain in his eyes. “That was because our ties became severed by the twin blades of pride and anger. Each of us had a hand in that. Even her gift can be eroded by those things. Eroded, but not destroyed.” His voice grows soft. “I do still love her, in a way. It is rarely a lack of love that forces two hearts apart, but other obstacles.”

It is all too easy to conjure up all the obstacles that face us, and it is tempting, oh, so tempting, to tie his love to me for all eternity so that I am the final one he

will ever love. But it is too close to what the abbess tried to do to me: to bind me so tightly to her that I could not love or live on my own, could not make my own choices. “No,” I say firmly. “I do not want a love if I must bind it to me in such a manner, for does not the very binding of it make it less like love?”

He smiles at me, one of his rare, dazzling smiles, as if I have pleased him beyond measure. He lifts my hand and brings it up to his lips, which graze against it tenderly.

“Besides,” I say, “there is something else I must do with it.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

AT THIS LATE HOUR, I find the duchess in her chambers. Duval is sitting with her, which causes me a moment of guilt—she must have sent for him because I was gone for so long. I sink into a deep curtsy. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace. I did not intend my errand to be such a lengthy one.”

She smiles, but it is a pale, watery thing that hurts to look at. “It is no matter. Come in, come in.”

Duval rises to his feet and excuses himself. Once he has left, I turn to the duchess. “I have something I would speak with you about.”

The duchess’s interest is piqued. “Pray continue.”

And so I lay out my plan before her, explaining the old power contained in the arrow and how it could be wielded for the country’s advantage. The duchess’s eyes grow brighter and brighter as I explain my plan, for she has struggled mightily to find some way out of this mess.

When I am finished, hope teeters in her face, then slowly seeps away. “It is a fine idea,” she says at last. “Except that I am already married.”

A situation that is all too easy to forget, with as little help as her lord husband has provided her.

“Only by proxy,” I point out. “And it is not consummated. You agreed to the marriage in the belief that it would help you hold on to Brittany, but instead, it has had precisely the opposite effect, driving France to move more openly against us. It has proved a poor bargain.”

The duchess rises to her feet, her hands clasped tightly together. “That is true, and I am sorry for it. But we are still bound before the eyes of God and the Church. We had a ceremony,” she says. “Presided over by the bishop and feted with a celebration. How can we just put that aside now? Besides”—her voice grows stronger and more laced with pride—“how can I consider marrying the man who has caused my kingdom so much woe?”

“Your Grace, we know that it was his sister the French regent who was behind much of what has transpired, as she held the kingdom for him.” It is so easy to forget that he is just a few years older than the duchess. “We do not know how much he was consulted in her plans and strategies.”

She presses her fingertips against her eyes. “This is all making my head spin.”

I am immediately contrite. “I am sorry, Your Grace. I did not wish to push so hard.”

“No, you are right to push for solutions.” The duchess gives me a grim smile. “Even though I am not certain I can do what you suggest, I thank you for at least bringing me a new option to consider. Odd, is it not, that those who have been the most helpful to me are my bastard brother and the ones who serve the old saints the Church would just as soon deny.”

“Every one of my allies has failed to assist in any meaningful way. Especially my lord husband.” Her words are bitter and laced with pain. “Unless God or His saints send me a miracle . . .”

“Could not this ancient magic at the heart of the old gods be a sort of miracle?” I ask softly.

“It could, but I fear breaking my vows. Besides, how can I marry King Charles? His family has been behind every grief that has befallen mine in the past fifteen years.”

“His *family*, Your Grace. Not him.” I think of the abbess and all that she has done in my name. “We cannot be held responsible for what our families do, especially when we have no way to control them.”

She nods, conceding the point, reluctantly. “But it will be delivering Brittany right into the hands of the French—something my father fought all his life to avoid, something I have sworn to prevent at all costs.”

“And yet,” I remind her, “you said yourself the costs might be too high. War is ugly and lives will be lost. Not only that, but in wedding the king of France, you would be setting Brittany’s true heir upon the French throne—you would bear that country’s future kings. Not an altogether bad way to maintain control of your duchy. Besides, I am not sure you are required to sacrifice your life—your chance at happiness—for your father’s goals.”

“No! It is my wish as well. It has been ever since I can remember.”

“But only because you have been raised to wish it,” I say gently. “It was trained into you just as surely as dancing or embroidery. But just as those are not truly you, neither is this desire for independence at any cost.”

She whirls on me. “Why are you so quick to surrender? To give up?” The moment she asks the question, I realize I will have to tell her who my father is, else, when she finds out, she will feel sorely betrayed and will doubt my loyalty.

Am I being quick to surrender? Is there some weakness, some traitor blood that flows in my veins? I consider a moment. “It is not that I am so very quick to give up,” I finally say, “but rather that I do not wish to spend my life pursuing goals that others have chosen for me. If I must perish, if I must stumble and fail, then let it be in pursuit of the ideals and dreams that I hold in my own heart.”

She stares at me a long moment. “I do not want all those deaths on my conscience,” she whispers. “Indeed, it haunts my dreams, and I fear that I will

not be able to live with myself.”

“I would have a hard time with that decision as well, Your Grace.” I take a deep breath. “In truth, killing holds little appeal for me.”

Her head jerks up in surprise.

“Oh, have no fear, I can fight better than most, for I am well trained, but I have never enjoyed taking life. And that was something I thought was a weakness of mine, something to be ashamed of and do penance for. I have spent my entire life praying for the strength to embrace killing.”

“And have you received it?”

“No. But I have learned something that I must share with you, something I have shared with few others.” I take a deep breath. “As it turns out, I was not sired by Mortain after all. I am not his daughter. My entire life has been a lie.” A bemused laugh escapes my throat. It still stuns me to say those words. “I have spent my life pursuing dreams and goals that were never mine to pursue. And one of the reasons I tell you this is that before you make a decision on the option that I have given you, you need to know the truth about not only me, but my true father.”

“Who is he?”

“Crunard, Your Grace. My father is Chancellor Crunard.” It is the first time I have ever spoken those words, and the sound of them echoing in the room is like a death knell for the person I have been all my life. Saying them, and to my duchess, no less, is akin to stepping out of an old skin and standing naked before the world. “There must be truth between us so you can make the best, most informed decision available to you. If I had hid my identity from you now, when you found out, you would always question my loyalty, and that would wound me greatly, for serving you has been an unexpected grace.”

She stares at me a long moment, her eyes wide and deep with thoughts. She shakes her head with a rueful smile. “I thank you for your honesty, Lady Annith, but be assured, I trust the counsel you have given me. As you say, I understand well how we can serve in spite of our parentage.”

Now it is my turn to give her a bemused look.

She smiles tightly and folds her arms across her chest. “Do you know how much Breton blood I possess?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“None. Not one drop. My father was a French noble who inherited Brittany from his wife.”

“Your mother.”

“No.” She gives a quick, firm shake of her head. “Not my mother. His first wife, the heir to Brittany, died years before I was born. My mother was also

named Marguerite, but she was Marguerite of Foix, not Brittany. So you see, the whole of my life has been a lie as well.

“But,” she continues, “the cause of Breton independence has defined my entire life, and in that I am more Breton than most of the Breton nobles, who have been receiving bribes and payments from the French regent for years.

“So instead, I will think of Brittany’s true people, those who have lived here since time out of mind and who have worked the land and built the castles and cathedrals and roads. Those are the lives I must weigh.”

And just like that, I know that it is time for me to meet with the abbess once more, for we still have much that lies unspoken and unsettled between us. But it is not her, or even the convent, that I must worry about. Like the duchess, my true concern is those whose lives will be most affected—all the girls that I have loved as sisters.

Chapter Forty-Nine

THE NEXT DAY, THE ABBESS forces me to wait for a full hour before she will see me. It is a rank display of power, and all the more pitiful for it. Luckily, it serves me well, for it allows me to run through a number of different ways the conversation can go. By the time I am finally admitted to her office, I am calm and sure of what I wish to say to her.

“Annith.”

She gives no greeting, but merely says my name, so I do the same. “Reverend Mother.”

I add a shallow curtsy to maintain the pretense of respect, but it is shallow enough that she knows that’s all it is—a mere formality and devoid of the former esteem and admiration I once felt for her.

“I am hoping you are here to tell me that you have come to your senses and will be returning to the convent immediately.”

“On the contrary, I am here to tell you that this cannot go on. You cannot keep serving as reverend mother. It corrupts the very nature of what we do and whom we serve.”

Her nostrils flare with irritation. “We have no choice, don’t you understand? Besides, no one except you knows or even suspects.”

I think back to the probing glances Sister Serafina often gave me and to the openly hostile manner of Sister Eonette. “I am not sure that is true.”

“How do you propose that we go about this?” She spreads her arms wide as if it is too big a thought to put her arms around. “How do we tell them?”

“I do not know; it is not my sin to confess.” I meet her gaze steadily.

She leans back in her chair, a smile playing about her lips, a smile that sends a whisper of unease down my spine. “You are every bit as culpable as I am, make no mistake.”

I frown in confusion. “What do you mean? I was a mere infant; I did not ask to be brought there.”

She picks up a quill from her desk and examines the tip. “Do you remember the great tragedy?”

The sinking feeling in my gut reminds me of why I have been so reluctant to confront her again. “Yes,” I say quietly. “Of course I do. We lost four beloved nuns.”

She picks up a knife and begins sharpening the point of the quill. I want to

shake her and scream at her to stop. Instead, I clasp my hands tightly together and wait for whatever is coming. “Do you also remember how, a few days before that, you and I went out for a walk and carried a small luncheon with us?”

The sinking feeling now turns into a sick churning. “Of course I remember.” It was one of the rare special outings Sister Etienne and I were allowed.

She finally looks up from the quill, piercing me with her cold blue eyes. “Do you remember what else we did that day, besides walk the island and picnic?”

“We picked mushrooms,” I whisper.

She sets the knife and quill down and folds her hands in front of her.

“Exactly.”

Dread begins to seep into my bones. “But you said they were the safe ones!”

She tilts her head to the side. “Did I?”

“Of course you did, or else I would never have touched them!”

“Odd. I don’t remember that conversation.” She leans forward, face triumphant with victory. “It was you, Annith, you who picked the mushrooms that killed the nuns that day.”

Awareness slams into me like a battering ram. “But, but if you knew, why didn’t you throw them away?”

“I had to do something to save you from that woman. She was going to kill you. And you—obedient, besotted sheep that you were—you were just going to let her.”

My mind reels. I had thought that learning I was not sired by Mortain was surely the worst shock of my life, but even it pales when compared to this. “And you let Sister Magdalena take the blame for it?”

“Sister Magdalena was old, well past her time, and she had begun to suspect, I think.”

A fresh wave of insight crashes over me. “It was you who made Sister Vereda ill as well, wasn’t it!”

For a moment, she simply stares at me, then inclines her head. “Yes.” Her voice softens. “But I had learned much and was more subtle. I made certain only to sicken her, not kill her. But she too had begun to question things that she saw. Things that she did not understand. And I had orders, orders that could not come from her.”

“Crunard was blackmailing you.”

“Yes.” Her voice is as flat and hard as her eyes. “If I did not help him, he was going to expose me to the world. He did not know about you. I made certain to keep that from him.” She drops her head into her hands for a long moment.

When she looks up again, her face is soft, pleading. “Don’t you see, sweeting? That is why I was going to have you be seeress. Together we could decide what

would be best for the convent and the country and we could steer the others to fulfill those plans.”

“Were you ever going to tell me all this?” The force of this second betrayal nearly brings me to my knees, for I had come to understand why a desperate young mother might need to take shelter. But this . . . this committing murder—and now, years later, laying it at my feet—has turned my entire world upside down. “How were you going to force me to See what you wanted?”

“You were always biddable and obedient. At least, before Sybella arrived. You seemed to sense what others wanted or needed from you and were only too happy to provide it. I was simply going to let you continue on that course. That and help you interpret your visions and read the signs of augury.”

“That is why you sent Sybella away so soon!”

“She was ruining you. Corrupting your innocence and your cooperativeness. She was ruining Ismae as well,” she adds as an afterthought.

“She was my friend. And your *sacred* charge, and you betrayed her for your own ends.”

The abbess lifts her shoulders in a cold, unfeeling gesture. “She was not you, and you were all that I cared about. All that I still care about.”

I feel sick, tainted with the stain of her sins.

The abbess stands up and comes around to my side of the desk. She reaches out to take my hand, but I jerk it away from her. Pain flares in her eyes. “You were to be my sacrifice to Mortain,” she says. “My penance. My atonement. By dedicating you to His service, I was certain He would grant us forgiveness.”

“But it was not *your* life to sacrifice to him.”

“If not for me, you would not have had life in the first place. If not for me, that wretched Dragonette would have killed or maimed you.”

I clench my fists in frustration. She is right. In some ways, I owe her much. But not my life. My gratitude, perhaps. And my loyalty?

It feels as if she lost her right to that when she murdered people and tried to blame it on me. Slowly, I look up and meet her gaze. “I owe you nothing.” My voice is quiet but sure. “Any loyalty or respect I might have felt for you was lost the day you killed others and risked young girls’ safety to try and shelter me.”

She reels back, as if my words have the force of a blow. After a moment, she puts her hands into her sleeves and returns to the other side of the desk. “Very well.” When she looks at me again, she is all business, any signs of the pleading mother gone. “Then I will give you what you have always wanted. If you say nothing of this to anyone, you can be an assassin. I will not make you seeress. I had hoped to protect you, not only your physical self, but your immortal soul as well. But if you do not care, so be it. You have only to hold your tongue.”

I nearly laugh at how little she offers me and how far too late it comes. “No. I will never serve under you, nor carry out your wishes. I will not even maintain this charade of yours much longer.”

Then I turn and leave the room, every belief I have ever held, about myself, the abbess, even the world, crushed beneath her crimes.

It is time to have Father Efram call a convocation of the Nine.

Chapter Fifty

THREE DAYS LATER, I am in the solar with the duchess and her ladies in waiting. They are stitching, but I find I cannot sit still. I feel as if every bone in my body has been taken out and put back in in the wrong place, and I must relearn how to move, to think, to act. I try to be subtle about it, but the duchess keeps glancing in my direction, looking as if she is about to say something then changing her mind. I am supposed to offer her protection and comfort, not disturb her with my restlessness. I have just decided that, propriety be damned, I will tie myself to one of the chairs in order to keep still when there is a commotion just outside the door. The duchess and I exchange glances, then I move in that direction, my hands reaching for my weapons. Just as my blades clear their sheaths, Duval comes through the door. His eyes are bright and tension runs through his body like a bow that has just been drawn. He glances at my knives, nods in approval, then turns to the duchess. "Ismae has returned," he says, and it is impossible not to love him a little for the relief that colors his voice. "She wishes to speak with you immediately."

The duchess has already risen to her feet and is handing her embroidery to one of her attendants. "Shall we call the other councilors?"

"Yes."

Duval sends a swarm of pages off to collect the others, then together, the three of us make our way to the council chambers. When we arrive, we find Ismae already there. She has not taken the time to change from her traveling gown. "Your Grace." She sinks into a low curtsy.

The duchess puts out her hand and helps her rise. "I am glad you are safely returned to us," she says.

"As am I. I only wish I had better news to bring you." Before she can elaborate further, the rest of the councilors begin filing into the chamber. The bishop and the abbess arrive together, a most disconcerting sight, and I cannot help but wonder if she has decided to try to curry his favor in preparation for the accusations I will soon be making.

When Sybella arrives and sees that Ismae is safe, her lips curve in pleasure, but she says nothing as she comes to stand beside me at our post behind the duchess's chair. She nudges my elbow with her own, whether in joy at Ismae's return or simply to annoy the abbess, I do not know. One never knows with Sybella.

When everyone is seated, Duval motions to Ismae. “Tell us what you have learned.” His face is tense and grim and I wonder if she has already told him what transpired in private.

“The French hold the city of Nantes easily enough—there is no resistance.” She glances apologetically at the duchess as she says this. “I was not able to get into the palace proper. They have double guards posted at every entrance, and everyone who comes through the doors must be vouched for by at least two others. They are taking no chances. They closed the gates to the city shortly after I got there and are not letting anyone out. There were also reports that they were going to post checkpoints along the northern roads.”

“They did,” Duval says. “They were able to intercept our scouts so that the army’s arrival caught us by surprise.”

“Just as I arrived in Rennes this morning, the French troops showed up in front of the city gate. I was one of the last they let through, and the gates were shut and bolted behind me.”

“And so it is official, then,” Duval mutters. “We are besieged.”

“With no help on the way,” Chalon adds. Duval looks as if he wishes to kick him.

Slowly, the duchess turns to me. Her dark eyes are haunted and in them I can see that she has turned over and over my suggestion. Winning the heart of the king of France is the only way to wrest some victory from defeat and save her people. “I think I would like you all to hear what Lady Annith has to say.”

There is a moment of stunned silence and the councilors exchange surprised glances, as if they are trying to remember who Lady Annith is.

The duchess continues. “We have one last option, one that Annith brought to my attention only a short while ago. It is . . . far-fetched, to put it mildly, and I do not know if it can be done, but I would have her tell you, so we may at least discuss it. Lady Annith?”

I take a deep breath and tell the Privy Council of the last of Arduinna’s arrows that I possess and what I believe we may use it for. I direct most of my tale to Ismae and Duval, for they will be the easiest to convince.

As I had presumed, the rest of the council is skeptical of the plan. The bishop in particular looks both scornful and indignant. “But she has already married the Holy Roman emperor,” he protests.

“By proxy,” Duval points out.

Father Effram places a hand on the bishop’s arm, reining in his protests. “And it is not uncommon for the pope to grant annulments when the need for political expediency is great.”

“That is true,” the bishop reluctantly concedes.

Montauban and Captain Dunois are more polite in expressing their doubts over the plan. It is only Duval who seems truly heartened. He has learned of the old gods through Ismae, so he understands their power more than most. Only then, when I know I have his support, do I allow myself to look at the abbess. Her gaze is fixed on me, her rage etched in grim lines on either side of her mouth. If it were not for the presence of the council, I am certain she would fly across the table and strike me.

In the end, all on the council agree that it is worth trying, although the only reason the abbess does so is so that her lone objection will not be noted.

The rest of the council meeting turns into a planning session, for it is no small thing to work one's way into the heart of fifteen thousand French troops, locate their king, then shoot him with an arrow. Not to mention get back out again.

"She cannot go on foot." Duval gives a firm shake of his head. "It could take her days to walk through the encampment, allowing them far too much time to detect her. But more importantly, she would have no means of escape, for once the king has been hit, his guard will swarm her like flies."

"It is not impossible," Ismae points out with a glance in Sybella's direction. "She could easily post as a laundress or camp follower and go unnoticed."

"Not and make her way through thousands of French soldiers."

"Sybella did it."

"Briefly, and only to collect information. And while the army was just arriving and in disarray."

"We are trained to stealth and cunning." Ismae's voice holds a note of gentle reproach. "You do Annith a disservice by not trusting in her abilities."

Duval turns to me. "My apologies, Lady Annith, for it is not you I do not trust, but the fifteen thousand French soldiers. With that many men, there is just too great a chance you would be noticed, and your disguise will afford you little protection if you draw enough soldiers' interest."

"Sybella and I could go with her."

Duval snorts. "So you can gut every soldier who propositions you and leave a trail of dead bodies in your wake? I do not think that will help her go unnoticed."

Beast clears his throat—somewhat delicately, given his size. "Must it be her that shoots the arrow?"

Duval glances at me in question. My hand slowly drifts up to the back of my neck, my fingers seeking out the small mark that I have never seen. "Yes," I say. "It must."

"Why not one of the Arduinnites?" The abbess's voice is pitched high, shrill even.

I turn and look at her coldly. “To what purpose? I can ride as well as they can, shoot as accurately as any of them. What do we gain by asking them?”

“Your life,” Duval says gently.

I know he means well, that he has only my safety in mind, so I work to keep my voice level. “I am done sending others out to risk their lives while I sit safely behind. I will do this.” Besides, of all the great dreams I once had, of serving the gods, of making some contribution, this is now the only way I can do that.

“Very well. So Annith going by foot is out, as is sending others. No, Ismae.” Duval puts his hand up to forestall further argument. “The trick will be getting mounted riders through the encampment. Even a small group would be immediately noticed.”

“What if we just sent a full mounted guard and punched through the camp like a battering ram, clearing her a path to the king?” Beast says, and Sybella looks as if she will stride across the room and clout his thick head. “If we sent enough men, there should be some left to get her safely back.”

“Except,” Captain Dunois points out, “how will you get any mounted men out of this city without their being noticed? For once they are seen, the French archers will pick them off. Or send a matching force to fight them.”

We all grow silent, for that is indeed the biggest problem. Getting enough of a force—getting anyone—out undetected.

Duval sighs and scrubs his hand over his face. “Well, this will not be decided tonight. Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“Aye.” Captain Dunois’s voice is heavy with disgust. His face is nearly gray with fatigue, and my heart goes out to him. “There is a problem with the mercenaries.”

“What now?” Duval says in disbelief. “Dare I hope that they are killing one another?”

“No, but their numbers have dwindled all the same. It is the French, my lord. They have been in contact with the mercenaries.”

“How? All the entrances to the city are well guarded.”

“With this.” Beast dumps something heavy on the council table. It is a rolled-up ladder made of leather. “The French threw this up and over the wall, then climbed in.”

Duval looks as if he would like to strike something. “And to what purpose?”

“Aware of our empty treasury, the French have offered the mercenaries their back pay, as well as a bonus if they agree to leave the city.”

Duval looks as if he will be ill. “Double—no, triple—the perimeter watch.” He grimaces. “How many of the mercenaries have taken them up on their offer?”

“Nearly a third.”

There is a long moment of silence as that number sinks in. “Well, at least when the food stores get low, there will be that many fewer mouths to feed.” But for all the bright polish he tries to put on it, it is a grim blow indeed.

Chapter Fifty-One

WHEN THE COUNCIL MEETING is dismissed, Sybella and I are granted permission by the duchess to excuse ourselves from her service long enough to attend to Ismae as she refreshes herself from her travel. Upon reaching our chambers, we find that a tub has already been set up, and the water is still steaming. I help Ismae undress while Sybella pours three goblets of wine. She waits until Ismae has stepped into the tub, then hands me one. Over the rim of her goblet, she looks at me with her probing gaze. “How do you come to know so very much about Arduinna’s arrows?”

I quickly down half the wine. “I have learned some things. About the abbess and the convent. And myself.”

Sybella and Ismae exchange a glance, then Ismae motions for Sybella to hand her the soap. “Do go on,” Sybella says. “We are listening.”

How do I begin? What part of this tale will lead the most cleanly into the full story? “I found out why the abbess has refused to send me out on assignments and why I have been picked as seeress.”

Unable to meet their curious faces, I look down at the goblet I hold in my hand and rub my fingers over the finely chased silver etchings. The faint splashing of the water in the tub grows silent. Afraid my courage will fail me, I say the words in a rush. “It is because I am not sired by Mortain.”

“Sweet Jésus,” Sybella mutters.

“There is more,” I warn them, then take a deep breath. “The abbess is my mother.” I do not stop there, but keep going, much like one takes bitter medicine quickly so that it may be over with as soon as possible. “Crunard, my father. He had been blackmailing her with exposure in order to bend the convent’s will to his own wishes.”

There is a faint splash as Ismae rises from the tub and grabs a towel. “Oh, Annith!” she whispers.

“And even that is not all,” I say ruefully. “The abbess had been poisoning Sister Vereda to make her too sick to see what was afoot. Seven years ago”—my voice falters—“seven years ago, she poisoned three nuns, including the old seeress and the former abbess, in order to stage a silent rebellion.”

“She is even more ambitious than I gave her credit for.” There is a note of begrudging admiration in Sybella’s voice.

I shake my head, feeling sick all over again. “It was not ambition. It was

protection. She was trying to protect me.” I look over at Ismae. “Do you remember I told you about the former abbess making my life more difficult than that of most of the other novitiates?”

“I remember you wouldn’t say much about it.”

But now, now the words come pouring out of me, like ill humors from a festering wound that has been lanced. “They called her the Dragonette. She was beautiful in the way that a venomous spider is beautiful. She caught your eye with her sharp edges and distinct markings.” I glance up at Ismae. “Do you remember the test the reverend mother gave you the first day you arrived at the convent?”

Dressed in her shift now, Ismae slowly lowers herself onto the bed. “With the poisoned wine. Of course, I could never forget.”

Sybella sets down her goblet quickly. “What poisoned wine?”

“It was a way for her to test whether I was immune to poison or not,” Ismae explains.

“I was given that test when I was but four years old,” I say.

Ismae nearly comes up off the bed in her indignation. “Four?”

I nod. “I learned later that the test is never administered without some indication that the novice might be immune to poison. I had never demonstrated any such potential, but it did not matter. The Dragonette was determined to find all my hidden strengths and talents, then mold them to perfection in order to glorify both Mortain and herself.”

“Sweet Jésus,” Sybella mutters again.

I try to smile, but my lips will not obey. “Precisely. The first ten years of my life were one long test, a never-ending trial during which I had to be ever sharp and ever vigilant.

“That’s when I first began listening at doors—in the hopes that I could catch some hint or warning of what I was to be subjected to, and thus prepare myself. It is also, I suspect, why I became so very good at reading people, then doing what they wanted before they even asked. I had so few tools for survival. I had to use everything at my disposal.” The abbess’s words—*obedient and biddable*—still sting. “They are not traits I am proud of, but they did allow me to survive.

“Sister Etienne—for that was what she was called before she became the abbess—was the one bright spot in my life. She was my champion when I was young. Always saving me a bit of bread when I had been forced to go without supper. Letting me out of the wine cellar earlier than my punishments called for. Only now, with the knowledge that she was—is—my mother, can I understand how she must have suffered along with me.”

“No.” Sybella shoves to her feet and begins pacing the room. Her face is so fierce and holds such rage that I fear she would strike the abbess dead if she were in the room with us. “She did not suffer like you did—not even close, for there was nothing preventing her from taking you and fleeing in the middle of the night, which is what she should have done.”

“Perhaps she was afraid they would come after us? We have all heard stories of how they send the hellequin to punish disobedient novitiates. Mayhap she simply thought those tales were true.”

“So what brought this all to a boil?” Ismae’s voice is gentle, a calming counterweight to Sybella’s anger.

“It was a new punishment the Dragonette devised.” I do not tell them I was punished because she caught me one day leaving small offerings for Mortain at the doorway to his realm or that she heard me chatting with him in spite of my continued promises to her that I no longer believed I had really seen him.

“It was a cilice, a small silver chain into which sharp thorns had been affixed, meant to be worn around the skin at my waist.” I still remember the shame I felt as she lifted the skirt of my gown, exposing my lower body, and slipped the chain around my waist. Remember the bite of pain of each thorn as it pierced my flesh.

Ismae’s hand flies up to her lips. My own hand drifts to my stomach, and the scars that still encircle it. “It festered and grew foul, so that I was sent to the infirmary. Sister Serafina was the one who tended to me, her hands gentle and her manner calm. But I think she must have told Sister Etienne, for she found out, and soon after that, she and I had one of our special outings. We were to have a picnic and collect wildflowers. While we were out, we also gathered some mushrooms for the convent stew pot.

“Only, they were poisonous. She had told me they were safe, which is the only reason I picked them. But they were poisonous, and she let me pick them, and somehow she got them past the cook and slipped them into the pot. Three nuns died that evening, then Sister Magdalena, the old poisons mistress, killed herself, thinking it was she who had made the error.

“She used me to poison them.” Even now, the enormity of that betrayal forces all the air from my lungs and I feel as if I will never be able to draw a full breath again.

Suddenly, Ismae is at my side, taking my hands in hers, chafing them. Sybella’s arm snakes around my shoulders and she pulls me close to her. “No,” she whispers fiercely. “Don’t you dare think you had anything to do with that. It was not you, not even a little bit, it was all her.”

I close my eyes and bask in the solace they offer. “I know it with my mind, but my heart—my heart is still bruised and sick with it.”

Sybella gives my shoulders once last squeeze—so hard it is almost painful—then begins pacing again. “I shall kill her,” she says at last. “Clearly, she does not deserve to live. Clearly, she is not serving Mortain or even the convent—”

“But is she *marqued*?” Ismae asks quietly. “For unless a *marque* has appeared in the last hour, or exists under her gown, I have not seen it.”

Sybella’s face grows white with frustration, then she tosses her head. “It doesn’t matter. I shall kill her anyway.” And though she does not mean it—at least, I do not think she does—her saying it brings me great comfort. I take a deep breath and let myself feel the absence of the weight of all the secrets I have been carrying.

Well, not *all* the secrets. “There is more,” I offer shyly.

Sybella gapes at me, looking so comical that I must tamp down a desire to laugh. “*More?*” she says.

“I also have a lover.”

Sybella stares at me a long moment, then whoops out a laugh while Ismae has a turn at gaping at me. “I thought so, but then you said nothing, so I was uncertain.”

A smile catches at my lips. “I knew that if anyone could guess, it would be you.”

“But when have you had time to take a lover?” Ismae asks. “And where?” She looks around the room we have shared as if searching for signs of our stolen moments.

“You have not asked me who,” I point out.

“I’m not sure we can bear to learn of it,” Ismae says faintly.

“He is a *hellequin*.” They both stare at me, struck beyond speech. “Or so I thought. Until I learned that he was only masquerading as one. It is actually Death Himself whom I have taken to my bed.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

BOTH ARE SPEECHLESS for a long moment. Then Sybella huffs out a sigh and runs her hand through her hair. Ismae simply continues to stare. “Is this a jest of some sort?” she asks weakly.

“No, it is the truth.” Then I tell them of the night Isabeau died and the small boon I asked of the hellequin, and how that in turn led to me learning his true identity.

“But—but he is *our father*,” Ismae says.

My heart sinks as I realize I was right; this has the power to cause a divide between us, a divide that the revelation of my parentage did not. “Your father,” I point out. “Not mine.”

“The duchess came within a handbreadth of marrying *my father*,” Sybella reminds Ismae. “And I did not think any less of her for it.” Sybella’s voice is calm and free of any judgment. Of course, with her own family’s twisted past, she would have the easiest time understanding.

A new wave of horror crosses Ismae’s face. “Are you going to marry Death?”

“Marry him?” My laughter is tinged with mania.

Sybella’s face softens with sympathy. “Do you carry his child?”

“No!” My hands drift to my stomach. “At least, I do not *think* so.” Indeed, I had not even considered that, although clearly that is at the heart of his relationship with women.

“I’m sorry, Annith.” Ismae gets up from the bed to stand in front of the fire. She puts her hands out toward the flames, as if they have grown cold suddenly. “It just feels so . . .”

“Overwhelming?” I offer.

“Yes, but also unbelievable. Twisted. Like some cautionary tale of long ago. I feel like a snake must when he has accidentally swallowed a goat and is struggling to digest it.”

Sybella stares past Ismae into the flames. “I am beginning to think that love itself is never wrong. It is what love can drive people to do that is the problem. And this particular love is far less misplaced than some,” she says dryly.

“Besides”—her voice turns thoughtful, as if she is considering all the complex knots that must be untangled—“I am certain that the rules governing human hearts do not govern how the gods may love. We have only to think of the old

tales to know that. Even better,” she adds with a twinkle, “consider how furious the abbess will be.”

That surprises a laugh out of me, and she joins in. Ismae does not, but she does smile, which gives me hope. Sybella reaches out and pinches her cheek. “Do not be such an old wart. Does it not make perfect sense that our beloved Saint Annith has captured Death’s heart? Who else among us could have done so?”

I roll my eyes. “After all that I have told you, you should realize just how poor a fit the title of saint is when applied to me.”

Her face grows serious once more, filling with sincerity. “I think you deserve it now more than ever,” she says.

I let her words wash over me, as healing as one of Sister Serafina’s balms. “Thank you,” I whisper, unable to stop the tears that spring to my eyes.

“Oh no. Do not start leaking. Ismae, come over here and hug her so we can all pretend it never happened and get on with our lives.”

Ismae’s gaze meets mine as she moves away from the fire. “Of course I am amazed and admiring of all that you have been through.” When she reaches me she wraps her arms around me and holds me close. “As you say, it is all just a little overwhelming.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. As long as I know they are still my friends, as long as I know that our connection cannot be broken, I shall be fine.

Once they leave to see to their other duties, I go to stand before the fire, feeling once again as if I have been completely upended and remade anew, when in truth, I have barely caught my breath from the first time my life shattered before my eyes.

But this—this is different. This is no shattering, but rather some great knitting together of the broken pieces into a stronger whole.

I feel cleansed, not only of sin—but of artifice. I am stripped down to nothing but my raw self. As uncomfortable as it makes me feel, there is freedom in it as well, for there is no place left for others’ expectations and desires of me to hide. The worst things that I could have ever imagined have happened.

I turn and stare at my saddlebag, tossed carelessly in the corner. Slowly, I cross the room and kneel beside it. I reach in, down to the very bottom of the pack with the crumbs of hardened cheese, and retrieve the small calfskin-bound journal that I took from the abbess’s office: the Dragonette’s accounting of me, my childhood, of all the things she did to me, and all the ways I failed and showed my weakness. I have not read all of it, but I do not have to. I lived it. I remember. But I am not that child anymore. My younger self served me well, as

well as any child in her circumstances could have. But I have new strengths and skills that I can rely on.

I feel the weight of the pages in my hand, the heft of the secrets and shame written there, the complexity of the ties that bind me to the convent. Then I turn and hurl the journal into the fireplace. As I watch, the orange and gold flames lick at the pages, making them curl in on themselves and shrink like a dying creature. I close my eyes, feel the heat of the fire against my face, my arms, my heart, and let those same flames burn away the last vestiges of shame and humiliation and mortification. They are simply scars now, like the silvery white marks around my waist, a path to show how far I have traveled in order to get where I am. But they are no longer who I am, if ever they were.

And with that new realization comes another—I have always loved Death. Not as a father, but as a true champion, for that is how he first came to me. He showed me a capacity for love—for acceptance—that was greater than that of any human heart I had encountered.

Even Sister Etienne, as much as she was fond of me, or perhaps even loved me, our time together was always interwoven with her need to see that I was happy. She needed me to be happy like a fish needs water to swim—and so I quickly learned to be happy when I was with her.

Mortain's was the only love that placed no demands upon me, the only one who loved me for simply being. His love was as unwavering and constant as the sun. It was what gave me the strength to keep going. The faith to keep trying. The hope I needed to persevere. That was him all along—whether I called him Mortain or Balthazaar, my heart knew him, recognized him.

Filled with this new awareness, I leave the room and begin making my way to the battlements. He never saw my love as a flaw or a weakness, but instead accepted it, letting it flow into him like a stream tumbling across parched earth.

I eased his dreadful aloneness as much as he eased mine, and I welcomed that feeling, that I had something to give him in return.

Is that not as good a reason to love someone as any? Is that not, in fact, at the very root of why anyone loves another?

As I reach the landing and shove open the heavy door, I have another flash of understanding. On some level, the Dragonette saw all this. She saw the special connection I shared with our god and that was why she punished and shamed me. Not because she did not believe me, but because my seeing him set me apart from her made me special in my own way rather than by her efforts.

I walk to the far end of the catwalk, my head so full of this jumble of thoughts that I do not even see Mortain standing against the battlement until I nearly plow into him. He puts his hand out to steady me.

“My lord! I am sorry. I did not see you. Normally, you are lurking in the corners or skulking in the shadows, not standing in plain sight.”

His mouth quirks, ever so slightly. “I never skulk, and lurk only sometimes.”

I shoot him a disbelieving glance, then join him at the parapet, looking out over the eastern part of the city, past the wall to the fields below. “The French army will be here tomorrow,” I tell him. “The day after, at the latest.”

He pulls his gaze from the darkened streets and fields and turns it upon me. “I know. I can feel it, all those souls loosening from their bodies in preparation for their imminent deaths, like so much wheat making ready to loosen from the sheath. She has lost already, you know. Your duchess.”

Although he says nothing I do not already know, it is hard to hear it from the lips of a god. “I know. She knows. We *all* know.” I look up and study his profile, which is as still and calm as the stone beneath my hand. “Can you see what will come to pass? Do you know what will happen?”

He gives a single shake of his head. “No, for I am not all-seeing. Only Death is my realm, and I know well enough when it is near.”

“Do you know who among us will live and who will die?” I cannot help but think of Duval and Beast, of stalwart Captain Dunois, trying to turn a fractious, undisciplined group of mercenaries into a cadre of men who can withstand a siege. I think of the duchess and wonder if they will let her live. And what of us? Those who serve the old gods, the convent? Will we be punished for our role in helping her?

“Not yet. It is too soon. And even once the marquee is upon someone, it is not a guarantee of death. There are too many variables, many of which I do not control. It is only when one of my daughters serves within my grace that I am able to exert some small portion of control on things.”

Suddenly, he turns to me, his eyes burning. “You could come with me,” he says. “Come to the Underworld and be my queen.” Even as I gape in shock at this invitation, he shakes his head and turns away to look back out over the countryside. “No.” His voice is heavy with despair. “It would only force you to share my prison with me, and I will not subject you to that.”

I can see in his eyes, even though they are averted from me, and feel from the timbre of his voice just how sorely his entrapment chafes at him. Just how thoroughly it has corroded not only his view of the world, but his view of himself.

And that has been my gift to him. Not just now, or in the last few months, but since I was young, I have always seen him as a man and honored the gifts he brings to the world. I have loved him for those things long before I understood the nature of who he was.

I reach out and take his hand in mine. “I would gladly share your prison, but I am not worthy of such an honor. I am bastard-born, and mortal through and through, as I have surely proven to you over and over again throughout the time we have known each other.”

He throws back his head and laughs, surprising me. “And I am Death. Unwelcome, the thief in the night, destroyer of lives.” And that is when I see that he is in danger as well, in danger of believing all that is said of him, of forgetting his own true essence. He turns to face me, pulling me close. “Don’t you see? Your mortal heart shines like a candle flame and I, like one of those hapless black moths you used to leave as an offering, am helpless before its lure.”

I step fully into his arms, and place my head against his chest, his words wrapping themselves around me. To him, my brokenness, my muddied birth, my scars—none of that defines me, it is all encompassed within the entirety of who I am, just as Death encompasses sorrow and joy, justice and mercy, and the beginnings of new life. We are all of us, gods and mortals, made up of many pieces, some of them broken, some of them scarred, but none of them the sum and total of who we are.

I feel his heart beating against my ear, marvel that a god even has such a human thing as a heart. “It does not matter,” I say. “For there is something else I must do.”

“What is that?”

I take a deep breath, for I know he will not like what is coming. “Our country is beset from all sides and there is a chance that I have the power to help. So I must.”

He pulls back and stares down at me, brow furrowed. “How?”

“I will use the arrow—your arrow—on the French king and see if it will compel him to turn his affections toward our duchess rather than his armies.”

He gestures to the thousands of tents stretched out before the city walls. “You will have to ride through thousands of French to do it—surely that is madness. Impossible!”

“I think it can be done. At the very least, I have to try.” As I draw back to look at him, the sorrow and desolation I see is almost more than I can bear. I raise my hand and place it against his cheek. “Would that you could join me in my world, rather than me in yours.”

He grows utterly still, except for his eyes, which shine with intensity. “But I have no place there, not once my unwelcome duties have been seen to.”

I slip my arms up around his neck. “You have a place with me, in my heart, at my side.”

He laughs, a sour, distressing sound. “You would upend the very nature of Death so that we could be together?”

“I would, for I will no longer sit and wait patiently for my happiness to grow like some budding fruit on the limbs of a tree, but will mold it and shape it with my own hands.”

I find Father Effram in the chapel. He has just lit fresh candles and is placing them under the nine niches. “Father.”

He turns around, pleased to see me. “Annith. What brings you here so late at night?”

“I have a question I would ask you.”

“Another one?”

I wince at his words, until I see that he is teasing. Even so, I can only imagine what a trial I am making of myself.

“Oh, do not look so! I was only jesting. In truth, it is refreshing having someone to discuss these esoteric theological issues with.”

Feeling somewhat mollified, I approach the nave. “This will be my most far-fetched question yet,” I assure him.

He sets down the last candle and rubs his hands in anticipation, but I do not know how to frame the question. “If a god grows tired of his duties or is no longer believed in or worshiped, what paths does he have open to him?”

Father Effram holds very, very still. “Do you know such a god as this?” he finally asks.

Unwilling to lie to him, I shrug. “It is a question I have been thinking much upon lately, that is all.”

His face furrows in thought, his long bony fingers reaching up to pluck at his chin. He comes to some silent decision, then takes a seat on the prayer bench and motions for me to join him. “If a god should grow weary of his burden—and some do—there is a way to set aside their godhood, if they so choose.”

“Truly?”

“Dear child, when Christ died on the cross, He was not only creating a way for man to become immortal and live forever in God’s kingdom, but also showing those few immortals left in the world how they could become mortal if they chose. Thus they would be able to access the kingdom of heaven if they wished. God is the maker of all things, and He would never abandon any of His creatures.”

“So they—and those of us who worship them—are not outside His grace?”

Father Effram gives a firm shake of his head. “No. They were always part of His plans for this mortal world.”

“Do the gods themselves know this?”

He nods. “Yes.” There is an ocean of sympathy and compassion in his face. “Child.” He reaches out and takes my hand in his. “Your love cannot change a man—or a god. All it can do is open a door, create a new path for him to choose. One that has not been open to him before. That is what the power of your love can offer him—all of that, and no more.”

I look away. “I have no desire to change him, only to see him happy.”

“I am certain your love does make him happy. Whether it will give him the courage to step through that door remains to be seen.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

TWO DAYS LATER, the planning begins in earnest. The duchess insists on being a part of it, claiming if I can make the sacrifice, the least she can do is stay informed. Ismae and Sybella are there as well, but more as moral support, I suspect, than in any official capacity. The abbess too has somehow managed to worm her way into the proceedings, and it is all I can do not to ask the duchess to order her from the room.

Beast has invited both the Arduinnites and the charbonnerie to attend, arguing that they have skills and knowledge that may prove useful to us. The Arduinnites have only been helping with maintaining order in the city for a matter of days, and already he is impressed with them.

It is odd, seeing them in the same room as the duchess's formal councilors, yet it feels right that all of the country's forces, both the old and the new, should come together to find a way to turn the tides of war from our land. In spite of the Arduinnites' unusual dress and unrefined manner, their presence and bearing is as regal as the duchess's, and I am proud to be one of Arduinna's line.

We have just sat down—the bishop as far away from the Arduinnites as he can manage, as if he is afraid they will taint his own faith just by their proximity—when the door opens. Duval whirls around to face the interloper. “I told you we were not to be disturbed.”

Before the white-faced page can speak, a dark brooding figure fills the doorway. Without waiting for an invitation, he steps inside. Ismae gasps, her hand flying to her mouth, and Sybella's lips part in surprise, but no sound emerges.

Balthazaar walks slowly forward. “For too long I have kept to the shadows, and I will do so no longer. I would be a part of this.”

The bishop crosses himself, and beside him Father Effram bows low, his cowl falling over his head as he does. No one else says anything or ventures into the awkward silence growing larger by the moment. I rise to my feet and clear my throat. “Your Grace, Lord Duval, may I present my lord, Mortain.”

The duchess's eyes widen, but with curiosity and wonder rather than fear. She motions him forward. “Pray, join us.”

Duval grows distinctly pale, and even Beast looks caught somewhere between awe and discomfiture. But it is the abbess's reaction that is most satisfying. Her

entire body stiffens in surprise. Mortain turns to look at her a long moment, until she finally looks away, her guilt and shame burning inside her like a candle.

Duval clears his throat. “My lord. We were just discussing a way to get Annith into the French camp so she can fire Arduinna’s arrow at their king.”

“I know.” Mortain comes to stand next to Duval and looks down at the map the others have made. “Please continue.”

Duval tugs briefly at the collar of his doublet, then resumes. “I have been thinking, perhaps it would be best if Annith disguised herself as a camp follow—um, a laundress—as Ismae suggested, and insinuated herself into the camp. Then she could choose the right time to make her move. In the confusion that follows, there is a good chance she could easily slip into the nearby woods to hide for a few days.”

Mortain stares down at the map, one white finger tracing a line from the center pavilion off to the side of the camp where it meets the forest. “That is a lot of occupied ground to cover with no escort.”

Marshal Rieux gives a sharp shake of his head. “In any case, I’m afraid that it is no longer a possibility.”

“Why not?”

“Because this morning, scouts and sentries reported that the French are moving their scaling towers and cannon into range, even as we speak.”

“How soon until they will be ready to fire?”

Rieux shrugs. “It could be as little as two days from now.”

Duval swears a black oath. “So, even time is no longer on our side.” He runs his hand through his hair. “That reduces our options to an outright assault or a sortie of some kind.”

Captain Dunois furrows his brow. “Neither of which creates a clear path for getting the girl back to safety.”

“What if we created a diversion? Sent out a sortie to distract them, then sent out a second, smaller contingent to punch through to the pavilion during the ensuing scramble?”

“In addition to the second sortie,” Beast muses, “we could use our own cannon. Remind the French that we have them and maybe even take out a few of theirs while we’re at it.”

Mortain’s voice fills the room. “But that still leaves Annith’s safe return to chance.”

The room falls silent. “We could mount a full-scale charge,” says Marshal Rieux. “Use what remaining mercenaries we have left to us.”

“If they will even fight. Many of them will not until they are paid what is owed them.”

Captain Dunois rubs his face with his hand. “That reminds me. There is another contingent of mercenaries demanding to leave the city.”

Mortain looks quizzically at him, and Duval attempts to explain. “The French king is buying off our mercenaries, hiring them out from under us.” He turns to Dunois. “Let them go, and good riddance.”

“Wait!” Beast’s eyes grow distant, as if he is studying some invisible map that only he can see. “How many mercenaries are attempting to leave?”

“Three or four hundred.”

A grin spreads across Beast’s face, lighting it with a nearly unholy glee. “We have just found our way out of the city.”

Duval grins back, discerning his meaning at once. “Our forces can slip out with the mercenaries.”

Mortain plants his hands on the table and leans forward. “While it is an excellent plan for getting to the French king, it does not address how Annith will get safely back into the city.”

“We will have to plan two diversions and utilize our cannon. We could send a sortie out this sally port.” Duval points to the map. “The French would think we were taking advantage of the departing mercenaries when, in truth, we would be creating a diversion of our own. It is common enough for the besieged to make forays into enemy camp hoping to find food or loot of some kind.

“Then, even if the first group posing as mercenaries can’t get her back, the second group can clear a path for her.”

“But who will clear a path for them?” My question gives all of them pause. “We are trying to avoid countless deaths, not hasten them.” The duchess and I exchange glances, and suddenly, I have no idea how she has borne the weight of these decisions. I do not think I could bear it. “You are asking them all to sacrifice their lives simply to give me a chance to shoot the arrow. An arrow we do not even know will work—”

“It will work,” Mortain says.

“Even so, we cannot ask so many men to ride to what will certainly be their death.”

There is a long moment of silence. “That is what they are trained for,” Captain Dunois explains gently. “And they well understand the need for some to die in order that a great many more can live. It is the very nature of a soldier’s life.”

Mortain looks at me. “What if,” he asks softly, “we do not ask your men to ride to their death? Instead, we will ask those that are already dead.”

“The hellequin,” I whisper.

“The hellequin. They wish to atone for their sins and find redemption. I believe sparing thousands of lives will grant them that.”

The bishop clears his throat. "Can they be trusted to ride on such a mission without you leading them?"

Slowly, Mortain turns to face the bishop, causing the other man to flinch. The grim acceptance in his eyes causes a dark ribbon of unease to unfurl inside me, even before he speaks. "I will be leading them."

Father Effram steps forward, his hands clasped together and his head bowed in deep obeisance. "My lord, you do know what will happen if you choose to involve yourself in mortal affairs, do you not?"

Mortain looks at the old priest, almost as if he is surprised by his question. "I do," he says.

When no one says anything further, I cannot contain myself. "What? What will happen if you involve yourself in the affairs of mortals?"

Mortain looks back down at the map, avoiding my eyes. "Then I will die as one."

The duchess offers to prepare a chamber for Mortain, but he politely declines. We now stand up on the ramparts with the warm summer wind buffeting at our hair. "You cannot do it!" I tell him.

"You can give your life for your country but I cannot give my life for yours?"

"The weight of your life is far different from that of mine, measured out in centuries rather than simply years."

He turns away from me. "I have learned that the quality of life is not determined by its longevity. And I would argue that your life is worth more than mine. At least to me. Besides, the world is changing and the age of gods coming to an end. Just as smaller kingdoms are being devoured by larger ones, so too are we gods being assimilated by the One God. Our time is drawing to a close."

Almost as an afterthought, he swivels his head around and scowls down at me. "Do you think so very poorly of my military skills that you are certain we will fail?"

"No! But the whole reason you and the hellequin will be riding out is to save others from certain death. The nature of the mission hasn't changed—it is most likely a one-way ride. The only thing that has changed is that you will be going, and I am not certain if I can bear it if you don't return." Saying such things makes me feel slightly foolish, for we have not talked of a future together. Well, except for the suggestion that I join him in the Underworld.

However, if he is gone, I will be utterly alone, without even Mortain's presence to sustain me with his strength and courage as he did when I was a child, for the god will have stepped fully into the mortal world.

But, I remind myself, that is his choice to make, just as being the one to fire the arrow is my choice to make, and so I keep silent.

“What will you do?” he asks. “After.” He does not say after he has died, but the words sit heavy in the night air.

I stop and think. What *will* I do? I have given no thought beyond our goal. The answer comes to me, unexpected and surprising. “I shall return to the convent.” I pull his hand into mine and squeeze it. “I will return to the convent and tell the others of their father, and what sort of man—and god—he was.”

I have surprised him. After a moment’s silence, he smiles. It is white and dazzling and rips my soul fair in two.

“And then?”

“And then? I do not know.”

He looks down at our entwined hands. “I will wait for you. Before passing on to whatever is next, I will wait for you in the realm of death so we may travel there together.”

My eyes burn with the unexpectedness of his gift. “No,” I say fiercely. “I do not want you to suffer any longer than you must. You have already been stuck there an eternity.”

He smiles. “I will not be suffering.” He reaches out and places his palm upon my chest, over my heart. “You will always open to me. Through you, I will watch my daughters grow, feel the life flowing through your veins, bask in the love that fills your heart. It will pass like no time at all.”

He pulls me into his arms then, our time for talking over. He lowers his lips to mine, placing them over my mouth gently, our kiss bearing the weight of a thousand we may never have.

Chapter Fifty-Four

THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, in a distant corner of the city, just as the sun begins to drop low in the sky, the hellequin begin trickling over the city walls, using the very same ladder that the French used to breach our defenses. They come spilling over, a shadowed, rippling darkness that makes no noise. The air itself seems to recoil at their presence, and the few soldiers who witness it cross themselves, the utter paleness of their faces giving voice to their fear even though they do not.

My eyes go immediately to Balthazaar. He is at his most human, wearing black leather and chain mail. His cheeks are covered in dark stubble, disguising somewhat his otherworldly pallor.

Fifty of them have volunteered for this mission, including many that I know: Begard, Malestroit, Sauvage, and Miserere, who is the last to scale the wall. I try to assure myself that their presence has nothing to do with their knowing or caring about me—they are hellequin and have assured me dozens of times that they care for no mortal; they are intent only on redemption. Half will be escorting me, and the other half—led by Miserere—will be raiding on the French supply wagons, the diversion they have settled upon.

They will not be coming back. Their only role is to provide us an escape route to allow us to get from the king's tent back to the postern gate and the safety of the city walls.

Beast has found four charbonnerie to accompany us, their mission to get to the cannon and use them against our enemy and buy us time.

The Arduinnites too have joined us and have offered their archers to act as cover when needed. As they are the best archers in the land, we gladly take them up on it.

Marshal Rieux has secured the strongest, fastest, and most skilled horses to be found in the city, but Aeva surprises me by dismounting and leading her horse to me. "Here," she says. "Ride this one."

While it is kind of her—and she is rarely kind—I politely decline. "I wish to ride Fortuna, for she has been with me since the beginning of my journey."

"My offer is not a slight against Fortuna, who is a fine horse. But my horse has been trained in the ways that Arduinna does battle and has some skills that even the noble Fortuna does not."

"What sorts of skills?" I ask, intrigued in spite of myself.

“If you whistle, like this”—she puts two fingers in her mouth and lets loose a piercing note—“she will come to you. And if you press your knees and twitch the reins just so”—she demonstrates—“she will stumble and appear to fall, putting your opponent off-guard.” She goes on to show me a half a dozen tricks the horse knows, and in the end, I realize I cannot refuse her offer. Too much depends upon this mission’s success.

Captain Dunois has amassed a small mountain of gear from the mercenaries—hauberks, helmets, gloves, and the like, although in truth, there is not much difference between them and what the hellequin already wear.

It is I who have the most dressing up to do. They have refitted a special saddle for me, one that allows me to sit a little higher on the horse, giving me some much needed height. I am wearing two padded hauberks, which give my shoulders and chest some additional girth and have the added advantage of hiding my breasts. Over that I wear a boiled-leather jerkin, vambraces, and riding leathers. I do not understand how any soldier is able to move once he has been suited up.

When it is time for me to don my helmet, my accursed hair will not cooperate. “Perhaps a linen cap would hold it in place,” Sybella suggests.

“No. Just cut it off,” I tell her.

She pauses a beat, and I turn to look at her. “It will grow back. And it is not worth risking it coming undone at the wrong moment, for how would I explain myself then?”

“True enough,” she murmurs, then lifts her knife to my hair and chops it off.

As I try my helmet once more, there is a faint susurration of sound behind me. When I turn around, I see that the hellequin are pressing upon Sybella, requesting a lock of my hair to carry with them. For some reason, a lump forms in my throat; I do not understand why the hellequin would want such a thing, so I pretend I do not see and busy myself with the last step, smearing my face with charcoal dust to disguise the smoothness of my skin and my cleanliness. Then I take a few minutes to wave my arms back and forth and pretend to draw a bow, trying to adjust to the feel of the hauberks.

Finally, we are ready and mounted on our horses. “The French checkpoint at the main gate is expecting you,” Captain Dunois informs us. “The terms have been set. You will be leaving with a group of nearly four hundred mercenaries, so your presence should not draw any undue attention.”

“Will not the other mercenaries realize they have never seen us before?” Miserere asks.

Captain Dunois shakes his head. “There have been thousands of them in the city and there is no way any one man or contingent has met all of them.”

Though Duval wanted to be here, there was no reason for someone in his position to involve himself with the mercenaries' departure, so he remains stuck in the palace. Ismae is attending the duchess. It was she who cut the duchess's hand and squeezed her blood onto the tip of the arrow, then bound the cut with a healing balm and bandaged it. She refused to say goodbye to me in the determined belief that I would be coming back.

In addition to Sybella, Beast is here, appearing right at home among the hellequin. Indeed, he looks as if he would seize a horse and ride with us if not for the death grip Sybella has on his arm. "Be safe," she tells me. "And may all the Nine bless your journey."

We begin moving to the main gate. In the northern part of town, far from our small group, fifteen hundred Breton forces wait, dressed for battle, chargers at the ready. If we fail, they will ride out to disable the cannon and destroy the siege towers before they can be used against us. It too will be a one-way mission. As they are not hellequin who welcome death, I pray they will not be needed.

Our plan is known to only a select few, so as we pass soldiers and men-at-arms in the city, they jeer at us and throw rotten food and rocks, thinking we are mercenaries leaving them to their fate. At least until Sauvage nearly rides a group of them down so that they must leap out of the way, after which they restrict their displeasure to slurs and taunts.

I ride in the center group, just behind Miserere, with Malestroit behind me. Balthazaar is in the lead. I am the weakest link in this chain we have constructed, for I am smaller than nearly all the others, except for Begard. With my padding and saddle platform, I am about the same size as he. Luckily, Captain Dunois has assured us that not all mercenaries are as enormous as the hellequin, so once we join the main group, we should be even less noticeable.

The throng of defecting mercenaries waits just inside the city gates. They believe the duchess and her councilors have no knowledge of their defections, and so they simply threaten the sentries with their lives. The sentries have been instructed not to resist or attempt to engage, so they give them no argument.

I am tense as we ride out under the stone arch, terrified that somehow someone has leaked word to the French of our plan and they are looking for us among the others. But the few French soldiers and officials who wait just outside the gate simply motion for us to pass on through. They are alert and on edge at first, and have a division of archers with bows drawn in case we are some warring sortie in disguise. But as the last of us rides out and no one charges, they lower their guard.

"Where do we get our gold?" one of the men shouts out.

The French captain does not try hard to hide his disdain. “Over there.” He points toward the camp. “At the quartermaster’s tent.” Balthazaar and I exchange glances, pleased at this development, for it brings us even closer to our target without drawing any attention to ourselves.

As we wend our way through the camp, we can feel the French soldiers’ regard upon us. Some stare in open disgust, others with mere curiosity. Mercenaries are not well loved by soldiers who fight for their liege.

As the minutes crawl by, we mill about with the others, waiting for our back pay. Each captain must dismount and sign for the purse, which he is then responsible for disbursing to his men. When it is Balthazaar’s turn, I do not think I am the only one holding my breath. He still does not look wholly human to me, especially in the harsh, unforgiving light of day. But the soldiers do not notice. Or do not appear to. They all watch him warily—in truth, he looks far more dangerous than any of the others who have collected their purses. Once he has signed, he takes the purse, bounces it in his hand as if weighing the contents, then gives a grunt of approval. The quartermaster turns his attention to the next mercenary, but I do not breathe easy until Balthazaar is back on his horse.

One of the hellequin, one of the ones I do not know well but recognize from my time with them, pounds his chest. “I am hungry! With nothing to eat but rats for the past week, I have a serious appetite.”

I wince, fearing he may be overplaying this, for we in the city have not come to the eating of rats. Yet.

But someone points him toward the center of the camp and the supply wagons where, he tells him, there is food for sale. He winks. “And a woman?” The soldier grins and nods—that common need forging a link between them when their loyalties could not.

It was well done of him. With a purpose to our wanderings, we begin trickling through the camp, avoiding the tents, the hellequin talking amongst themselves, some even in German, which impresses me somewhat.

I scan the sea of tents, looking for the king’s pavilion. It was so easy to see from the walls of the city, but here on the ground, it is harder to discern. “This way,” Balthazaar mutters, drawing his horse nearer mine and shifting our direction. I keep my head down, as if I am sullen and ill-tempered.

We begin moving toward the center of camp, veering east slightly, so that when the diversions come, we will seem to be running toward them, like the rest of the encampment. Initially, no one pays us any heed. It is not until we have passed a dozen rows of tents that anyone hails us. “Hold there! What are you doing?” one of the patrolling soldiers asks.

It is Sauvage who answers. “The quartermaster told us that the food wagons and women were this way.”

The soldier looks less than pleased but is no doubt put off by Sauvage’s terrifying visage and intimidating manner and simply grumbles under his breath.

We have made our way past another dozen rows when the king’s pavilion comes into sight. The tent is even larger up close, nearly as large as one of the chambers in the palace. It is of purple- and gold-striped silk and has the king’s banner flying atop, flapping cheerfully in the warm breeze. My entire body quivers with anticipation, but I try to keep my head down to avoid calling attention to myself. It is hard—so hard. I want to look and see, plot out my course and consider the hundred possible ways this could go, but I dare not risk drawing anyone’s eyes for too long.

When we are but three rows away from the king’s pavilion, I hear it: the shouts and scramble of soldiers accompanied by the distant thunder of riding horses. The soldiers near the king’s tent crane their necks in curiosity as the sally port opens and the second group of hellequin ride out. Our diversion has arrived.

I look at Balthazaar, for now timing is everything. We have only a few moments to get to the tent, shoot the king, then retreat. If I take too long at any of those steps, the hellequin’s chance of returning to the city with me will evaporate.

He nods, and I twitch my reins the way Aeva showed me. My horse whinnies and rears, throwing me to the ground. Since I am expecting it, I am able to roll off her somewhat gracefully and avoid too painful a landing. But now I am on the ground, on foot, and no one is paying any attention to me, except for two squires, who snicker. Then their knight barks at them and they hurry to help him into the armor so he may ride after the Breton raiders.

I make as if to kick at my horse in disgust, then grab her reins and begin limping behind the others. As we pass behind a large tent, I lift the bow from my saddle hook, then toss my reins to Balthazaar. He catches them neatly, then acts as if he is still making for the food wagons.

A quick glance shows me that no one is watching. Most of the surrounding French soldiers are scrambling toward the attacking Bretons, eager to engage after so many days of inactivity.

I sprint as if heading in the same direction, then veer around the back of the king’s pavilion. Balthazaar raises his crossbow to offer cover should anyone spot me before I reach the tent.

For a moment, the sheer audacity of my plan steals my breath away. Because of me, Mortain has consigned himself to a mortal fate. If I fail, I will have robbed myself of not only a lover, but the god who has sustained me my entire

life, and the father of all the girls at the convent. They will never know him, not as a man, not even as a god. This is what following my own desires has brought me to.

If the Dragonette or the abbess were here, how they would mock my pride, my willfulness, the sheer selfishness of my dreams.

But they are not here, only I am. For some reason, the gods have put this task in my hands. I grasp that thought and hold it tightly in my heart. Surely that is a sign of their belief in me.

Either that, or Salonus the god of mistakes has tricked us all.

With no one there to see, I throw myself to the ground and crawl toward the edge of the pavilion so I may slip under. But the tent is held firmly in place by a wooden peg. No matter how hard I pull, it will not budge. Swearing, I take a knife and begin stabbing at the dirt around the peg, trying to loosen it. Finally, after long painful seconds, I am able to wiggle it out. I pause to be certain my actions have not been noticed—either inside the tent or out—then slip under the heavy silk.

I pause, listening. There. Voices. Arguing. It is a man—the king?—and a woman.

“And I told you I did not want to use cannon.” As he talks, I begin to creep forward on my belly, using the trunks by the royal bed to hide my movements. “The entire point of this exercise was to intimidate her, not to destroy the town and all its inhabitants. She is utterly surrounded; her country is in our hands. We have only to wait for her to recognize it.”

“You are too soft.” The woman’s voice is thick with scorn. “She has given us no indication she is even considering surrendering.” I slowly pull Arduinna’s arrow from my quiver, then raise my head to peer over the thick leather chest in front of me.

“Her sister has just died.” The king’s voice is gentle, compassionate even. “She is likely clouded with grief, as I would be should you die, dear sister.” There is a faint dry note in his voice that has me wondering if he would truly be as distraught as he claims.

“We must put an end to this farce.”

“And we will. In good time. But we will not be using the cannon. Now, would you like to give the order? Because I know how much you dislike it when I countermand your orders in front of the men.”

There is a long, tense moment before the regent says, “I will do it.”

Boom! An earsplitting crack of thunder fills the camp, reverberating through the valley.

The king's head snaps up, and he glares at his sister. She shakes her head. "I did not order that," she says, then hurries from the tent. To my surprise, after a moment's hesitation, the king follows her.

I am frozen to the spot with shock as I watch my chance for averting this war stride out of the pavilion. What now?

I shove the arrow back in my quiver and rise to my knees. The king's tent is empty except for the two guards that stand just inside the tent flap. If I go back the way I came, I will run into Balthazaar, who will do everything he can to prevent me from burrowing deeper into the enemy's encampment.

Which means I will have to fight past the two guards.

I withdraw two regular arrows, clench one between my teeth, then nock the second one to the bowstring. Still crouching in the back of the tent, I release the first arrow, which catches the guard in the windpipe, ensuring his silence as he dies.

Before I can nock my second arrow, the other guard draws his sword and leaps toward me. He is faster than he looked, and I barely have time to drop my bow, grab the long dagger from my waist, and get it up in time to block the thrust of his sword. The force of the blow sends a shock all the way up my arm. As our blades lock together, I see in his eyes the moment he decides to call for reinforcements. As he opens his mouth, I reach up with my free hand as if to place it on the dagger handle for extra leverage. At the last minute, I grab at the second dagger hidden at my wrist, then spin inside his guard and bring it across his throat, cutting off his cry for help. Red blood spatters across my face like warm rain, but I hardly even notice.

Instead, I roll the smaller guard over, unbuckle his sword belt, and wrestle his French tabard over his head. The tabard marks him clearly as one of the royal guard, and wearing it may help me get closer to the king. I slip it on, then grab his helmet and sword as well.

I snag my bow from the ground, my heart hammering—not in fear, I realize, but with anticipation—and use the exhilaration to propel me to the door. Two more sentries wait outside, but with the king gone, their attention is focused on the smoke and noise coming from the northern part of the camp rather than on the empty tent behind them. Which makes it easy to slip up silently behind them and slit their throats, cutting through their vocal cords just as Sister Arnette taught me to do all those years ago.

Only this time, I do not throw up, or even feel a sickening lurch in my stomach. Instead, a grim satisfaction fills me, for I am that much closer to my goal.

Chapter Fifty-Five

MEN ARE SHOUTING, horses whinnying, and hooves thundering as hundreds of soldiers scramble toward a burning siege tower. Not wanting to risk standing out, I join them. The regent said she was going to rescind the order to fire the cannon and I can only hope that the king has followed her.

When I am well away from the tent, I lift my fingers to my mouth and whistle the way Aeva showed me. Because the air is already filled with the shouts of soldiers, the clash of swords, and the thud of galloping horses, I do not see my own horse drawing near until she is almost upon me. I launch myself onto her back and instantly feel more secure being upon a horse. My view is better as well, and I can now see over the heads of the foot soldiers.

The king is seated upon a horse, standing in the middle of a cluster of his cavalry, talking with his sister and the captain in charge of the remaining cannon. There is no way to worm my way through the scores of soldiers who now stand between me and my target.

I look around for the hellequin I rode out with. They linger half a bowshot away from the royal pavilion, waiting and looking. For me. Balthazaar in particular seems to scan the crowd more intensely than the others, his brooding gaze never straying far from the tent. Despair seeps into my bones, for every complication added to our simple plan diminishes his chances of returning to the city.

I look back at the king. Even though he is within range of my bow and we are both mounted, there are far too many other riders between us. I can barely see the top of his head. I do not know if my aim will be as true as Arduinna's, and it would be too easy to miss and waste the arrow on one of the people who surround him. Then our only chance would be lost.

I consider my options. One cannon is still billowing smoke, and one of the scaling towers is on fire, with hundreds of French troops scrambling with buckets so the flames will not spread. The second scaling tower sits abandoned. Our secondary diversion has already launched from the sally port. A hundred mounted French knights are bearing down hard on the escaping sortie—in truth, only a score of hellequin.

They will not last much longer, not when they are that outnumbered.

I glance over at the second scaling tower and calculate its distance from the king. If I were upon it, I could easily see him. It is even possible he would be in

range of my bow. The arrow would have a far better chance of striking him if it came from above.

If I can reach the platform.

And if I can avoid drawing the attention of every French archer in the camp.

Deciding this is my best option, I lightly press my heels against my horse's sides and she leaps forward. I shut out all the noise and confusion on the field around me and focus on the platform that overhangs the wheels of the scaling tower. I grasp the front of the saddle to steady myself, pull my feet up beneath me, then—as I have a hundred times before—attune my body to every movement of the horse and begin to stand up. I have barely reached my full height when the platform is there, right in front of me, and I have no time to think but must simply react so that it does not knock me off the horse. I get my arms up just in time to grab on as my ribs connect solidly with the platform, and I give silent thanks for the two padded hauberks I wear. Then I scramble up on the platform, relieved when I feel the solidness of the wood beneath my feet. Afraid I have been spotted but not willing to stop and find out, I hurry to the beams and trellises of the scaling tower, step around one, and press myself close to it. Only then do I look back to check if I have been seen.

No one seems to have noticed. I glance over my shoulder at the city wall. From there I am in plain sight, but those on the field cannot see me. Or they have not bothered to look up. Either way, it is a small sliver of luck, and I will take it.

As I shrug my bow from my shoulder, I seek out the figure of the king. I can see him better now, and from this height, I should be able to shoot over the heads of his attendants and retainers. Except now that I am here and free from the press of bodies, I realize it is—just barely—too far, and the breeze is coming from the wrong direction. It blows toward me and away from the king, just enough to drag against the arrow, reducing its speed and range, making the shot impossible.

As I watch, his attendants step back. He is getting ready to dismount, and once he is off his horse and among the crowd, I will never be able to hit him.

There are only impossible options left to me. Even though I am not divine or even gifted by nature of my birth, it feels as if all I have struggled with my entire life, all that I have trained for, and all the skills I have practiced have brought me to this moment.

But I had also thought it impossible ever to leave the convent, or confront the abbess, or meet a god face to face, let alone fall in love with one. Impossible things do happen. But only if we make them.

I draw the arrow dipped in the duchess's blood, then fit it to the bowstring. I lift my bow, the black feathers of the fletching tickling my cheek. *Dear*

Arduinna, I pray as I sight down the arrow. Although I come newly to your service, please let me be your instrument in this. Guide this arrow, for the love you once bore him, for the love you might bear me as one marked by your own hand, but mostly to save all the innocents from the horror of war.

As I pray, the breeze dies down, as if the hand of the goddess is holding it back. But I do not take the shot, for still air will only gain me ten feet, and I need at least thirty. Moments later, I feel a brush of wind against my neck, sending the strands of my hair forward to tickle at my cheeks.

But still, I do not take the shot.

I wait until the breeze sighs past my face and streams down along my shoulder, until I see the grass on the field below me begin to ripple as the gust dances its way downrange. Then, when it is in the best position to carry the arrow forward, I release the bowstring.

In that same moment, ready to dismount at last, the king stands up in his stirrups so that he is ever so slightly higher than those around him. The arrow strikes him in the fleshy part of the arm—praise the saints that he is not wearing full armor—then disintegrates, falling to the ground in a sprinkling of black dust.

I stare in dismay. Is the arrow too ancient to withstand the impact? Or is it part of the magic of the arrow itself?

The king frowns and swipes at his arm. Whatever happened, he has felt it, and that is a good sign. He leans close to examine a rip in his sleeve, his fingers coming away red with blood. I close my eyes, my body going slack with relief.

But my relief is short-lived, for I have been spotted. A small force of French archers has seen me. They drop to their knees in the field and raise their crossbows. I throw myself behind the thick wooden support beam of the siege tower, pray they are not excellent shots, and reload my own bow.

A rapid series of thuds, like hammer blows, descends upon me, the force of them causing the wood to tremble slightly. But no arrow finds me. While the archers are reloading their crossbows, I peer around the beam, raise my bow, and fire a shot. I pick off one, but there are easily a dozen more, and I duck back behind the safety of my beam. As I draw another arrow, I realize there is no way I will be able to take on all of them.

They fire again, one of the quarrels whistling past my ear as it misses the beam. As soon as the volley is over, I turn and take another shot, eliminating one more. Only ten left.

A third volley of arrows pins me behind the beam again, but there are far fewer than before, far fewer than could be accounted for by the two stricken archers.

There is a flash of movement off to my left. I turn and see that two of the archers have pulled out of formation and are approaching me, one on either side. I will be able to hit one, but not both. *Merde*. I lift my bow to the one on the right, for he is closer to being able to fire. When my arrow buries itself in his eye socket, I turn to face the other archer. But too late; his crossbow is raised, sighted on me.

Chapter Fifty-Six

A GREAT DARK SHAPE BARRELS down on the archer, sunlight glancing off the sword as it arcs toward his head. The archer's shot goes wide, then his headless body crumples to the ground.

Balthazaar.

There is a clash of steel as the rest of the hellequin fall upon the remaining bow men. I hurry over to the edge of the platform. "What took you so long?"

He steers his horse so that it is directly below me. "We were detained." Without giving myself time to think about it, I jump down. My breath leaves me in a dizzying rush and for one terrifying moment I fear I will miss, but the horse prances forward and then Balthazaar's arms are around me.

Infantry with lances and pikes are swarming toward us now. Sauvage and the rest of the hellequin wheel their horses around to engage. "Go!" Sauvage calls over his shoulder, lifting his sword. The weight of Balthazaar's despair at having to leave his men surrounded and outnumbered presses upon my heart like a stone.

Malestroit lifts his enormous hammer, then gives a nod—of farewell or relief or blessing, I cannot tell. Then he spurs his mount into the fray, his hammer swinging wildly.

I turn away, unable to watch when he should fall. Another contingent of pikemen come running from the encampment, the sharp points of their pikes gleaming silver in the sunlight. Balthazaar's arms tighten around me. "Keep low," he says, then pulls me up close against his chest and covers me with his body as he gallops for the postern gate.

But the French have figured out that is where we are headed, and they know that I was the one who shot at their king. They too make for the gate. Out of the corner of my eye I see rows of archers run forward, then kneel and draw up their bows. I make myself as small as possible and pray to every god in existence.

The twang of bowstrings fills the air, followed by the swish of arrows in flight. I brace myself. Behind me, Balthazaar grunts, then jerks.

Before I can look to see if he has been hit, another volley of arrows comes raining out of the sky, only these come from the city itself. I look up at the ramparts, my heart swelling when I see the Arduinnites lined up along the crenellations, already firing off another round.

We are almost at the gate now, almost to safety. Balthazaar hunkers lower in

the saddle and something wet begins to spread across my back.

A second volley of arrows come from the French behind us, but a smaller volley, as the Arduinnites have reduced their numbers. Balthazaar jerks again, his arms around me loosening their hold. When we are half a bowshot from the gate, he starts to fall. I scramble to maintain my balance, to find a way to hang on to him and the horse both and not topple over, but I cannot. As he falls, his weight pulls me from the saddle, and we both go plummeting to the ground. His demonic horse rears up, hooves flailing and nostrils flaring, before turning and galloping directly for the attacking soldiers.

The impact drives all the air from my lungs and for a moment I fear I have broken every bone in my body. But even as he fell, Balthazaar maneuvered himself so he would land first, taking the brunt of it. As we roll apart, I see he has easily a half a dozen arrows protruding from him. Panic gnaws at my heart. I start to crawl toward him but must stop as a fresh salvo of French arrows rain down around us, sending a final arrow into his chest. There is a faint, almost silent twang as the Arduinnites answer with another volley of their own.

Using that as cover, I scramble to Balthazaar's side. Stark terror clutches at my heart at how white his face, how still his body. *No, no, no*, my heart screams. This was not how it was supposed to be. In the far distance, a lone hound begins to bray, the sound eerie and chilling even in the full light of day. More hounds take up the lament, and the earth itself seems to shudder, then stop, as if the very laws of its existence have been tested.

The entire field grows quiet as I stare down at Balthazaar's lifeless form. At the arms I will never again feel around me, the eyes that will never again peer so deeply into my soul, and the lips I will never again coax into a smile. "No," I whisper, then cup Balthazaar's pale cheek in my hand and lay my forehead against his. I know that his love does not die with him, that I will carry it with me always, but that is cold, empty comfort. My breath comes in short, ragged gasps and I am not sure I will ever draw a full breath again. This pain is worse than anything I have ever imagined—I, who have been familiar with pain my entire life.

A trumpet sounds just then—three short blasts. I do not know what it means, but the French soldiers do. Reluctantly, with mumbling and dark glances, they sheathe their weapons and point their spears down. A mounted knight comes riding before them and motions them back.

He is chasing them away.

Once they are out of arrow range, the knight turns and nods to me, and I want to shout at him that he is too late.

But others begin to reach us now, as soldiers from the city gate swarm forward, the Arduinnites covering them with their threat of another rain of arrows. Someone grabs me by the arms and tries to pull me back to the safety of the gates, but I refuse. The Brigantians come next, bringing a stretcher with which to carry Balthazaar back. Before they transfer him onto it, they stop to examine his wounds. Two arrows have gone straight through his chest, the arrowheads fashioned in such a way as to pierce even the mail that he wore.

Carefully, the Brigantians break the arrowheads from the shafts, then pull them slowly from his chest. As the shafts leave his body, Balthazaar arches up off his back. He gasps and draws in a huge gulp of air. His face spasms in pain, his hand going to his chest, and I stare down in disbelief.

“It hurts,” he croaks, and I laugh, a giddy, frightened sound.

“Of course it hurts,” I tell him, then bend down and begin raining kisses over his face. “You’re alive.”

He pulls his hand away from his chest and stares at the red blood that covers his palm. “I am alive.” The marvel in his voice matches my own. A shadow falls across us just then, and when I look up, I see Father Efram. “He’s alive,” I whisper, afraid that if I say it too loudly, someone will hear and take it away.

Father Efram smiles. “He is alive.”

“But how?”

He smiles gently at me, but before he can speak, Balthazaar begins to cough, clutching his chest. I start to panic, but Father Efram lays his hand on my shoulder. “This wound will not kill him. The first death makes him mortal; it is the second death that will carry him from this world.”

“How do you know this?”

He looks from me to Balthazaar. I follow his gaze and see Balthazaar staring at him, recognition slowly filling his eyes. He gasps out a laugh, then clutches his chest again. “Salonius.”

Father Efram bows his head. “At your service, my lord.” Then he turns to my gaping self. “I know because I was once a god as well.”

“You are—were—Saint Salonius?”

“Yes.” He turns to Balthazaar once more, his face growing serious. “And this,” he says to the man who was once Death. “Does this put right all that lies between us?”

Balthazaar stares at him a long moment, then nods. “It does.” He puts out his hand. Father Efram grasps it and closes his eyes, almost as if receiving a benediction.

Balthazaar is taken to the Brigantian convent so they may tend his wounds, but it is hard—so hard—to let go of his hand. I wish to accompany him, to stay by his side forever if need be, to ensure that this is real and will not be snatched away.

But I have others I must see to.

A truce has been made, and the Breton forces have left the safety of the city walls in order to recover our dead. Every soldier seems to know that if not for the hellequin, it would be his own dead body being carried back on a litter.

Of the fifty hellequin that rode out, twenty-eight bodies are returned to us, among them Begard's, Malestroit's, and Sauvage's. Slowly, I drop to Malestroit's side. His face is no longer filled with sorrow but with serenity. I kiss the tips of my fingers, then press them to his lips. "Goodbye," I whisper. "And thank you. May you find peace at last."

Sauvage too is much transformed, his terrifying ferocity replaced by a peace so deep, he is hardly recognizable.

Begard looks even younger in death, relaxed, with no pinch of regret or guilt shadowing his face. I bid him goodbye as well. Father Efram joins me, and, together, we walk among the fallen hellequin. He gives them a final blessing and I bid them each farewell.

Some bodies are not recovered, and I do not know what that means. Most of those not recovered were on the sortie to the supply wagons, including Miserere. I think of his fierce, implacable face and mourn that he may not have found the redemption he so desperately wanted.

It is only when they have all been seen to and tended, and I confirm with my own eyes that the truce continues to hold, that I allow myself to return to the palace long enough to strip out of my blood-soaked clothes, scrub the worst of the filth from me, then head to the Brigantian convent.

I am not questioned at the convent but ushered immediately to Balthazaar's room. It is clean and smells of pungent herbs. At the door I pause, staring at the still figure on the bed, marveling that his chest rises and falls as he draws breath. Marveling that the pallor of death has left his face and he no longer appears to have been chiseled from the whitest marble.

He is, I realize, pulsing with life.

We have done it, he and I. We not only evoked one last gasp of magic from Arduinna's sacred arrow but managed to upend the order of the world and create a place for Balthazaar in it. At my side, hopefully, although we have not discussed that.

"It is a miracle, is it not?" I turn to find a grizzled nun standing beside me, her wrinkled face alight with wonder and awe.

“It is,” I agree.

She looks up at me, tilting her head. “Are you the one he did it for?”

Her question makes me pause, uncertain of how to answer that. Did he do it for me? Or because he was finally offered a chance? Perhaps the two things cannot be separated from each other.

Seeing my discomfort, the nun smiles warmly, pats me on the arm, then goes about her business, leaving me alone with him.

“Quit lurking in the shadows.” Balthazaar’s voice rumbles up from the bed. “That is my role, not yours.”

I cannot help it, I laugh and go to stand beside his bed. He has a most curious expression on his face. “Are you still in a lot of pain?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, but without bitterness or distress, merely wonder. He lifts one hand and stares down at it, then looks up at me. “But pleasure too. Everything”—he looks around the room, staring at the shafts of sunlight that play upon the shadows—“everything is so much *more*—more delineated, nuanced. And”—he turns his gaze back to me—“exquisite.”

The warmth in his eyes almost unnerves me. I do not know what to do with a joyous Balthazaar. He takes my hand—wincing as he does so—then presses it to his lips. “I cannot believe that you have done it. Created a place for me in life.”

“We did it,” I remind him. “Not just me, but us. Together.”

He stares at me a long moment, his dark gaze unreadable, and I long to know what he is thinking. He shakes his head, as if he is not quite able to grasp it all. “No one has ever invited me to share her life before.” Then he tugs sharply on my hand, causing me to stumble and fall onto the bed. I try to pull back, afraid to cause him more injury, but his other arm comes up around me and he shifts, making room for me beside him. Afraid I will cause him more agony if I fight him—and also because it’s where I desperately wish to be—I allow myself to be tucked up against his side.

His hand runs down my back in a long, slow caress. “The hellequin?” he asks.

I press myself closer against him, as if our closeness will diminish the sting of the words. “Most have found the peace they were looking for,” I tell him. “We recovered over half of the bodies, including those of Malestroit and Begard.”

His hand on my back stills. “And the others?”

“We found no trace of them.”

I glance up at his face as a fresh wave of an entirely different sort of pain washes across his features. “I had hoped they would all end their journeys on that field.”

“I know. What will happen to them now?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it and frowns. “I do not know. I am not sure what will happen to any of them now. Do we know yet if the arrow worked?”

I am relieved to have good news to share with him. “We know that they have called a truce and that the hostilities have ceased, at least for the moment. I would like to think that is at the command of the king as he decides how best to follow the direction his heart now points him in.”

In the silence that follows, I can hear Balthazaar breathing, a faint, ragged sound. I long to ask him about us, what will happen with us now. We had spoken of how to live without each other but had not dared to dream of what we might do if our bold gamble worked. “Have you given any thought to what you will do now that you are free?” I say.

“As long as you are at my side, I care little. Except . . .”

“What?”

He shifts uncomfortably on the bed. “At some point, I would like to meet my daughters, to see them face to face and somehow be a part of their lives.”

In that moment, I realize that if I was not already besotted with him, I would fall in love all over again. I rise up on my elbow and stare down at his face, losing myself in those eyes that now hold far more light and hope than bleakness. “Then that will be where we go first.”

Chapter Fifty-Seven

TWO DAYS LATER, THE DUCHESS is holding court in the great hall. It is sparsely attended, for the entire city holds its breath, waiting to see what the French will do. Of course, the citizens do not know of the arrow and our hopes for it, but they did witness—or heard tell of—the skirmish, and they wonder what it portends.

It is the first time I have attended the duchess since we rode out into the French encampment, as she had given me leave to tend to Balthazaar and his injuries.

Sybella and Beast are at the Brigantian convent this morning, spending some well-deserved time with their families. Ismae and Duval are playing chess while the rest of us pretend not to watch, for he is trying to teach her and she is most impatient. She does not care for his being so much better than she is at the game, and she spends most of it glaring at him.

Just as Duval captures Ismae's second bishop and says, "Check," one of the sentries comes hurrying into the hall, his face pale, his eyes wide. I step closer to the duchess, my hands going to my knives. Their game forgotten, both Ismae and Duval rise to their feet. "What's happened?" Duval asks.

"We have a visitor." The messenger clears his throat. "It is the French king." The disbelief in his voice is mirrored on all our faces.

"How big is his party?"

"Only fifty archers, and he is bearing the flag of truce." The man clears his throat again. "And a rose."

Smiling, Duval turns to the duchess, who is smoothing her gown and straightening her headdress. "Your Grace?" For the first time since I have known him, his voice is filled with hope. It makes him sound younger than he normally does.

"If he is here to see us, then by all means, show him in." She and I exchange a glance.

The bemused sentry retreats, and we all wait, hope filling the room like birdsong.

The French king enters the hall with only a handful of his guard. My first impression is that he is smaller than I thought, and my next is that he is simply but elegantly dressed. He is not handsome in any sense of the word, but his eyes are kind. The duchess curtsies to him, for he is higher in rank. "Your Majesty."

He bows. "At last we meet face to face," he says. Then more gently: "I am sorry to hear of your recent loss." To my surprise, there is true sorrow in his eyes; this is no pretty courtier trick but genuine compassion.

"Isabeau is sorely missed, Your Majesty."

He glances around at the few courtiers in the hall. "I wonder if we could speak privately."

"But of course." She dismisses all her courtiers except Ismae and me, and the king in turn dismisses his guard. After that, he motions her to one of the window casements, and together they move to take a seat.

His voice is pitched low, but I have had much practice listening at doors.

"I would put these hostilities behind us if we can." He is perfectly still, except for his fingers, which fidget with his hat. That is when I realize that he is not speaking to her as a king, but rather as an equal, which does credit to his nature. "The truth is, I have come to admire the sharp mind and fierce spirit behind my noble opponent, and now that I am here, well"—he looks discomfited, as if flattery does not come easily to him—"I had not expected such a fierce and ardent defender of her people to be as lovely as yourself."

As he speaks, something inside me relaxes, for those are the words of a potential suitor rather than a conqueror. The duchess blushes prettily and bows her head, and something swells deep within me. She has been pursued by men and rulers of all sorts, and not one has approached her as a suitor rather than a political ally. Mayhap there will be love in her future after all.

I draw a little farther away to give them their privacy.

They talk for nearly an hour, and when they are finished, the duchess asks that I let the courtiers back in. As I do, I see that their numbers have doubled. News of the king's arrival has spread quickly. Duval is one of the first back in through the doors, with Captain Dunois and Chancellor Montauban following close behind.

When everyone has assembled, the duchess looks bashfully at the king, who nods kindly at her. She stands with her full regal bearing and surveys the nobles and attendants who have gathered. Briefly, her eyes rest on me, and she winks. It is all I can do not to whoop with relieved laughter.

"We have an announcement to make. His Majesty the king of France and I have discussed the future of our great countries and find that we have more in common than we have differences. We have decided to resolve those remaining differences through marriage."

A cheer goes up from everyone in the room: for having averted a disastrous conflict, for old differences put aside, and for the duchess having managed to

thread this needle with love rather than war. As I look at both their faces, I realize it is indeed a triumph of the heart.

For the next three days, while the duchess and King Charles come to know each other, the duchess's councilors and a delegation from France sequester themselves in the privy chamber and wrestle over the details of the marriage contract. The king is of no help, for whatever point of contract the duchess's advisors insist on, he agrees to, until his own advisors throw up their hands in disgust. I think once more of Arduinna's last arrow and all that it has bought us.

Deep in the bowels of the castle, in a room tucked well away from observers, another series of meetings is held. The first of these is a private meeting between Crunard and me. In the rush of all that has happened, I had nearly forgotten about him, for he is still so new in my life, it is hard to remember I have a father.

I find him sitting in his cell, thinner than when I last saw him, and with the lines of fatigue etched more deeply in his face. When he sees me, he leaps to his feet and strides to the bars. "You are safe!"

"I am safe." I tilt my head. "Did you think I wouldn't be?"

"The guards—there have been rumors, stories flying about you riding out, but no one could give me any details." He appears to rein in his emotions somewhat. "I was worried for you, that is all."

"I appreciate your fatherly concern, but as you can see, I am fine. I do come bearing news, however. The duchess and the French king are to be married."

His eyes widen. "He agreed?"

"With a bit of persuasion, yes. But more importantly, she has agreed, and he appears to care for her, and there will be peace."

Crunard closes his eyes. "Peace," he says, the word bittersweet with all that he has lost.

I cannot help it then—I step forward, my voice gentling. "I come to bring you a boon. The duchess, as a sign of her appreciation for my help in this matter, has agreed to investigate the whereabouts of your son—my brother—herself. She will seek him out or learn what has happened to him, and if he is still alive, she will have him safely returned to Brittany. She has given her word."

Some of the grayness leaves his face, and his mouth twists in a sour smile. "And he can find me here, rotting in a prison for dishonoring us all."

"The duchess is in a forgiving mood," I tell him. "She has already pardoned many of those who crossed her. Perhaps she will pardon you as well."

His hands grip the iron bars. "And if so, what does that mean for us?"

I step back then. "Why should it mean anything? Why should I care at all for the man who abandoned my mother when she needed him most, who left me to

be raised as an orphan, who betrayed his entire country? What makes you think there is any *us* to be considered?"

His gaze meets mine steadily. "Because I know the daughter to be a far better person than the father was, and I hope that she will see that the most recent of his crimes were committed out of love for his children."

I stare at him a moment longer, then leave without answering his question.

The second meeting is a convocation of the Nine, called in order to hold the abbess accountable for her crimes and to determine the rightful punishment.

On the first day, a delegate from each of the Nine arrives, called to the convocation by Father Efram's summons. The abbess from the Brigantian convent here in Rennes is the first to arrive, followed by Floris and the high priestess of Arduinna. Father Efram—I cannot quite manage to call him Salenius, for I am still not certain I believe that he is; it is just the sort of trick the gods like to play—presides over all.

The abbess of Saint Mer arrives, a wizened old woman with wild gray hair and seashells strung around her neck like jewels. She is accompanied by two girls, one on either side, both followers of Saint Mer. I try not to stare, but I have never seen the sisters of Saint Mer before and they are startling to look at.

Beast is here, representing the followers of Saint Camulos, as their rank is closely tied with their order's hierarchy. A tall older man with dirty bare feet and a thick walking staff is introduced as the head of Saint Cissonius's order.

Mortain himself will take his place among the Nine. When he steps into the room, silence falls, as thick as a heavy snow. All eyes turn toward him, for these are people who have devoted their entire lives in the service of their gods, yet they have never met one face to face before. One by one, they sink into deep, reverent bows, their foreheads nearly touching the floor.

"Please, rise," he says, then makes his way to the seat that is for him. It is hard to tell in the torchlight, but it appears as if a faint tinge of pink has risen in his finely sculpted cheeks.

Two of the seats are empty. Amourna is no longer worshiped so much as her name is invoked when one is seeking true love. There is not any convent or abbey that serves her, and I cannot help but wonder if there ever was.

Dea Matrona too is not worshiped in a formal way, but instead finds her place in the homes and hearths and fields throughout our land.

Just as the Brigantian abbess calls the meeting to order, the door opens. An ancient, bent-back woman shuffles into the room, her long, gray hair nearly reaching the floor, her old homespun brown gown faded and closer to rags than a

gown. She too has a staff, which she leans heavily upon. Slowly, she shuffles across the floor and takes the empty seat left for Dea Matrona.

Everyone stares in surprise, but she gestures impatiently for them to proceed.

The Brigantian nun begins speaking. “We are here for an accounting of the crimes of Sister Etienne de Froissard, who has posed as abbess of the convent of Saint Mortain for the past seven years, even though she bears none of his blood. She has wronged the gods by posing as a daughter of Mortain, and she has betrayed the trust placed in her with that position. She is also charged with endangering the girls put in her care, and has been accused of the murders of Sisters Druette, Appollonia, and Sabina.”

And so it begins, the abbess’s—my mother’s—trial. Father Effram assured me that they never sentence anyone to death, else I am not certain I would be able to get through this. For all the anger I hold for her, for all the wrong that she has done, she did it out of love and a desire to protect me. I do not know if I will ever be able to resolve the two.

“Sister Etienne, what say you to these charges?”

The abbess looks almost naked without her distinctive headdress and habit, like a magnificent hawk who has lost all her feathers. She turns and looks at me, and even now, her head is not bowed in shame or remorse. I hold my breath, wondering if she will try to pull me into it, try to paint my actions with her own motives. She will not know that I have already told the members of the convocation that I too am not of Mortain’s blood, although I did not learn of it until mere weeks ago.

But instead, she surprises me. “I accept responsibility for all that I am accused of. I would say only this in my defense: The previous abbess betrayed her duty to her young charges long before I did. I did not know of the existence of this convocation, else I might have tried to bring her before it. But I saw no other way to protect the girls. To protect my own daughter.”

The Brigantian nun turns to Mortain, her manner becoming slightly nervous, as if she is not certain how this should all proceed in front of a true god. Or a former god. “Do you wish to handle this matter personally, as is your right?”

Mortain shakes his head. “No, I would leave it to the convocation to decide and will respect its decision.” In truth, he is not nearly as angry at the abbess as I am, for he feels that without her, he would never have had me, and for that, he has told me, he will forgive her much.

“Very well. We shall withdraw to discuss sentencing—”

Her words are interrupted by a sharp, single rap on the floor. It is the old crone. Everyone turns to stare.

“I claim her as ours,” she says. “She has proven herself such a devoted mother, let her serve the Great Mother awhile. Ten years.”

Everyone glances around somewhat uncertainly, as no contact has been made with those who serve Dea Matrona in quite some time. Indeed, I think they all thought that she too had begun to fade from this world.

“Are there any objections?”

There are not. And so it is decided.

As the convocation breaks up, the various abbesses and priests pause long enough to greet one another and exchange a few words. It is not often they are all in the same room, and there is the sense that they have much they would like to discuss. A handful approach Balthazaar, wanting to see this miracle made flesh.

I stand off to the side, watching. Forgotten for the moment, the abbess makes her way over to me. We stare at each other. She has grown thin these last few days, and her face is drawn. “I am sorry,” she whispers. As I stare into her hollow, gaunt face, it feels like the first true thing she has said to me in years. I nod, acknowledging her words. She looks down at her hands. Her nails are ragged and bitten to the quick. “I would ask one last indulgence, if I could.”

I do not know that I have it in me to grant her anything, but I keep my voice level. “What is it?”

“May I hold you? Just once before I go, for I have not been able to do so since you were three years old. If I could have one wish before I die, it would be that.”

Her request sneaks in under my guard and lands a painful blow, reminding me sharply that for many years, she was nothing but a young mother trying to be with her child. “Yes,” I whisper. Slowly, as if unable to believe in it, she awkwardly wraps her arms around me, then pulls me close. I am not quite able to allow myself to relax into her embrace, but I do not resist, either. Some small, tentative thing passes between us. She gently kisses my brow, then reluctantly pulls away. “Will you ever forgive me?” she asks softly.

That small, tentative thing pulses inside me. “I will try. That is all I can promise. I will try.”

She starts to leave, then stops. “May I come see you? When my sentence is served?”

I stare at her a long moment before I say, “Yes. But do not come back to the convent. Send word instead, and I will meet you.”

Her eyes widen at my mention of the convent, and I see a hundred questions in them, questions about what I will do next, where I will go, and who I will be with. But our time is up. Dea Matrona’s priestess is at her side, her ancient

clawlike hand reaching out and pulling at the abbess's sleeve. "Come" is all she says. With one last look at me, the abbess leaves.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

THE DAY OF THE BETROTHAL CEREMONY dawns clear and sunny, as if God and His Nine are all as happy about this day as we are. A feeling of joy lies over the city, relief to be celebrating an impending marriage rather than a crushing defeat and untold deaths.

The cathedral is nearly empty as the duchess and the king of France pledge their vows. Only the privy councilors are in attendance, along with one French advisor and the French regent herself. I study this woman who was behind so much of the hostilities between our countries and wonder what drove her.

The duchess does her best to ignore the regent. I do not think they will ever be close.

Ismae, Sybella, and I are also in attendance. The duchess invited Mortain as well, but this made the poor bishop so nervous that Mortain declined.

Once the ceremony is concluded, the royal party turns their attention to signing the marriage contract and the peace treaty between Brittany and France. The three of us are not needed for that.

Just as she did when we were forced to attend chapel services back at the convent, Sybella begins whispering in church. "Ismae, are you still able to see marques?"

"I don't know," Ismae confesses, then looks around the few gathered in the cathedral. "No one here bears one, and I have not seen anyone marked since . . . since three days ago, but perhaps it is simply because no one is ready to die just yet. And you? What of your gifts?"

Sybella nods. "I am still able to sense people's nearness, as always."

I smile. "Well, that is good, then, that your gifts did not disappear along with Mortain's godhood." I did not wish to be the reason they no longer had their abilities. "Which means the girls back at the convent will likely still have their gifts and abilities as well."

At my mention of the convent, Sybella pounces. "Is the rumor true? Will you be returning to the convent?" She does not sound surprised.

"Yes."

"But why?" Ismae asks. "You could not wait to leave."

How do I explain this to them? "I wanted to leave the suffocating restrictions and the painful memories that the convent held. But now, now that everything has changed, I want to go back and remake the convent into what it was

originally intended to be—a place with life as well as death, with joy as well as solemn duty.”

“But won’t you be bored?”

I laugh. “No, for I am not like either of you. I do not relish killing. I am good at it, but I do not find any purpose in it.”

“And you think you will find a purpose in returning to the convent?”

I shrug, embarrassed. “I want to show the others that they have choices, that their lives are theirs to live. I know it is not nearly as glamorous as what you two will be doing, but it is what I feel compelled to do—to put the convent back as it is supposed to be.”

“What does all this mean for Mortain’s daughters?” Ismae asks. “How will we be able to serve him?”

“I do not know,” I admit. “Mayhap it will be no different from serving the duchess or any liege lord.”

“And what of the convent and the duties it performs?”

“Again, I do not yet know. That is something we will figure out as we go.”

Sybella smiles in her sly, wicked way. “Balthazaar will be going as well?”

“Yes, he wishes to meet his daughters. And put right what has gone off course.”

“And with Mortain at your side, who will say you nay?”

My lips twitch into a smile. “True enough. Just because he is newly mortal does not mean that death will cease or that people will come to accept it or even that political events will not require intervention. But what about you?” I turn to Sybella. “I heard the duchess say that you are going to the French court with her?” I am still hoping I have heard that incorrectly.

Sybella smiles. “She will need someone to insinuate herself among all those long-faced French nobles that cling to her betrothed’s robes like flies. Someone to report to her who can be trusted and who cannot. And she has agreed to foster my sisters at her court, which will afford them the best protection I can find against our brother.”

“And what of Beast?”

“He is going as well, to serve as the captain of the queen’s guard.”

I am happy for her, and I try to smile, but she will be so far away.

“Oh, do not pull such a sad face! It will only be for a few years. I reckon I shall return right about the time Sister Beatriz will have to retire from her duties. I think I would make a most excellent womanly-arts teacher, don’t you?”

I cannot help it, I laugh, as does Ismae. “The Nine save us,” she says.

“The Eight, now.”

“No, it is still the Nine. They did not change it when Amourna removed herself, and neither will they for Mort—Balthazaar. Bah! I cannot decide what to call him now.”

“Just do not call him Father, and I will be happy,” Ismae mutters.

“And you.” I turn to her. “You will be close, so you must come visit once in a while.” She and Duval will be staying in Rennes—Duval will be overseeing the duchy while his sister takes her place on the French throne.

“Oh, I shall. I may even let Duval come just so he can storm around the halls, for old times’ sake.” And thus everyone is accounted for, I think.

No, not everyone. My thoughts go again to the hellequin. Those who died on the field before Rennes that day have found both the redemption and peace that they so desperately sought. But what of the others? Those who did not ride out that day, or those whose bodies were not found? Did they too find their deserved reward? Or do they, even now, still ride on, trapped on some eternal hunt?

The next morning, Mortain and I set out on our own journey, one that will take us back to the convent. He has healed unnaturally fast.

As our horses prance and sidestep in the fresh morning air, I send him a glance. “I will not call you Mortain for all the rest of our lives. It will feel too much like being wedded to a god.”

“Merely a former god. And you will only have to bow to me a little.” His smile is as quick and welcome as a glimpse of sun in the dead of winter.

“Ah, you may be a former god, but you are only a newly made mortal, and I have had far more experience at being mortal than you.”

He blinks in surprise. That I have had more experience than him in *anything* had not occurred to him. I cannot help it. I laugh as the wonder of the moment fills me. Our lives. They will—finally—be *ours* to live as we choose. Filled with our hopes and dreams and, yes, our heartaches as well. But they will be ours.

We will love freely. Laughter shall echo down the halls of the convent. And we will fight our enemies—fiercely—when needed, for as surely as winter follows summer, it will be needed.

But for now, I cannot wait to share with those whom I once called sisters all that I have learned. I will teach them how to think for themselves and not simply reflect back to the world what it wishes from them. They will be strong not only of body, but of mind and heart. And most important, I will teach them how to love, for in the end, that has been the greatest weapon of all. It has proven stronger even than Death.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

OVER THE CENTURIES, as the Church struggled to convert an entire population to Christianity, as a matter of policy they adopted pagan deities as saints, painting over the original myths with their own Christianized narrative. They also built churches on pagan holy sites and organized their own festivals and celebrations to coincide with earlier pagan celebrations to make them more palatable for the local populace. It has been said that Brittany in particular fought harder than other kingdoms against the loss of their own deities and form of worship.

Though the nine old gods of Brittany did not exist in the exact form in which they were portrayed in the *His Fair Assassin* books, they have been constructed from earlier Celtic gods and goddesses, about whom we know very little. I have added a few embellishments of my own.

As in the previous two books, many of the characters in *Mortal Heart* are actual historical figures, and I drew from the broad political events of the time for my story. As the second phase of the War of Breton Succession drew to a head, France did invade Brittany and held most of the duchy's cities and towns in its possession. The duchess was besieged at Rennes, surrounded by fifteen thousand French troops, trapped inside the city with thousands of mercenary soldiers who were better suited to fighting than waiting out a siege. The mercenaries roaming the city quickly became almost as much of a threat as the French troops, especially when the money to pay them ran out. That in turn created a weak link, which the French exploited by bribing the mercenaries to abandon the duchess. Even her supposed allies offered only minimal support—either holding her towns as surety to pay for the use of their troops or offering to escort her out of Brittany rather than helping her hold on to it. Maximilian, the Holy Roman emperor and her husband by proxy marriage, had his own wars with Hungary and France. France used that to their political advantage, effectively tying his hands and preventing him from being able to offer meaningful support to his wife. The situation was somewhat complicated by Maximilian's own daughter's betrothal to King Charles of France, which further bound him to that country and its ruling family.

As in *Dark Triumph*, one of the greatest liberties I have taken is compressing the timeline of the events in this book. In reality, these major events occurred over the course of two and a half years, with lots of fallow waiting periods in between. I pulled most of the major events of 1490 and 1491 into 1489, the year

in which the story takes place. In reality, the betrothal that occurs at the end of *Mortal Heart* did not happen until the end of 1491.

Ultimately, the battle that had been brewing between France and Brittany did not culminate in full-scale war. Instead, Anne was convinced to abandon her proxy marriage to Maximilian and marry King Charles VIII of France. This marriage not only saved her beloved country and people from the horrors of yet another war, but gave her some political power with which to influence France's future policies toward Brittany. By many historical accounts, she and Charles held great fondness and affection for each other. After they had been together for seven years, Charles VIII died, leaving Anne once more in possession of an independent Brittany. She did go on to marry Louis d'Orleans and become Queen of France a second time, the only woman in history to do so.

But *that* is a story for another day . . .

Q & A WITH AUTHOR ROBIN LAFEVERS

What inspired you to write about assassin nuns in fifteenth-century France?

I just started getting this *itch*, this desire to write a great big, sweeping, epic romance. Not just in the boy-meets-girl sense, but in the tradition of the medieval tales filled with high stakes and impossible choices, with lives and kingdoms hanging in the balance.

And then I thought, nah. You can't write that kind of book for teens. But the idea stayed with me and wouldn't leave. So just on a lark, I let myself start noodling around, researching the Middle Ages and different countries and milieus that might make an interesting backdrop for such a story. The more research I did, the more I became hooked into the time and place and the medieval elements—patron saints, the drama, the intensity.

I also knew I wanted to write a story about a heroine who was absolutely powerless but managed to carve some small power out of a society and culture where women traditionally had none. But I wanted that source of power to feel organic and true to the historical world. One fascinating tidbit I read said that many noblewomen were all too happy to join a convent because being a nun often gave them much more freedom and autonomy than being a wife. I was also struck by the Catholic Church's early decision to incorporate many pagan deities into the Church as saints in order to gain wider acceptance among a reluctant populace. Those two things kind of wove together in my imagination and took off. I began mulling over different sorts of convents, whom they might worship, and what sorts of power they'd confer to their inhabitants. Healers felt like a natural choice, which is why I shied away from it. I wanted something darker, more ambiguous, and ultimately something that would shake the very foundation of what my characters thought they knew about the world. I wanted to look at things like faith and devotion and blind obedience through that darker lens.

When I learned about the twelve-year-old Anne of Brittany who'd inherited a kingdom in the process of fending off an invasion from France, something clicked and I realized that maybe, just maybe, this might work. After all, the Middle Ages were a very young society—teens held positions of power and were making major life decisions. That might be the exact right place to set a book with teens front and center.

Also, I went to Catholic school for the first few years of my life, and the nuns

absolutely fascinated me with all their mystery and suppressed passion and enigmatic rituals. It seemed like surely they must be up to something far more intriguing than simply praying and living quietly behind those cloistered walls! So I let my imagination fill in the blanks.

All three assassins look out not only for themselves, but also for each other. We love the strong friendships you write between women! Why was writing these sorts of relationships important to you?

It was important because women's friendships are some of the most sustaining relationships in our lives! At least, they have been for me. I had strong, supportive friendships long before I had a romantic relationship, and the demographic truth of it is that most women will have those same friendships long after their romantic relationships end, whether due to a parting of ways or the realities of life expectancy differences between men and women.

I also think there is a danger in the obsessive blush of new love, to think that a single relationship can now meet all our needs. But it won't. It can't. It shouldn't—to do so would be a wildly unhealthy burden to place on a single relationship. So I think it's especially important in romances to show how we need all these relationships for a full, rich, and satisfying emotional life.

HFA has lots of love stories, but not at the expense of each woman's autonomy. How did you achieve that perfect balance between romance and action?

The truth is, I married very young. Luckily, my husband was wise before his time and pointed out that we were allowed to define our own relationship and set up our own boundaries, rules, and expectations. We did not need to conform to societal or cultural roles or dynamics. So for me, love has not come at the expense of autonomy—quite the opposite. It has encouraged my independence and was a secure platform from which to launch myself into the world, taking greater risks and accepting larger challenges, because of that deep unconditional support. I wanted readers to experience that and explore what it might look or feel like for them.

For me, respect is at the heart of a healthy relationship. Respect and a sense of two equals entering into a partnership. If one of the two parties doesn't respect the other, the relationship will always be on unequal footing. Also, here is where I need to clarify that the respect can grow over time—in fact, I think that is

what's at the core of the slow-burn romance—watching two people grow to respect, and ultimately trust, each other.

I've also had some good role models in my life—both for how to be fully committed to a relationship and still be autonomous as well as how to be suffocated by a relationship. The diminished growth and stunting of a person's soul is painful to watch. It makes it easy to choose, and advocate for, the former.

HFA came on the forefront of a wave of kick-butt girls (and even assassins!) in YA. Who are some of your other favorite heroines? And what do you think has changed since HFA came out?

I think what has changed is that the environment and culture is much more accepting of—to the point of embracing—kick-butt girls. There's been sort of an explosion of acceptance for all the facets teen girls—and women—contain and a celebration of that.

I also think readers and authors are hungry for those stories that show girls getting angry, taking control, pursuing untraditional goals, and kicking butt. We're starved for that because so much of our cultural media does not include those role models or portrayals for us. If anything, there is an appetite for even darker stories, but at the same time a growing recognition that strong female characters don't *have* to kick butt. They can be strong in other ways: by being resilient, or persistent, and having great determination. More and more we are recognizing and celebrating the many ways more traditional female roles also contain great strength and heroism.

Some of my favorite heroines are Kestrel in *The Winner's Trilogy* by Marie Rutkoski; Seraphina in *Seraphina* by Rachel Hartman; Inej and Nina in *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo; Laia and Helene in *An Ember in the Ashes* by Sabaa Tahir; Samantha in *Under a Painted Sky* by Stacey Lee; Safi and Iseult from *Truthwitch* by Susan Dennard; Zélie from *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi; Jessamy in *Court of Fives* by Kate Elliott; Shahrzad from *The Wrath and the Dawn* by Renée Ahdieh; Josie in *Out of the Easy* by Ruta Septys; Jane from *Dread Nation* by Justina Ireland; and Lia from *The Remnant Chronicles* by Mary Pearson.

We wouldn't want to change a thing about HFA, but is there anything you've looked back on and wished you had done differently?

There are a couple of things I would go back and change or do differently. As my editor is always telling me, a book is never finished; it is simply pulled from

the protesting author's grasping fingers and sent to the printer.

Because I began writing *Grave Mercy* mostly as an exercise for myself to see if I could even write this big, sweeping, darkly romantic kind of book, I was myopically focused on recreating a specific court complete with actual historical figures. In doing so, I inadvertently reinforced the misconception that medieval Europe had no people of color. While the specific court I was working with did not include any people of color, or at least none that the historians I read made note of, if I were to do it over again, I would find a way to include more characters of color, both for a sense of true historical accuracy and to avoid any sense of erasure.

There is also a scene in *Grave Mercy* where I closed the door a little too soon and left a little too much room for interpretation, and some readers inferred something I never intended. I would definitely try to fix that.

Why do you think readers today identify so strongly with characters living in fifteenth-century Brittany?

Well, the discouraging answer is that in many ways medieval cultural expectations of women and girls still exist in today's society. Many of the reasons and justifications used to rob today's women of their rights and agency stem from the Middle Ages, so while we've made some progress legally, on a wider societal scale there's a long way to go. There are still those who want to narrow women's choices, strip them of autonomy, force them into diminished roles, and control every aspect of their existence.

The more hopeful answer is that human nature is human nature, and many of the things we long for and strive for have not changed so very much: supportive relationships, agency, meaningful work, a degree of autonomy, self-actualization. Those are all universal struggles that transcend time.

One theme across all three books is the struggle to open up and ask for help. Does that lesson come from your career as an author?

That lesson doesn't come from being an author so much as it comes from my own life. I think a majority of teens and women struggle with this. To ask for help is to admit to weakness, to make ourselves vulnerable, to open ourselves to unwanted advice, judgment, and criticism, and we fight enough against those while struggling to be perfect! So asking for help just feels like ordering up a double dose of all that.

However, being vulnerable and needing help is also what makes us human. To be invulnerable is a very barricaded existence. If we are invulnerable to pain, we are also likely impervious to compassion and the full richness of love in all its forms.

Strength through invulnerability is brittle, while strength that embraces vulnerability is much more deeply rooted and resilient, reaching down to our very core. For me, having the strength to be vulnerable, to be able to ask for help, to admit one is not perfect is far more powerful than simply being able to kick butt. And far, far harder to do. And something I have to remind myself of every day.

Do you have many backstories already mapped out for other initiates of the convent of Saint Mortain, which readers may or may not learn of in the future?

So! Many! Backstories! I cannot simply write a walk-on character in this world without knowing their entire backstory! And new characters show up in my head all the time—either inspired by some historical tidbit I come across or from simply wondering how a certain sort of girl would respond to being Death’s daughter. I have had to come to terms with the fact that I will never be able to write all their stories and just accept them as random travelers on the creativity bus.

What would people be surprised to learn about your life as an author/your writing process?

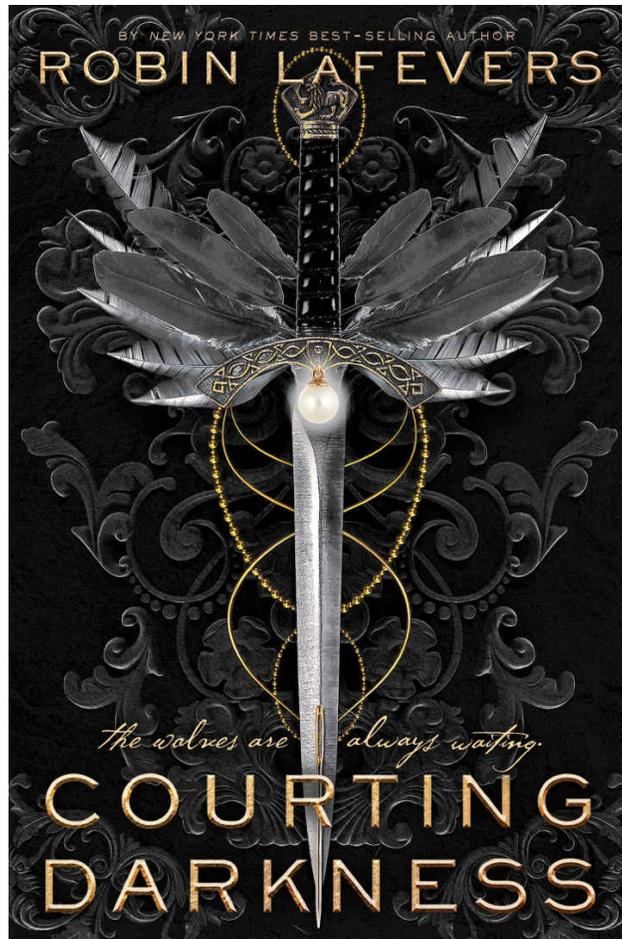
Well, for one, how messy it is. Not only mentally but also physically, since I do so much of my writing by hand, especially the figuring it all out part of it. I have two desks going at all times, covered with maps and plotting charts, research books, story journals, notes, and index cards, everywhere. And that’s not even counting my computer station!

Second, when I write a story I’m not trying to do anything other than explore how *one* specific character reacts to *one* specific set of circumstances. My books are never meant as a statement or proclamation on Issues. They are simply one individual character’s journey. I never intend for it to be a statement on how everyone should act or feel in the same situation. For me, writing a book is posing a question. The characters, the world, the themes are not the answer, but all part of that ongoing question.

And lastly: Duval, Beast, or Balthazaar?

Ha! That's the cool thing about being an author. I don't have to choose—I can have them all! (But if I absolutely had to pick . . . nah. All three!)

*Travel to the French court in February 2019 with **Courting Darkness**, the first in a new duology set in the world of the His Fair Assassin series.*



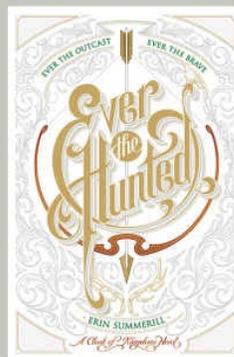
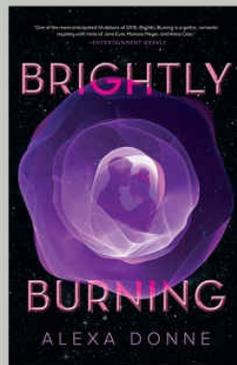
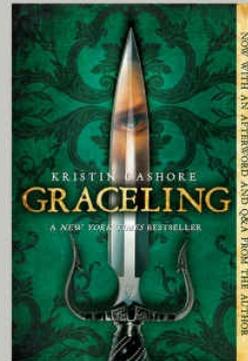
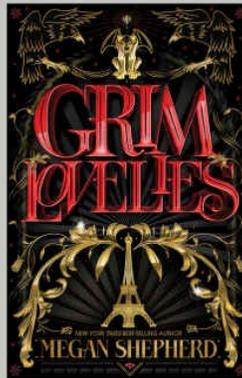
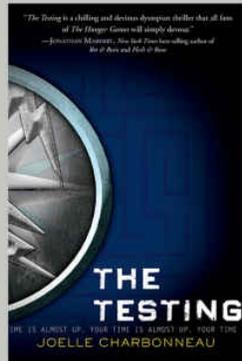
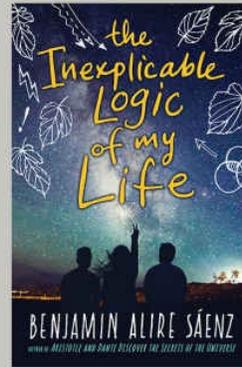
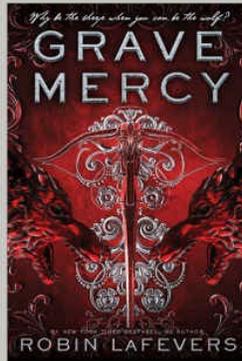
When Sybella agrees to accompany the Duchess to France, she expects trouble, but she isn't expecting a deadly trap. Desperate and surrounded by enemies both known and unknown, Sybella begins searching for the undercover assassins from the convent of St. Mortain who were placed in the French court years ago. There's only one catch—she doesn't know what names they're using, or what they look like.

Genevieve has been undercover for so many years, she no longer knows who she is or what she's supposed to be fighting for. Her only solace is a hidden

prisoner who appears all but forgotten by his guards. When tragedy strikes, she has no choice but to take matters into her own hands.

As the two assassins' paths draw ever closer, the fate of the Duchess, Brittany, and everything Sybella and Genevieve have come to love hang in the balance. Will they find each other in time to save the new queen, or will their worlds collide, taking everything that they care about with it?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROBIN LAFEVERS is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the His Fair Assassin trilogy. While she has never trained as an assassin or joined a convent, she did attend Catholic school for three years, which instilled in her a deep fascination with sacred rituals and the concept of the divine. She has been on a search for answers to life's mysteries ever since. She lives with her husband in the foothills of Southern California.

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